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Roberto Falck: *Liquid Elegance*

By Mary McGrath

When I first browsed the images of Roberto Falck, not only was I amazed at his range of talent, but there was also a certain something that begged me to look a bit deeper at his photography. Was it his international travels? The wedding and portrait work? His advertising images? Of course, the answer was yes to all of these questions, but what really stopped me in my tracks was his underwater photography.

I've always loved the work of Howard Schatz, but I'd never seen his techniques applied to wedding photography. Executing land-based wedding photography is an art unto itself, but adding in the element of water truly tests the skills of any professional.

Lucky for Roberto, he is not just any professional, and his photographic journey is indeed an interesting one. Born in Ecuador, he attributes his love of the outdoors to his father, who was a native climber in his country. Roberto's father also had an extensive collection of *National Geographic* magazines that captured Roberto's visual interest at an early age.

Although enchanted with the idea of being a photographer in Ecuador, Roberto knew there was a fair amount of uncertainty in this field, so he moved to the United States to pursue a more practical vocation, eventually graduating from college with a finance degree.

But the dream of a photography career continued. After graduating from Kurtztown University in Pennsylvania, he realized he wasn't a suit-and-tie guy, so in 1997 he returned to New York City to embrace photography once again. For a few years, he was an assistant to several photographers, trying his hand at fashion, portrait, product and other types of imagery. Roberto soon understood that he couldn't make a decent living if he remained an assistant.



In 1999, he transitioned into web design and development; he continued in the web business for five years. During this time, he had the opportunity to enjoy some international travel, which allowed him to again pursue photography. He utilized his business background to create a newsletter featuring many of his international shots.

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This savvy business ploy piqued the interest of a particular friend who delighted in his images and wanted to hire him for a wedding shoot. Although Roberto hadn't done weddings before, the assignment was enticing, as his client allowed him to take liberties with the shoot. His journalistic style applied to the session, the wedding shoot was a huge success, and it ignited Roberto's passion to give professional photography another chance.

As fate would have it, Roberto got a wake-up call in 2005 when he was laid off from his web

developer job. Maybe now was the time to take a serious plunge into photography. By 2006, he was a full-time wedding photographer, and although this was still a relatively new endeavor for him, he decided to give himself to the end of the year to make it professionally. The gamble paid off.

A turning point in Roberto's photographic career was when he listened to Gary Fong speak. Prior to seeing Gary, Roberto described himself as a "shoot-and-burn" photographer with little business acumen or flair for handling the personal side of his career. In listening to Gary, Roberto learned that it's not enough to be artistic, that business practices require attention as well. Roberto realized that by simply applying Gary's strategies, he really could earn a living doing photography.

By 2006, Robert knew that he needed more space for his business to flourish. In Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood, he noticed a small storefront that would soon be vacated by a photographer who was relocating. Although it was small, the 400-square-foot space was large enough to accommodate his needs without incurring too much expense; he took it over and began his expansion.

The Park Slope area was also a family-friendly neighborhood. Knowing that he couldn't solely survive on doing weddings, Roberto began doing portraits of families, babies and children. Another essential component of his photographic success had begun. In regards to his child portraiture, Roberto remarks, "I always keep it simple. I use very few props because I want to concentrate on the child--the portrait--rather than make it commercial."

Throughout 2006, Roberto tried to master the nuances of running a photo business. That same year a friend mentioned WPPI to him. It was his involvement in WPPI that marked a turning point in his career. Initially, WPPI seemed like an exorbitant expense, but as with any business, you have to invest money to make money. Roberto soon found the investment was well worth every penny. Not only did it spark his creativity, but it also brought him a plethora of new business ideas that he could apply to photography. He left his first WPPI convention renewed and invigorated.

This investment paid off handsomely. In 2004, Roberto had only done 13 weddings. By 2006, he was up to 30 weddings and 50 portrait sessions. In 2007, he shot 50 weddings and 104 portrait sessions.

It was the WPPI seminar hosted by Vicki Taufer in particular that had a tremendous impact on Roberto. Her seminar showed him how to sell and present himself to clients, so that he wasn't only displaying his images, but actually creating an experience for them. "You not only have to have good photos, but you have to know how to price your services as well," explains Roberto. "She [Vicki] taught me about relationship marketing and the business of being profitable."

In fact, Roberto has partnered with a maternity clothing store in Park Slope, where he's had several exhibitions of his regular land-based weddings and portraits as well as his unique underwater sessions.



Roberto's segue into underwater photography can largely be attributed to the renowned Howard

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Shatz, whom Roberto met in 1997. Howard's work made an indelible impression on Roberto, but also important was Howard's advice that one should develop an image bank of unique shots to help differentiate oneself from other photographers. Roberto began shooting underwater when he learned to scuba dive in 2004. He decided to take his Canon 20D on a dive, encased in its waterproof housing. Although Roberto enjoyed underwater photography, he wasn't a David Doubilet; shooting fish and plankton didn't really resonate with him. But when he began doing

destination weddings, the thought of combining his underwater interests with wedding photography sparked a new project. While in Tobago, he decided to try shooting a wedding couple underwater. The ceremony had already taken place, and although the bride was hesitant about damaging her dress, she decided to go along with his proposal, so she submerged herself in the pool for the shoot. The groom also joined in, donning his shirt and bow tie--liquid elegance was born.

At the end of 2006, Roberto had another destination wedding planned, so he pitched the underwater session to another couple. He showed them images of the Tobago couple, and they were soon on board. For these early sessions, Roberto used a Canon 20D and a black fabric draped on the side of the pool as a backdrop. The images were taken in the shady area of the pool with available light, so no strobe had to be used. The simple setup worked initially, until Roberto graduated to more sophisticated measures.

Roberto attributes his evolution in underwater portraiture to Ed Pierce and Larry Peters. Roberto says, "Ed Pierce in his *Photovision* DVD series had a great interview with Larry Peters, who explains how to do this sort of thing. This was a great help in figuring out a few details." Soon Roberto had access to swimming pools in Long Island and Westchester, and on his blog he advertised his need for couples willing to take the plunge with him. His style evolved and required a more elaborate setup within the swimming pool; he began using strobes triggered to a slave to lights outside the pool, techniques he had learned from Larry Peters. Regarding the new pool setup, Robert comments, "It was a fascinating technical puzzle."

As the underwater sessions advanced, Roberto began implementing maternity portraiture into his shoots. Roberto liked the idea of women being submerged, as the images reflected the maternal beauty and elegance of the miracle of life. He was ecstatic at being able to combine all his passions--nature, diving and photography--plus he was carving out a new niche and distancing himself from other notable photographers.

Roberto's underwater sessions are certainly not easy. While he wears a wetsuit during the shoot, couples often become uncomfortable if they are underwater too long. He finds that working with dancers helps circumvent this problem. "They know how to move, which makes the process much easier," says Roberto.



Roberto has now graduated to the Canon 5D for all underwater work. The full-frame images are one advantage, but the underwater housing is specifically designed for the 5D. Some of his other preferences for equipment include several Canon lenses for his outdoor wedding work. The majority of Roberto's images utilize natural light, but if needed, he relies on Canon 580EX Speedlites along with a Frezzi video light.

In only a few years, Roberto has made tremendous progress in his endeavors. At the 2007 WPPI Convention and Trade Show, he received six Accolades of Excellence in the 8x10 print competition. Whether his photography is done above or below the water, for Roberto Falck, it's all about the evolution of talent. Darwin, take note. For more information, visit www.robortofalck.com.

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