

Photographer Eugene Tan is living the dream – photographing the world’s best waves and the surfers who ride them. He talks to *Fran Molloy* about the hobby that grew into a daily email list with more than 30,000 followers.

# EUGENE TAN

Eugene Tan is the poster-boy of tens of thousands of city workers, from merchant bankers and corporate lawyers to government clerks, personal assistants and magazine editors. More than 30,000 of them subscribe to his daily email surf report *Aquabumps*, complete with gorgeous surf images and seascapes from his Bondi home base and, sometimes, exotic surf locations around the world.

Starting out as a hobby when Tan was working as the creative director for web design firm Eclipse, bulk emails of his favourite beach shots sent to a group of friends and work colleagues soon morphed into a blog, a daily email list and his popular website *aquabumps.com*.

By 2004 Tan was generating enough in ad sales from his blog and email list to quit his day-job to work as a full-time surf photographer.

Tan’s Bondi gallery now sells large art-canvas copies of the photographs he takes at the beach each morning.

Photography and surfing were just his hobbies when he worked in an office in Sydney ten years ago – but now they provide not just an enviable lifestyle, but a very comfortable living.

Tan says that he used to be a ‘cubicle guy’ himself. “Now I’m selling the dream. It’s escapism I’m selling, so I’ve got to be living it. I travel all over the world and stuff like that. Of course, the reality is, I’m working 12-14 hours a day – there’s a lot of admin and stuff.”

“Ruby owns a coffee shop in North Bondi. The shoot was so short and I didn’t expect much as it was so cloudy that day, but when I got it back, it just worked and was kind of interesting. I love that kind of summery, under-the-water stuff. The water was full of jellyfish though, she got stung, which is why the shoot only lasted two minutes.” (Canon EOS 1Ds Mk III, 14mm lens, 1/2500s @ f/7.1, ISO 400.)





"This is one of the juniors competing at *Boost SurfSho* at Bondi. I'm not sure who it was now. The colour of his wetsuit reflects the blue of the garage doors, which works beautifully. I had to go really low – I was shooting from the land, squeezed between some rocks at the south end and it was low tide. I shot it at over 1/1000th of a second – that's become a bit of a standard lately, to get the spray." (Canon EOS 1D Mark IV, 300mm lens with 2x teleconverter, 1/1200s @ f/8, ISO 400.)

**"I cracked my head open and a big chunk of my scalp came off, but I was in shock and didn't feel the pain... It's famous for sharks out there and I had blood just hosing out of my head but the surf was that big no one could get to me..."**



"I shot this from a chopper – I'm in them all the time now. It was a very calm day, baking hot. The water was super clear, it was low tide, a shallow bank, all the reflections were coming through and this girl just started swimming off unprompted. The beach must have had ten thousand people on it, but she just swam right out and I followed her with the chopper, shot it and it's been so popular. I'm starting to do a bit more work in Photoshop after the shots, but I don't usually spend more than a couple of minutes, I just get too bored. I only do stuff I've been doing in the darkroom for years: burning, dodging, contrast filters, just simple adjustments. With this one I used Unsharp Mask to try and bring out those beautiful reflections." (Canon EOS 1Ds Mark III, 300mm lens, 1/320 @ f/9, ISO 500.)

He is up each day before dawn, armed with a Canon digital camera and a waterproof housing. Shots are taken when he's swimming in the water, walking on the beach, clambering across rocks – or tearing around the place on his scooter.

"It's different shooting in the ocean," he says. "In big surf, it's hard to swim with a camera that big and heavy and can be quite dangerous."

Last Christmas the danger came closer than usual when he was swimming at a big surf spot, a reef called Voodoo in Cronulla. "The surf was huge, I got pounded and head-surfed into the reef. I cracked my head open and a big chunk of my scalp came off, but I was in shock and didn't feel the pain," he recalls.

"I knew I was in trouble when all the surfers looked at me and their jaws dropped. It's famous for sharks out there and I had blood just hosing out of my head, but the surf was that big, no one could get to me so I had to swim ashore and scale a rock ledge to get out. I was really dizzy. If I had been knocked out that would have been the end of Aquabumps!"

Tan has been a photographer for a few decades, starting out documenting his classmates in Perth at the age of nine. "I had a tiny pocket camera I

bought at a garage sale and the kids would do funny things, like pile up in a pyramid. Then in high school, I was unleashed on this whole lab: cameras, lenses, darkroom – the works. It was incredible."

