

Pro-Photographer Guide

From Concept to Capture

With Vincent Lions



PHASEONE

what the world's best photography is made of



Vincent Lions on precision sharpness

Conceptual, still life and commercial photographer, Vincent Lions takes us behind the scenes on a photoshoot for Halios watches, showing us his creative process using the XF Camera System. Read about his workflow, equipment, and how Focus Stacking helps him create incredibly sharp images.

Photography workflow

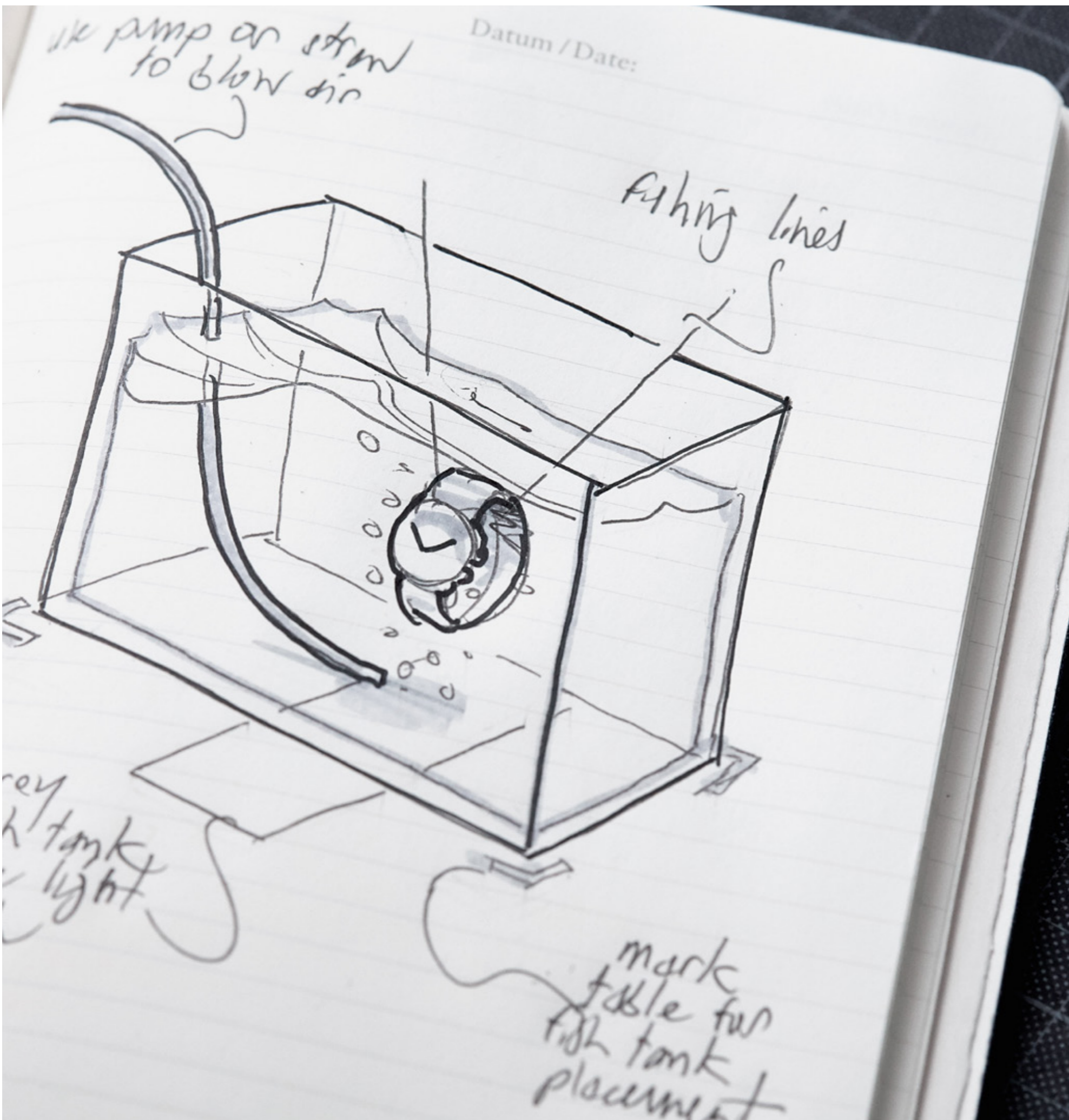
A visual guide to Focus Stacking

I am very excited to present to you the visuals I created for the recent wristwatch collection of watch company, Halios.

