

In synch

Peter Dench talks to Brad Walls about his project, *Water Geomaiids* – stunning aerial photographs of synchronised swimmers

Most photographers add a drone to their digital SLR or mirrorless repertoire. Born in 1992, Australian photographer Brad Walls, started with one. 'I really hadn't picked up a camera too much before 2019; my mum had a camera I took out in my early 20s and experimented a little, I didn't think much of it. I got into a career where I was a product designer where I got an inkling I wanted to pursue something visual. I started with the drone. I bought the first Mavic Drone in 2018 and just went travelling on holidays across Asia and south-east Australia, that's how it started. Just taking landscapes and introducing myself into that world.'

Brad has rapidly been refining his style, experimenting with negative space, symmetry and leading lines, increasingly implementing his approach to people as well as the landscape. His *Pools From Above* series received global acclaim and comparisons to the American photographer noted for his images of socialites, jet-setters and celebrities, Slim Aarons, a photographer Brad took inspiration from. 'As much as I love his work, I kept looking and thinking what I would've done differently? As a photographer, the notion is you should take in the scene as it is – mine are very staged,' says Brad. There are also correlations with artist David Hockney, how he uses lines, symmetry and beautiful colours.

Swimming pools were an integral part of Brad's youth, the memories of summers spent splashing about in the pool in his backyard burned onto his retina. Pools are the basis of his latest series, *Water Geomaiids*, striking images of swimmers at The Sydney Emeralds Synchro Swimming Club. Synchronised swimming

developed from life-saving and swimming techniques, progressing to a sport when ornamental swimming and theatrical water ballets were popularised at the end of the 19th century, eventually gaining Olympic status in 1984. Aquatic spectacles are nearly as old as the Olympics themselves – Julius Caesar is reported to have flooded amphitheatres to stage reenactments of large naval battles known as *naumachia*, where prisoners were forced to fight one another to the death (or drown trying).

Natural fit

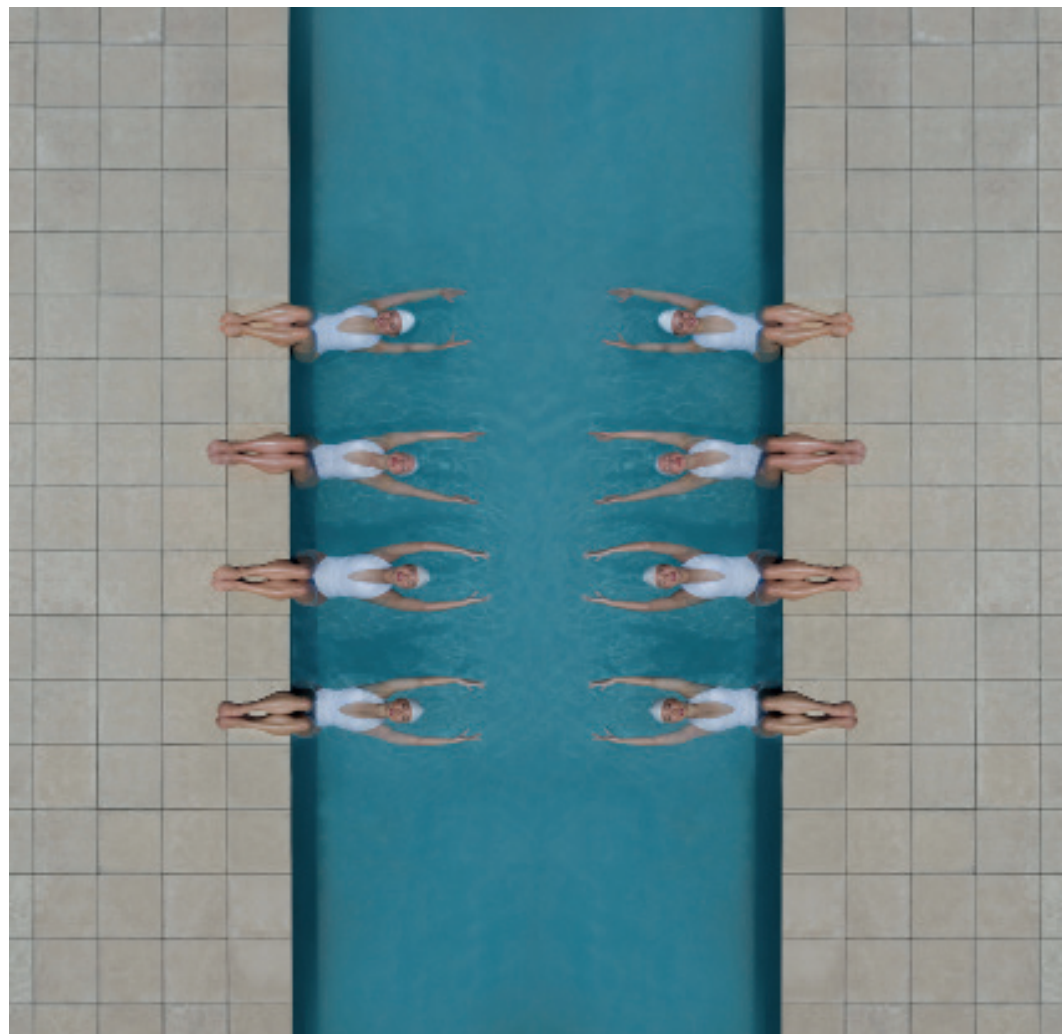
As the synchronised spectacle developed from life-saving to what we are familiar with today, it was a natural fit for Brad and his symmetrical obsession. Working with the Sydney Emeralds choreographer, Katrina Ann, a former competitor who has taken part in the Commonwealth Games and multiple World Championships, Brad would draw geometric shapes on his phone and together they would figure out how to get the girls into those static shapes. 'She's on the poolside next to me, I'm with my drone monitor. The drone is above me about five metres up. She has a loudspeaker telling the girls who's out of line and the next position. I'm more liaising with her than the girls,' reveals Brad.