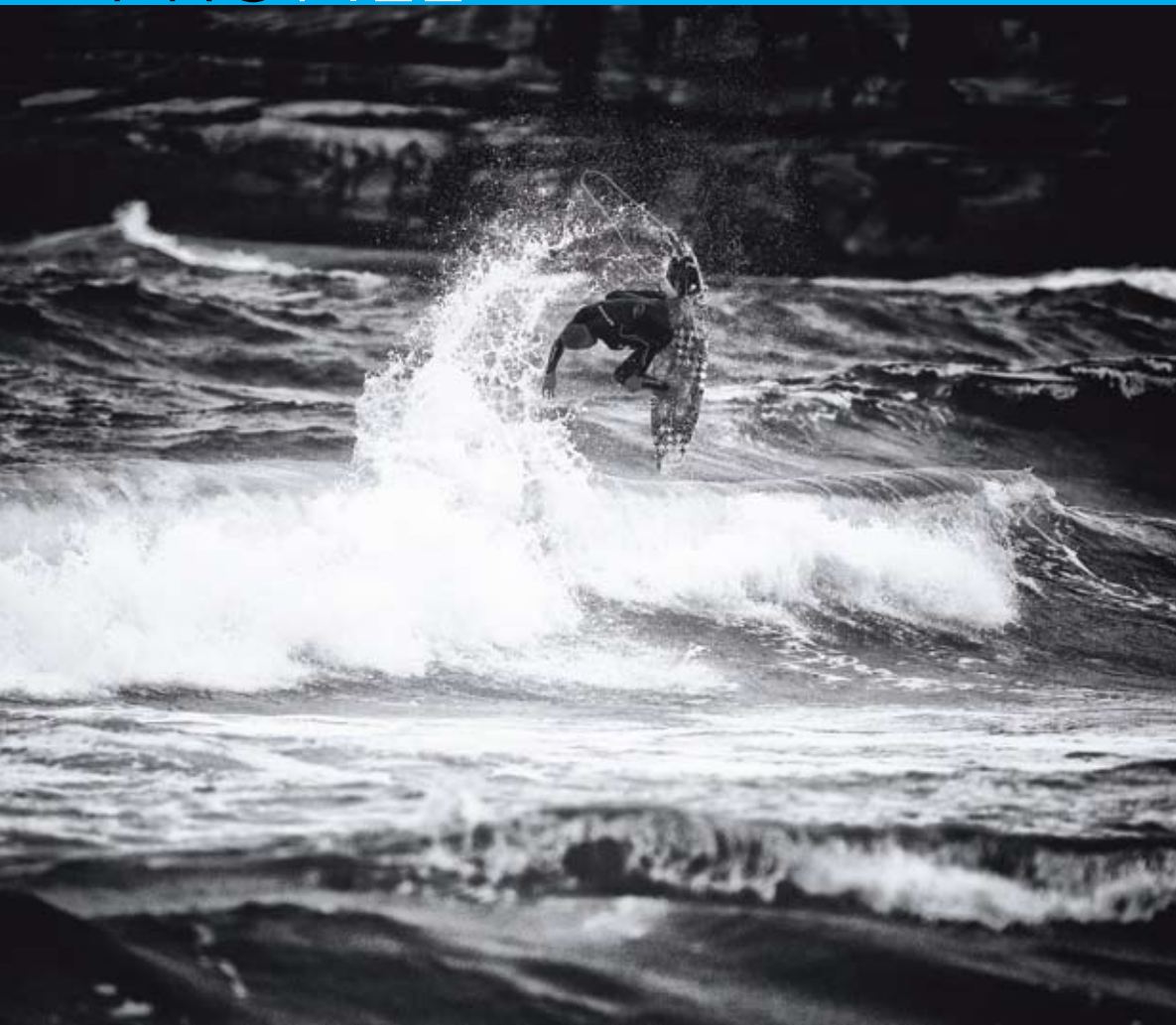
He says he drove his mother nuts when he set up his own darkroom in her laundry. On leaving school he enrolled in an Arts degree at Perth TAFE, with a minor in photography.

He spent a decade working as a graphic designer, moving to Sydney at the age of 22 when web design was taking off in the mid-nineties.

"By the time I quit my job, the corporate work was just paying the bills. I think in some ways I was in the right place at the right time."

Tan says it's tougher for amateur photographers now to move into the professional ranks because there is so much competition. "The market is absolutely flooded. At a Bondi surf carnival the other day, the amount of gear on the beach was incredible. People were walking around with \$10,000 worth of kit – and I know they didn't do it professionally. They had day jobs to support their weekend hobbies."

His advice to wanna-be pros? "You've just got to be on top of your game. There will always be work and



"Caleb Reid works in a bottleshop in Bondi and is probably one of the most talented surfers in our area. He's a quiet achiever; he will come out on a stormy day and do stuff like this when the waves are terrible. I kept the shot black-and-white for a reason; there was just no colour in the shot at all. In black-and-white you can focus on the action. I love the spray and how his arm kind of echoes it. I shot this from the beach." (Canon EOS 1Ds Mark III, 300mm lens with 2x teleconverter, 1/1250s @ f/5.6, ISO 800.)

**"I've got a gallery, and I'm in there six days a week and all that people want to talk about is kit! But there's no secret and no magic camera is going to make you good."**

things happening at the top of the game. If you're kind of average, it's going to be tough."

Tan has three main digital cameras, each with waterproof housing (usually the Aquatech brand), several specialist cameras, and a big range of lenses.

"I've got a gallery, and I'm in there six days a week and all that people want to talk about is kit!" he says. "But there's no secret and no magic camera is going to make you good."

He uses predominantly Canon cameras, and has been shooting Canon for around 13 years. He's just bought a 1D Mark IV. He also has a 1Ds Mark III, a 5D Mark II and several film cameras.

There's also a Hasselblad XPan film camera, with custom-made waterproof housing and a large format Fuji 617. "Beautiful cameras, but they are a pain to lug around. I don't shoot much film because it's so expensive to scan to a size I can use in the gallery."

Tan uses a big range of lenses. "I'm totally spoilt, I've got everything," he admits.

"But if I had to pick out one lens, at the moment it's my brand new 24mm f1.2 Canon. And I love my new 70-200mm Mark II, but the lens I use most is the 300mm f/2.8, with a two-times magnifier so I can get the shot without carrying so much weight."



"I was cooking dinner and shot this from the balcony of my apartment. Plenty of camera buffs sit out there in lightning with their shutter open for 30 seconds trying to get this; I'm sorry to say this was just pot luck, there was no skill in it. I literally walked out, said to my fiancée, "Look at that cloud coming over with the boat going straight into it!" then grabbed my camera, shot three frames – not even at a slow speed, hand holding at about 1/100th of a second. Then that lightning bolt – bam! I didn't retouch it at all. P&O cruises has been in touch since; they're interested in buying a big print of that shot." (Canon EOS 1Ds Mark III, 70-200mm lens, 1/100s @ f/5.6, ISO 1600.)