

photography blurs the boundary between art and science, writes
Richard Wilson

David Shale looks for beauty in the recesses of the world — deep beneath the oceans. Darkness, water pressure and plunging temperatures conspire to evolve forms of life that are startling in their design and appearance. These are otherworldly creatures, dramatically distinctive, and as a photographer and filmmaker Shale seeks to capture their uniqueness. In doing so, he also questions the dividing line between science and art.

What is it that separates these two disciplines? When does a photograph of an animal become more than just a record of its appearance? Shale believes the answer lies in technique, in trying to bring a still image to life. He has a PhD in biology and worked for eight years as an oceanographer; science informs his work, but he is not a scientist. "I consider myself an artist," he says.

His latest work is included in an exhibition, *Deeper Than Light*, which opens at Aberdeen Maritime Museum tomorrow. The collection of photographs was taken during an expedition by a Norwegian research ship, *GO Sars*, to the mid-Atlantic Ridge four years ago as part of the Mar-Eco survey of north Atlantic ecosystems. The ridge is a series of mountain ranges about 2,500m below sea level. The project, exploring the biodiversity of the deep sea, is part of a wider census of marine life, as scientists attempt to explore and describe the world that exists in the oceans.

The journey was a voyage of discovery for Shale. Each day on board brought new species to photograph, occasionally animals that had never before been seen. Each represented a different artistic and technical challenge. Where the *Anoplogaster cornuta* is a frightening-looking fish with a large jaw and scowling features that resemble a piranha, the *Cyclocanna welschi* is a translucent, bell-shaped creature, luminescent and soulful. While a scientist seeks to record and detail, an artist sets out to characterise and embody, to personify.

"In film-making and photography, it's trying to represent the animals in a particular way," Shale says. "You can put an animal on a tabletop to take a picture of it and that's a scientific representation, or you can try to make it look, or interpret it, as if it was living in the wild. Part of that is art.

"Every animal I've photographed has produced a different set of problems. You can't just say, here's an animal, you put it in a tank, you take a picture and it's going to work. You have to test to make sure the lighting is right, because the colours are different or the absorbency of the animal is different, the texture of the animal means you have to do different things."

The results are vivid and compelling. The *Cirrate octopod* is a red, gelatinous creature that looks perplexed, while the *Forskalia asymmetrica* resembles a clutch of dangling diamonds. There is a fascination in the images, a striking defiance of the extreme conditions in which these creatures exist, but also an aesthetic quality.

The exhibition, organised by the University of Bergen in Norway, makes its first UK appearance in Aberdeen, as the Scottish university's Oceanlab is involved in the Mar-Eco research project.

Work by the Norwegian painter Ormulf Opdahl, who was also on the expedition, is also on display. The exhibition merges science, art and technology (some of the research equipment will also be displayed) to try to broaden the understanding of a world that is largely unknown to the public. Science can explain the discoveries, but it is art that reveals them.

"That's the aim, to communicate the findings of the project and also general things about the deep sea and the mid-Atlantic Ridge to the lay person," explains Dr Nicola King, a research fellow at Oceanlab.

Shale has spent his working life capturing nature at its most dramatic and

beguiling. He left full-time research in 1979 and his previous work includes the BBC's *Blue Planet*, in particular on *The Deep* documentary for the series and *The Abyss*, which was broadcast live from the ocean's depths.

He recalls a time when "the theory was that people got fed up watching lion kills in East Africa", and wildlife television moved from the land into the sea. Interest in the marine environment persists and Shale, who still works on BBC projects, has a growing range of outlets for his work, including posters and book and magazine illustrations.

"There are a lot of strange animals down there that people have never come across. This sort of exhibition brings them to their attention. It's not like going into a museum and seeing something preserved in a bottle, you see images of animals that were alive, and they are interesting.

"Most are quite strange, they have to adapt to the environment and their bodies are modified in a different way than most people are used to. They're interesting, they're colourful. Modern filming and photographic techniques, along with modern scientific and research techniques, have enabled us to show them in a different light."

Shale often shoots underwater, but during the mid-Atlantic Ridge

expedition, the animals were brought up from the deep in specially designed nets and photographed onboard in a room specially refrigerated to keep them alive. He and the research team worked round the clock to make the most of their month at sea. The commitment was productive; the specimens they found were remarkable in their diversity.

"You might know that certain characteristics will exist, because of other animals you have seen from that environment, but you can never know what they are going to look like on any given day," he says. "There's a beauty in their distinctiveness. In this exhibition, some of the chrome jellies are fascinating, so delicate that if you held one in your hand and pulled it out of the water, it would disintegrate. Yet in the water, they're fantastically colourful. I also like the squid and octopuses, because they have particular adaptations, like the glowing sucker octopod."

Shale talks with the enthusiasm of a devotee. He sees the exhibition as a demonstration of the way science and art can merge. In the unexplored depths of the ocean, beauty can be found lurking in the dark.

Deeper than Light, Aberdeen Maritime Museum, March 29 to August 2

It's not like seeing something preserved in a bottle, you see images of animals that were alive!

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