He first worked with Katrina on a test shoot in 2019. 'That shoot had constraints, the pool was too small, the lighting wasn't right on the day but it was a good practice session. I came back a year later and really refined what I wanted, I think I'd grown as a photographer,' he adds.

In one image, eight smiling swimmers linked together are captured pin-sharp at the centre of a circle of ripples. 'It was a



Clockwise from top left: Water Jewel; Pearls; Emerge; Form





Very serendipitous moment, the girls were moving from one position to the other, they lifted up and leaned to one side creating this whirlpool, they were doing static positions before. I didn't know my shutter speed was quite slow,' admits Brad. In other images, the swimmers can be seen peering from parasols while holding a diamond shape, forming a diagonal staircase shape, a rhombus within a rhombus and a finishing pose reminiscent of flowers in bloom. The serene images are achieved with maximum effort as the swimmers fight to stabilise in the moving current.

The shoot was in the middle of the day to limit shadows from surrounding trees. Brad brackets the raw files to deal with issues of glare on the water. 'The biggest hindrance with drones is battery life. It can hamper you, you get about 25 minutes from each battery if you're lucky. My shoots normally last for an hour to an hour and a half – that is quite difficult when you're in the moment and you hear a buzzing, telling you to land.'

Synchronised swimming is the

perfect subject for Brad's forensic appreciation of order. 'We learn about shapes and geometry in school – in science, chemistry, physics and maths, to try and work out what all these shapes mean. It intrigues me still, the unknown. There's so much naturally forming symmetry out in the world; architects are a good proponent of that, using it in their design. I've done some architectural work in the past – that introduced me to seeing it. In society we love formation and symmetry, it makes us feel at home in a way. When I look down a street and the trees are lined up in a perfect row or the driveways are aligned, I feel drawn to that.'

Brad has applied his aerial photography to several subjects, including ballet, gymnastics and exercise, basketball and tennis. Is there a limit to his canvas? 'I'm very particular in what I choose to shoot in terms of sports. I think there are some sports which wouldn't have the scope to create my visuals. I recently shot a hurdler. I had a very distinct image in my mind. The subject has got to be vast in space.



Team sports just go out the window, there's too much going on, I couldn't deal with that, unless they're in a symmetrical line. The sports that are more single based make more sense to me. Synchronised swimming is a team but they're working harmoniously. It worked perfectly.'

Not since American film director and musical choreographer Busby Berkeley devised his complex kaleidoscopic on-screen performances using a large number of props and showgirls, has the view from above been so eloquently captured. The drone is invaluable to enable Brad access to a perspective beyond Berkeley's ladder.

Brad hopes to exhibit his Water Geomaids at art fairs and in shopping centres across the globe. There are plans for a book of his pool series, he has around 60 images from Australia and Asia and hopes to add to them with trips to America, Mexico and parts of the Mediterranean. When that happens, I'm sure that Brad's global appeal as a defining aerial expert will take off.

Clockwise from top left; Water Ballet; Parasol Peek; Circle of Synchro; Staircase; Diamond



Brad Walls is an Australian aerial photographer based in Sydney. Best known for his use of close-up top-downs, he specialises in aerial portraiture and a minimalistic approach to aerial photography.

