

SUMMER 2015  
IMMERSION

W

A

Z

X

98 **Fish**

**Eye**

**Fish:**

**Diver in  
Fish Bowl**

**Text by Margaret Cohen**

Is there any better metaphor for our relationship with the sea than Ron Church's "Fish Eye Fish"? The photo, which first appeared in Church's 1971 book *Beginner's Guide to Photography Underwater*, is grainy black and white image of an angelfish, which draws the viewer into the fish's luminous, enlarged eye. At the bottom of the eye, floating parallel to its almond-shaped black retina is the silhouette of a diver. In this image, underwater photographer is at once a stranger, companion, and voyeur to alien undersea life. On the verso of a print of this image in the collection of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, Church has penciled a title: "Fish Eye Fish: Diver in Fish Bowl", with the date 1970.

Almost every present day surfer is familiar with photographer Ron Church's intimate portrayals of American surf culture of the early 60s. His images—at once both gauzy and masculine—have come to define the nascent days of surfing in California. But Church's real passion was shooting *in* the water. Technical innovations in photographic equipment in the post World War II era coupled with the invention of modern SCUBA, spurred a period of intensive creativity in underwater film and photography—one which Church was heavily involved in defining. He was, in many ways, an underwater photography pioneer, documenting scores of undersea projects like Jacques Cousteau and the US Navy's Sealab for the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. His work was prized in these setting because his intention went beyond mere documentation. Church was fascinated by aesthetic qualities of undersea perception, including this alien environment's "blackness, colors, abstracts, movements and life", as well as the more philosophical question of "man's relation to it".<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he believed that "a good picture should create a mood or feeling." While this sentiment is perhaps obvious in the world of art, it is more complicated in the world of scientific endeavors that Church travelled where the intention is to present, without sentiment, whatever is before the viewer.

*Beginner's Guide to Photography Underwater* was reprinted in again 1973, the year when, tragically, at the height of his creativity and career, he passed away of a brain tumor at age 39.<sup>2</sup> Heavily illustrated, this book, so slim it is really more of a pamphlet, packs into a mere 65 pages Church's extraordinary knowledge of technique and art. In the forward to the work, Church published an endorsement of his "mission" by Cousteau. In words that still ring true into our time, Cousteau wrote, "the sea . . . is told best visually. . . . Underwater photography is the public's only view of the undersea world and the principal link of affection", and hence has a role to play in shaping "public opinion [which] will determine the fate of the oceans we love"<sup>3</sup>.

"Fish Eye Fish" is the only image in the *Beginner's Guide to Photography Underwater* to appear twice, first on the inside right title page and again as a full-page illustration introducing the section "Film." To have the acuity to perceive, let alone record, the reflection of the diver on the eye of a fish is itself a feat. One might be skeptical given this difficulty, and speculate that the diver's silhouette is a result of darkroom tricks. Even as such, the image is evocative. However, Church's stated intent in the darkroom was not to introduce new elements into a photograph but rather to give emotional impact to the low-contrast underwater environment. In the section "Film", Church explains the technique used to produce "Fish Eye Fish," which is one of what he calls "reshooting." Starting from an underwater scene—the example he gives is a medium shot—the photographer is advised to select "a highly enlarged section of the original emphasizing graininess" (28). This highly enlarged photo will be copied onto "lithographic (line) film, from which the final high contrast print is made" (28).

In "Fish Eye Fish", such reshooting highlights the filigree pattern of the fish's scales, revealing their delicacy, at once armor and jewelry. The fish's eye also has an alluring mystery not usually attributed to a fish's glassy stare, due to another aspect of the photographer's craft: the kind of lens used to shoot the angelfish, whose source Church indicates in the pun of the title on the verso of the print at Scripps. The image is shot with

Fish eye fish: Diver in Fish Bowl. Courtesy of <http://facebook.com/ron-church-photography>.  
Image provided by the University of California, San Diego.



a fisheye lens, an extremely wide-angle lens, which “show[s] a distorted, spherical view of the world”<sup>3</sup> and provides yet another layer of metaphor to the image.

The term “fisheye” was coined in 1906, after the way a fish might see the sky looking up from the depths, where the refraction of light rays entering water would give the effect of a distorted hemisphere. Fisheye lenses, invented in the 1920s, proved helpful in the low-light underwater environment for several reasons, including that they allow the photographer to shoot very close to the subject.

At the time of Church’s *Beginner’s Guide*, fisheye photos commonly took the form of a hemisphere, and he includes one such example on page 18. Hemispheres have been equated with the contours of an entire planet since the first Western maps of the globe. In “Fish Eye Fish”, the fish’s eye appears a brooding underwater cosmos, an effect even more evident in the Scripps print. In this version, Church has not effaced the structure of the iris’s borders, where rays radiate inwards, colored grey. As a result, the sphere of the iris resembles the view of the surface looking up from the depths towards the light, the view that first gave the fish eye lens its name. Only in Church’s image, we gaze not up towards the sun, but rather into the inky dark center of the fish’s pupil.

In the fishbowl of the fish’s eye, the diver floats. His or her arms are raised at right angles, in an ambiguous gesture — perhaps it is simply a way of helping to stabilize himself. Or, perhaps it is a greeting to the fish and the rest of the aquatic world in which he is immersed. It looks like the right arm may end in some kind of instrument, for the silhouette is thicker at the hand; perhaps a camera? A fishbowl refers to a situation at once of containment and excessive exposure, where someone is being watched and there is no place to hide. Thus, there is a second fishbowl implied in the situation of the diver taking the picture, for he exposes not just his film but himself in the fishbowl of the sea. A diver in the sea is terribly vulnerable, subject to the gaze of predators he or she cannot see in the low light underwater environment where human vision is severely limited. Yet the diver is curious (approaching with a camera) as well as vulnerable, stalking the fish with tools at his disposal. The similarity between camera and weapon was surely not lost on Church, who was also an avid and accomplished spear fisherman. Thus in “Fish Eye” the diver becomes both predator and prey; both viewer and viewed.

Church once explained the role of the camera underwater as a “looking glass” to bring to “arm-chair” viewers its “many strange and wondrous vistas” (7). Church published the book under the imprint of SEACOR, a company he founded for new technologies for photographing the challenging underwater environment. SEACOR was an acronym for Sea Equipment Advancement Corporation (SEACOR). Its logo was the shape of a fish with at its center the high-contrast circular black and white blades of the camera’s iris.

1 Ron Church, *Beginner’s Guide to Photography Underwater*, forward by Jacques Yves Cousteau (SEACOR, 1973 [First printing 1971]), 51.

2 Facts about Ron Church’s life are from Edward C. Cargile, *Pioneers in Diving* (2002), quoted on [http://www.ronchurch.com/ron\\_church.htm](http://www.ronchurch.com/ron_church.htm)

3 <http://www.uwphotographyguide.com/fisheye-lenses-underwater>, consulted March 2015.

Fish eye fish: *Diver in Fish Bowl*. Courtesy of <http://facebook.com/ron-church-photography>.  
Image provided by the University of California, San Diego.

