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Buoys: Fishermen's hand-made tools as art

Photographer and story by Arthur Drooker



As a photographer I pride myself on making the ordinary look extraordinary. To see a common object anew is to photograph it in a way that it has never been seen before. Such was the case when I saw the unexpected yet undeniable beauty of buoys. Yes, buoys.

I should state at the outset that I'm not a fisherman. To be honest, my idea of fishing is going to the seafood department of my neighborhood supermarket and buying filets of whatever looks good for dinner that night.

Yet, like a fisherman, I venture forth at all hours not knowing what I will find and when I return with a pleasing photo, I often call it the "catch of the day."

Moreover, and more important, fishing requires skill and patience, and so does photography. And let's not forget luck. The kind of luck I felt last fall when I visited Point Arena pier on the Northern California coast.

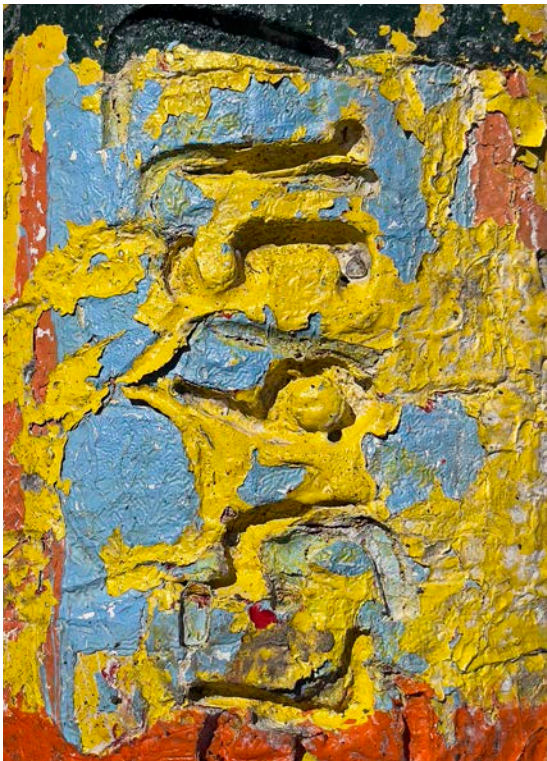
Normally, I would have no business being there but the occasion — giving my son-in-law's family, which includes avid fishermen, a tour of the area — just happened to take place when the setting sun bathed buoys on the pier in golden light, saturating their colors and accentuating their textures. I take moments like this as a sign. It's as if the sun deliberately focused its last rays, like a pointer, on the buoys, saying, "Look at this!" I did. And began photographing.



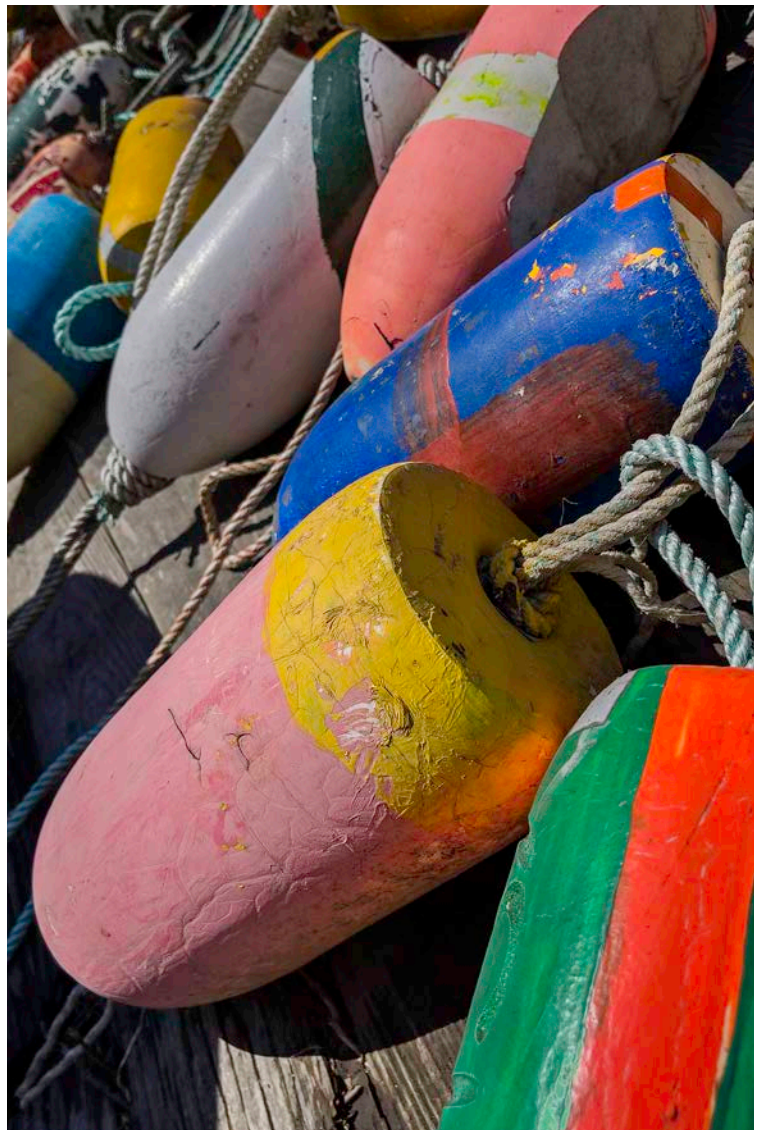
A close up of a permit number on a buoy on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, Calif.