It was the second time I worked together with Halios. The first time I was shooting with a 35mm system. I have since moved to medium format, and I now work with the Phase One XF system. The change in workflow and image quality is huge! Seeing the final visuals could easily be considered enough to showcase the image quality, but I believe that going through the creative process will give you more material to appreciate the impact the system has on my photography.

Out of the images shown on this page, I will share with you in detail how the image on the right was created: The Halios Laguna immersed in water.





Concept

Sketching ideas

I very often start my projects with a sketch. It doesn't have to be 100% accurate, but it helps me to share ideas with my client. That way, I can also explore different options before going on set and figure out what material I will need to create the images.

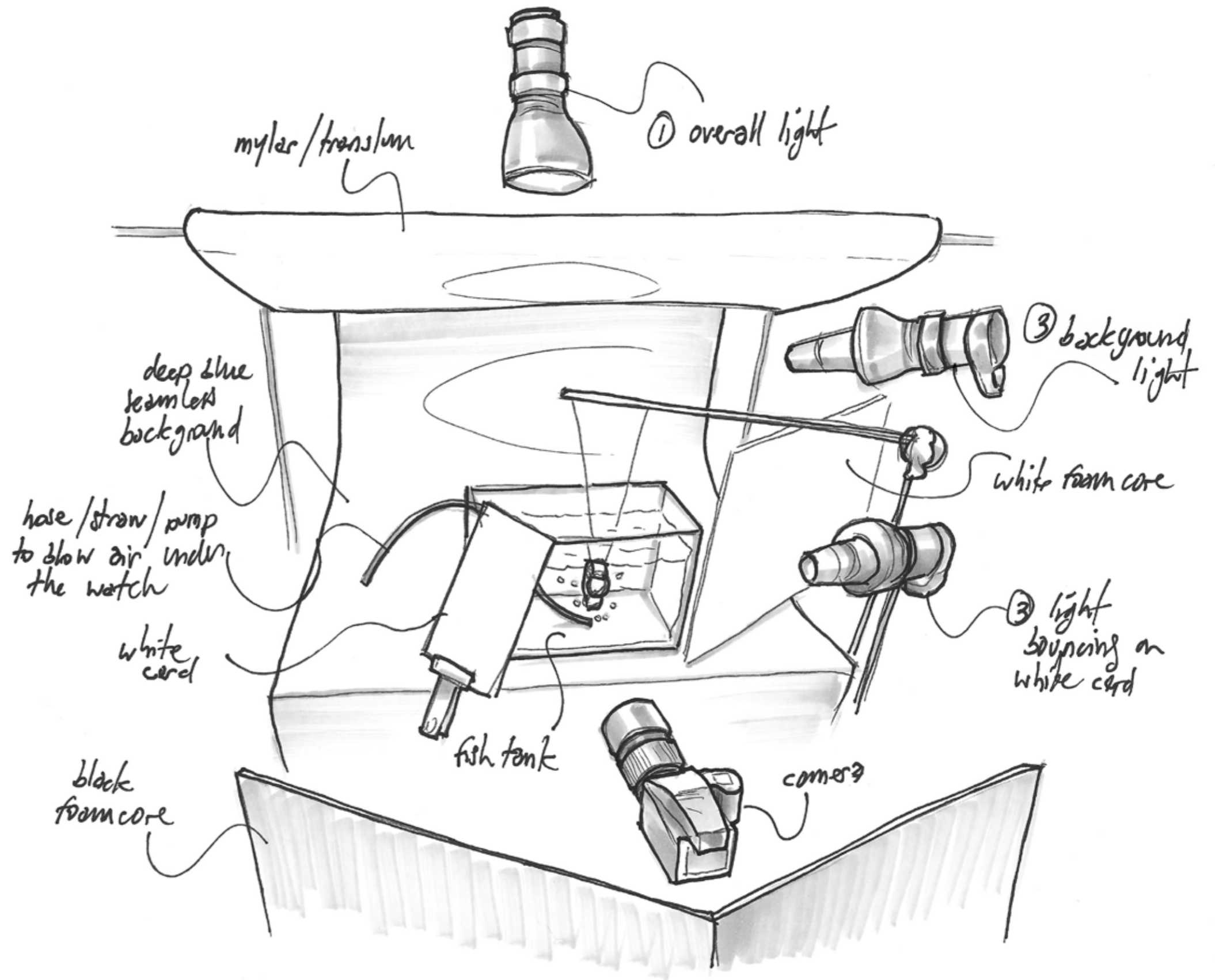
Haliotis had six different watches to work with for this project. Four Seaforth models, one Laguna, and one Puck. I worked with prototype watches, so that the clients could have the visuals ready before the final production models would be out. For that reason, the four Seaforth prototypes were not totally waterproof yet. I had to shoot them in a dry environment. Placed and lit properly on black sand, I could hopefully give the illusion that they were under water. Because of its name, I definitely wanted to shoot the Puck on ice! The Laguna could be in water, so I decided to have it immersed, play with water splashes, and maybe ink as well (which I didn't end up keeping).

