



Mike Laptew's Unexpected Underwater Scenes

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by Cristina Schreil

After years as a competitive spear fisherman, Mike Laptew was hooked by another calling. Upon buying an underwater camera around 1990, the Pawtucket, Rhode Island native was drawn in to what he calls a “love affair of capturing the moment.”

He started out alternating between motion pictures and still photography, but has focused on the latter since 2004. Sixteen fine art photographs depicting almost exclusively Long Island Sound and Block Island Sound seascapes—with a focus on flowing vegetation, rocky bottoms and such inhabitants as striped bass and blue crabs—are currently on display through October 5 at The White Room Gallery in Bridgehampton, NY.

With his photographs ranging in size from 21 by 17 inches to 38 by 28 inches, Laptew shares the exhibition, his first, with artist Savio Mizzi's featured paintings of sea creatures and underwater environments.

The photographer has traveled worldwide, shooting in Siberia, Japan, the Caribbean, Alaska and beyond—taking 27 trips to biodiverse Costa Rica alone—but said he finds particular beauty in the waters of the Mid-Atlantic and New England. He also says he's at his artistic best in those waters.



Photograph by Mike Laptew. Courtesy of The White Room Gallery.

“I find that I can be enthralled with the commonplace,” he said in a phone interview, adding “insane beauty” can be found around Long Island if the photographer understands how to shoot in the unique light. Subject matter, he said, “may be as subtle as periwinkles and mussels clinging to rocks in three to five feet of water.”



Photograph by Mike Laptew. Courtesy of The

White Room Gallery.

Over the years he's moved from drawing on his angler background in "shooting" more fish to gravitating toward seascapes, highlighting not only an animal but also the story of its environment. He added that he prefers a High Dynamic Range look, comparable to the clarity and contrast of High Definition television.

He said he always subtly enhances his images in Photoshop, part of his own interpretation of the Ansel Adams dictum that "great photos aren't taken, they're made."



Photograph by Mike Laptew. Courtesy of The White Room Gallery.

The vast majority of Laptew's photographs are taken while he free dives, holding his breath. The dives last around 45 seconds to a minute and a half. Free diving allows for vital closeness; he's not blowing obstructing bubbles by breathing through a regulator, he explained. As a result, some plunges around the world have yielded closeups of a lady crab in a fighting stance, or a sea turtle drifting seemingly right into his lens.



Photograph by Mike Laptew. Courtesy of The White Room Gallery.

Above sea level, he has also captured Narragansett Bay, where he lives, aerial views of waterways, lighthouses and other landscapes, but said the White Room exhibit presents a beauty many who frequent the shores of Long Island and other popular seaside areas don't realize is there.

"A lot of times I'm shooting with significant back-lighting, particularly if I'm shooting with a sunset from an underwater vantage point," Laptew said. "Other than that I try to just find the right degree of ambient light to really bring out the colors that abound out of the grass, the moss. There's so much vegetation in our area, all of which can range in color from amber to bright golden to deep green to almost a ruddy red."

He stressed that he enjoys the challenge of working in the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast. Much of what's there is cloaked in what he described as a thick sheet of organic matter. At the time of the

interview, he said he hadn't been in the water for a week because of excess sand and silt.



Photograph by Mike Laptew. Courtesy of The White Room Gallery.

"It's one more chore but one more thing that makes it kind of rewarding when you get those special days," Laptew said.

Fierce wave action conjures a dynamic environment he must constantly adjust for on his Canon Mark III camera, which he protects with Subal underwater housing.

"I'm trying to take a picture while I'm trying not to move and at the same time everything around me is," Laptew described. He aims for symmetry in his compositions, often waiting for vegetation to sway into position.

He has also shot underwater footage and is a contributor to The Fisherman magazine. The White Room Gallery exhibit includes a compilation of his work. Laptew said that with video, it's all about panning to reveal the fish's behavior.



Photograph by Mike Laptew. Courtesy of The White Room Gallery.

He has also filmed fishing icons, such as legendary Montauk shark hunter the late Frank Mundus. Like Laptew, Mundus hunted fish before vowing to protect them. Laptew said he filmed Mundus in Montauk for Salt Water Sportsman magazine.

Laptew recalled that Mundus expressed his colorful personality in many different ways: he'd wear one red and one green sock to help him distinguish port from starboard, for just one example. He added that in most of their interactions, Mundus "was grumbling about what had been allowed to happen" to struggling ocean ecosystems.

It was something that resonated with Laptew, who stressed that many still drop trash at the beach, expecting the tide to take care of it. His conservation efforts run in tandem with his drive to capture in his art the "wild factor" that can catch a viewer's imagination.

"People don't protect what they don't care about," he said.

BASIC FACTS: “Mike Laptew & Savio Mizzi” remains on view through October 5, 2015. The White Room Gallery is located at 2415 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.thewhiteroom.gallery.

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