

# WATER SHAPES

## Painting in Water



fluid matrix.

Watershape designer and builder, Steve Kenny, believes that water encompasses both art and science. While his day job is focused on running a company that designs, builds and services high-end residential and commercial swimming pools, he also takes time to explore his purely artistic instincts. The result is a body of water images that represent the beauty and inner mysteries of the world's most important and beautiful

By Steve Kenny

I've always been amazed and delighted by how beauty can emerge from the unexpected, or even an accident. My life experiences working with and enjoying water have revealed countless epiphanies, large and small, a process of unexpected discovery the likes of which have driven the creative instincts of some of history's greatest artists, inventors and philosophers.

One of the best examples I can think of was how the great modernist painter Jackson Pollock discovered his groundbreaking drip-painting technique when he spilled paint on the floor of his studio. That simple accident and resulting recognition on Pollock's part led to a revolution that shook the art world to its core, a sea change that is being felt to this day.

On an infinitely smaller scale, the same kind of thing happened to me about six years ago. And, like Pollock, my simple unexpected observation has led to a mode of making art that has become a significant and intensely enjoyable sideline to my career working as a water-quality professional.

As I've perfected the art and craft of creating beautiful water, I've found myself falling more and more in love with the aesthetics of the aquatic experience. When water is crystal clear, polished, and inviting, it becomes one of the most beautiful design elements we experience anywhere.

It's why so many great artists throughout history have been captivated by water, and the way we interact with it, and depend on it to survive, travel, explore and to inspire our minds and spirits. It's both permanent and ever-changing, ever-present, tangible, yet always mysterious.

**As a proud parent, many of my images start with my kids as models. Showing the human element in water is almost always compelling, and things can become quite entertaining when they see what I've done to distort their appearance.**

## ENDLESS NUANCE

The way the light plays within the liquid matrix, the texture, random motion and infinite patterns, the reflective quality, the way water distorts size and depth, and how it influences the physical movements of people and animals – every aspect of it can be the source of unending wonderment. At least it is for me and I know for a lot of other people in different ways.

All of that is why I've always enjoyed sailing on the ocean. The sensory experiences of being on the water transport me to a different state of consciousness, as if traveling to a beautiful alien world. Recognizing the impact that water has on my senses, emotions, and awareness, I started spending more and more time sitting underwater and simply looking around.



**I love how bubbles capture and distort light. It opens up wonderful possibilities when trying to express the depth, texture and variety of movement in water.**

I found that through the aperture of my mask, I was seeing the world aquatic in a whole new way. All of the amazing qualities I've always admired about water suddenly took on more dimensions and greater depth. No longer was water simply a beautiful reflective surface, which is amazing enough in and of itself, but submerged it becomes more visually prismatic, more all encompassing.

It didn't take long before I started making digital videos of my little underwater excursions, which were mostly confined to my own backyard pool. Using a GoPro camera, I began capturing the temporal nature of the motion and the random spontaneity of the liquid space. By recording those magic moments, I was then able to go back and study the visual qualities more deliberately and in greater detail.

Along the way, I was struck by how varied and even abstract many of the images seemed to be. I started looking at each frame and began to see them as individual works of natural art. In those raw images, I started to see a different kind of aesthetic potential.



**Still recognizable as water, I often try to blur the lines between representational art and images that push into abstraction.**

One day, just for fun, I took some of my favorite "stills" from the videos I took on my GoPro camera and loaded them into Photoshop, where I began to manipulate the colors, distort the shapes, play with saturation, sharpness, tint, and texture. Almost immediately, I found that with some creative manipulation, I could take those already beautiful images and make something that, to my eyes, looked and felt completely new.

It wasn't long before I was turning out piece after piece of what mostly looked like abstract art. I go through phases over times. Some of the images do still look like water, especially those where I've captured someone swimming, floating, or diving into the water. Other pieces take on a visual quality that are not directly identifiable as water, per se, but, to my eyes, always carry the spirit and mystery of the fluid matrix.

Over the past few years, I've started displaying these works in our show room and have even talked to people at different art galleries and art dealers in nearby New York City about someday showing and selling my pieces. Much to my delight, the feedback I've received has been incredibly positive, and now my modest random observations are turning into a potentially substantial personal and, even possibly professional, pursuit.

I now take higher-resolution still images using a Cannon AOS with an underwater case, but the process is basically the same as when I started out using video stills. It's very intuitive and "in-the-moment". In the water I'm just using my instincts to capture images that I find beautiful and interesting. From hundreds of images, I'll select a handful to process in Photoshop. There are no particular guidelines or rules, I just start distorting the images and when they reach a point where they speak to me somehow, I'm done.



**There are times when I enjoy taking the imagery to a place that may have begun with water, but has become something else entirely. Through all the visual machinations, however, I believe the “spirit” of water is still present and remains the basis for the art.**

Given the random nature of the initial photography and instinctive way I go at it at the keyboard, there is no way I could ever recreate these works, they are all born in the moment and represent a tiny slice of water's random and every-changing nature.

## **EYES WIDE OPEN**

Now that I've found my own way to be involved in an artistic endeavor, I've come to realize that art really is the product of how we choose to look at the world, and then how we try to express what we see. When Pollock spilled the paint on his studio floor, it's likely that every other person on the planet would've just seen a small mess that needed to be cleaned. But Pollock instead saw spectrums of unexpressed creative possibility.

Although I would never compare myself to his level of genius, I do now see that kind of purely creative path far more clearly. When I look at the way water “paints” the world, I see so much more than I once did. It's the magic of the moment, the beauty of the accident, and the gift of the unexpected.

That's why I can't wait to see what “painting in water” will reveal next.

*Steve Kenny is founder of SRK Pool Services, a pool design/build and service company based in Wainscott, N.Y. He has more than 25 years' experience studying and finetuning water chemistry in an effort to generate the best possible experience for his customers. He is passionate about and devoted to the science, methods and art of ensuring impeccable water-quality condition. He is a lifetime sailing enthusiast, published author and photographer.*