There's a rule in watch photography: time on the dial should always be 10:10. Hands are placed that way to balance the dial and frame the logo. That rule means that the watch can't be running when it's photographed, so the crown must be pulled out to stop the watch running. Consequently, the watch cannot be exposed to water as crown out means water can get in. So, to create the visual I wanted for the Laguna, two series of photos were needed: one in a dry environment with hands at 10:10 (crown pulled out), one in the water (crown pushed in, time running). I would then have to combine them together into one single image in post-production.

Studio set

Preparing for the shoot

Here's a sketch of the studio set. I used three light sources: one overall, one for the background, one for the subject. As I mentioned earlier, the watch was photographed twice. First time without the fish tank, second time immersed in water in the fish tank. Watch position and light had to be identical for the two scenarios, so the photos could be merged flawlessly in post-production. Lighting a watch can be challenging: it's highly reflective and direct light can be quite unflattering. On top of that, shooting through a glass fish tank meant an additional reflective surface to compose with. That's why the white card bouncing light (3) had to be placed strategically, so it highlighted the watch nicely, but its reflection didn't show on the fish tank surface.





The perfect flash

For the second part of this project, I worked with Profoto D2s. Their short flash duration is perfect to freeze water in motion. The XF camera has Profoto Air integrated, which means no more cable or external remote device, no more AA batteries to store and replace. Additional Profoto settings are also available with the Advanced Profoto Air tool available since Feature Update #3.

Tethering with Capture One Pro

I can't imagine working in studio and not shooting tethered. I started working with Capture One Pro since version 5 (now on version 10), and haven't stopped using it since. Every new version comes with new features that improve my workflow dramatically. Capture One is not only part of the creative process, to me it is as essential as the lens on the camera.

One thing I really appreciate with Capture One Pro combined with the Phase One XF system is how smoothly they work together in comparison to the 35mm camera I had before. I haven't had any connection issue in months, I can change a lens while tethered without losing connection, and I have way more control over the camera directly from Capture One.





Focus Stacking with the Phase One XF



Phase One Feature Update #2 introduced the Focus Stack tool. For the type of photography I do, it's a real game changer. Focus Stacking is an image processing technique much needed in almost every macro product photography project. If you're not familiar with it, here's how it works: you take a series of shots of the same image, and gradually adjust the focus point between each frame, from the part of the subject the furthest away from the camera, to the one that is closest. You then combine all those shots together in post-production into one single image to have your subject perfectly sharp from one end to the other.

To change focus in a traditional way, you would either action the focus ring on the lens, or move the entire camera closer (or further) to the subject using a focusing rack. With the Phase One XF integrated Focus Stack tool, you simply program the camera: it will then take care of capturing all photos on its own, flawlessly, and faster than you would.

(Note that I still use a focusing rail, but only to place the camera at the right distance to the subject with extreme precision, without changing the tripod head settings. For small subjects, such as watches and jewelry, it does make a difference).

I am working with the Schneider Kreuznach 120mm LS f4.0 Macro Blue Ring lens for this project. It is by far the sharpest and best macro lens I have had the pleasure to shoot with. One major feature of this lens - besides the leaf shutter and the optical quality of course - is that it has auto-focus, which is required to use the Focus Stack tool on the Phase One XF, so the camera can drive the lens.

The photo to the left is focused on the inside of the watch bracelet, which is the part of the watch the furthest to the camera. The image to the right is focused on the bottom right part of the glass, which is the closest part of the watch to the camera.



Set the lens to Auto Focus

The Focus Stack tool can't operate if lens is in Manual mode.



Find the distant focus point

Use the view finder or live view to look closely at your subject, and scroll the side dial and front dial (finer tuning) on the XF body to find the distant focus point.



Set Capture Delay

This is my favorite "hidden" feature: Focus Stack gives you the option to set a timer between each capture. Very useful if your studio lights need additional time to recycle. Tap the icon with the multiple images located under the "X" to access this option.



Make sure mirror is up

Use Capture One camera control, or go back to the main screen on the XF body to make sure mirror is up. (You can however run the Focus Stack tool with mirror down if you prefer).



Assign the distant focus point

Save the focus point with the front button.



Find the near focus point

Repeat previous step, this time for the near focus point.



Start Focus Stack

Use the rear button to start Focus Stack and capture images.



Watch your XF camera do everything!

You're done. The camera will now run the Focus Stack tool with the settings you entered. You can at any time interrupt captures by tapping "Abort" on the touch screen.



Assign the near focus point

Save the focus point using the rear button.



Set the number of captures

Use the rear dial to select the total number of images you want to capture.



Capture Delay will pause the camera between each capture (in this case 1 second)....



...and shoot all frames, one after another (in this case 40). Another big advantage of the Focus Stack tool is that the photographer can walk away from the camera when it's capturing images: no unwanted reflection of the photographer's hand in the subject, no unwanted vibrations either.



Exporting the images

Here on the left are the 40 shots together. I didn't make any dramatic change to the images in Capture One. I mostly made the blue background more vivid, and adjusted the white balance.

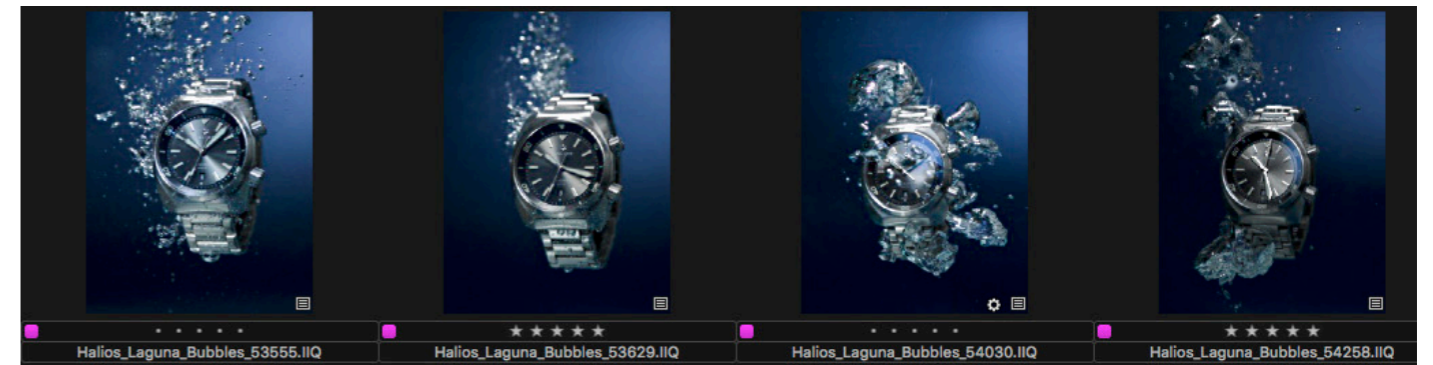
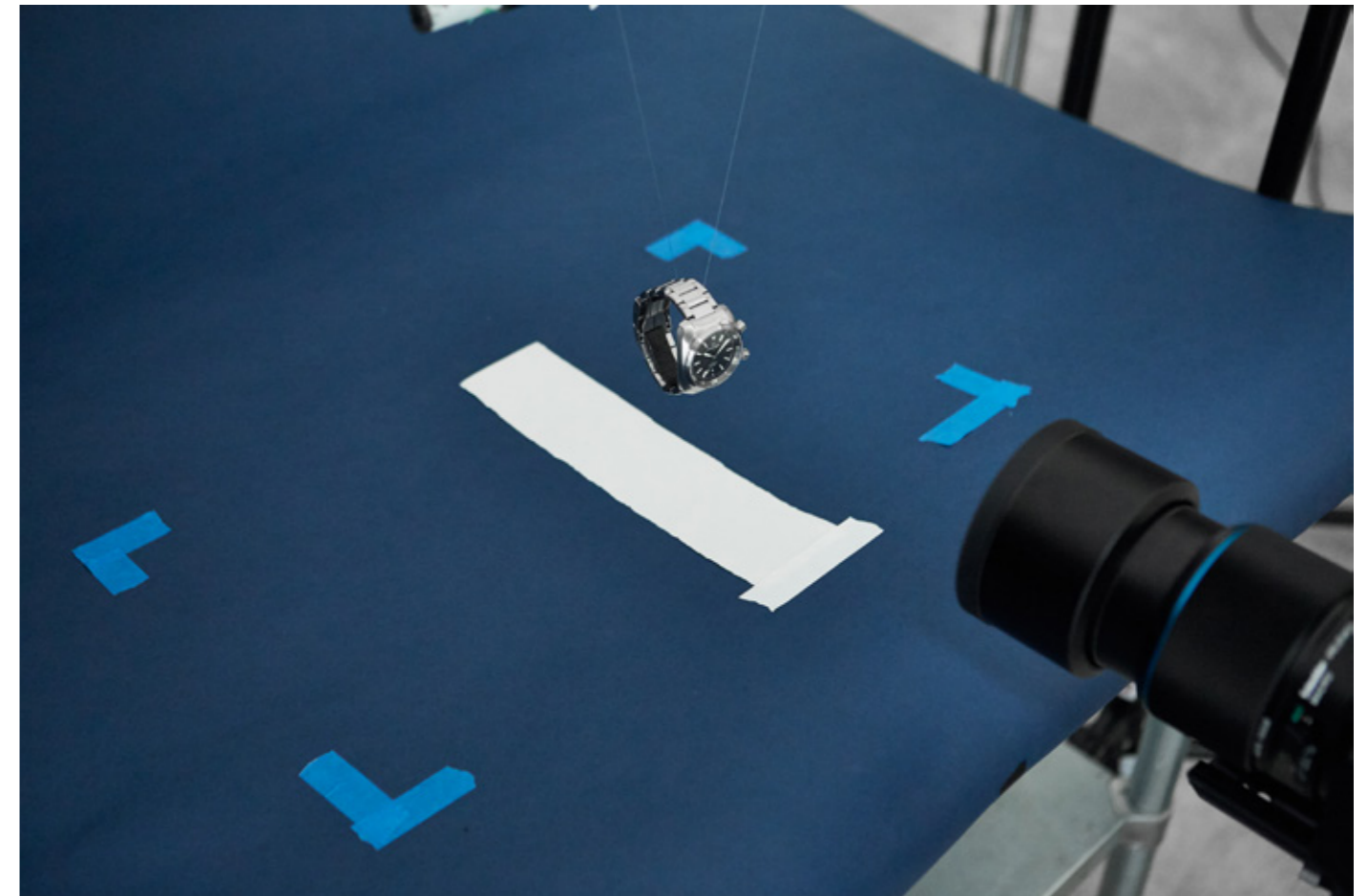
The next step is to export all those images from Capture One and import them in a focus stacking application, such as Helicon Focus. But before that and while I was still on set with everything in place, I had to work on the second part of the final image with the watch in the water.



The water shot

Because I anticipated that I would have to photograph the watch with and without the fish tank, and that I potentially would have to move the tank more than once (to clean it, refill water, or for any other reason), I marked its position with tape.





Perfecting the shot

I also marked the stand holding the watch. This way I could lift the watch up and down when moving the fish tank in and out, and put the watch back in the exact same position as before.

I won't lie to you: I shot multiple images of the watch in water before I got the result I was looking for. And if you add elements such as liquid, smoke, or basically anything organic or in motion; you have to accept you're working with some factors that you can't always fully control. For that final image, I ended up blowing air under the watch pretty much like on the sketch I posted earlier.

Most important thing before playing with water though: don't forget to screw in the watch crown!

Post production

The last steps

Once all images were captured, there were three final steps to go through in post-production:

- 1 Make fine adjustments in Capture One Pro before exporting images. This meant adjusting colors and small details. I use a larger calibrated screen for this step (I work on a 27" EIZO monitor).
- 2 Merge all 40 images from the Focus Stacking session together into one image using Helicon Focus. That step often requires some retouching in Helicon Focus as well.
- 3 Combine the result of the stacked images with the water image in Adobe Photoshop, so the final visual has both a sharp watch with the perfect 10:10 on the dial, and all the movement and organic elements of the shot in water.





Seeing up close

Not every photo for this project required that amount of work in editing and studio setting. The photo on the left, for example, didn't involve any water, fish tank, or merging images in Photoshop. Just the usual: concept, lighting, composition, and focus stacking. But even for an image that seems simpler, if you work with a medium format system, the image quality is so good that you might very well end up spending hours retouching micro dust, imperfections in the metal, and tiny scratches. Even on prototype watches that have never been worn, even if everything looked perfectly fine at first... before zooming in!

Working with the XF Camera System

Enjoy the creative process

Working with the Phase One XF Camera System together with Capture One Pro not only has a major impact on the workflow and on my creative process, I must admit it puts a smile on my face when I work! Because I know that if I do my part of the job right, the camera system will not let me down, and it will deliver astonishing image quality.

I really enjoy doing what I do, and I consider it a privilege to share it with you in this e-book. It is fundamental to me to communicate that passion. For one very simple reason: the purpose of making images is for them to be seen. I can't imagine anyone responding emotionally to my work if I myself didn't feel passion and fulfillment in the creative planning process. So yes, creating a strong visual requires creativity, a good eye, good equipment and some solid photography skills, most definitely. But overall, it's a process we should enjoy.

On that note, I will leave you with the amazing feedback I got from Halios after they received the visuals for their new models:

"It's an honour to have my watches photographed by an artist like Vincent Lions. As watch enthusiasts, we find no shortage of glossy, perfectly lit dreamscapes of our current obsessions, but knowing what goes into the conception and execution of the image makes it a sublime experience for me. It's like the convergence of two passions."

- Jason Lim, Halios Watches



Vincent Lions

Vincent is a professional photographer born in France, based in Toronto, Canada since 2004. He specializes in conceptual, still-life, and commercial photography. With a background in art direction, he values the creative and narrative aspect of photography just as much as technique and lighting.

You can see more of his work on his website

<http://www.vincentlions.com>

or on Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/vincentlions/>



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Equipment Used

- Phase One XF Camera System
- Leaf Credo 40MP Digital Back
- Schneider Kreuznach 120mm LS f4.0 Macro Blue Ring lens
- Profoto D2 monolights
- Capture One Pro software

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