A pile of buoys near Spud Point Marina in Bodega Bay, Calif.



Buoys with coats of chipped paint, like this one in Bodega Bay, Calif., resemble abstract art to photographer Arthur Drooker.



Buoys hanging at The Boat House, a restaurant in Bodega Bay, Calif.

Working quickly before the sun set, I hauled in more than one “catch of the day.” With each buoy I photographed, the more I came to know the essence of the object: A buoy doesn’t just mark the location of a fisherman’s trap beneath the surface. Its peeling paint, dents, and scars also mark the effects of time, tide, and toil. Such wear and tear mirror the rough hands and weathered faces of fishermen who have made the buoy an essential part of their trade for generations. Emblazoned with unique color schemes and permit numbers, buoys are also non-representational portraits of their owners and their own kind of abstract art, especially when seen close as I prefer to photograph them.

Excited by what I photographed at Point Arena, I became obsessed with buoys. A few days later I drove to Bodega Bay, another fishing hub near my Northern California home, in search of more. There I found a bevy of buoys decorating the walls of The Boat House, a popular restaurant on Highway 1. So, this is what happens to buoys when they retire! After years of service, tethered to traps, they hang in perpetuity, adorning the walls of restaurants and other buildings in seaside towns. While



A makeshift “painter’s studio” inside Pier 45 on San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf.

A close-up of a buoy hanging from The Boat House, a restaurant in Bodega Bay, Calif.



A close-up of a permit number on a buoy from Point Arena pier on the Northern California coast.

diners finger-licked their fish and chips, I carefully handled the buoys as if I were a sommelier holding a precious bottle of vintage wine.

My experience at Point Arena had made me a buoy connoisseur so I knew what to look for as far as which ones to photograph: The buoys had to show just the right amount of wear and tear, if too worn and torn they would be unrecognizable; they had to have an eye-catching combination of colors; and they had to make a unique contribution to my growing series of buoy photographs. The ones hanging at The Boat House did not disappoint. If they had been a dish on the menu, then I would’ve given The Boat House a four-star review.

Bodega Bay and Point Arena yielded a bounty of buoys but my quest to photograph them in Northern California wouldn’t have been complete without exploring Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco. Behind the tourist traps, family-style seafood restaurants, and jaywalking sea gulls pecking at sourdough breadcrumbs stands Pier 45, a cavernous hall housing the west coast’s largest concentration of fish processors and distributors. In the late afternoon,

when most fishermen were gone, I had this treasure trove to myself. There were buoys galore basking in bins and hanging from traps. The best find of all was sitting on a wooden table: a group of orange, yellow, and blue striped buoys flanking a paintbrush in a plastic cup. This tableau captured the heart of my project — buoys as art. While the fisherman who had painted them was absent, what he left behind in his makeshift studio made his presence felt.

After exploring these three fishing hubs in Northern California, I assessed what I had photographed and determined that I had enough memorable images to publish a portfolio of them. Seen together they show in granular detail the array of colors, designs, and textures that make buoys worthy of our attention. More personally, they also show the joy I felt in discovering these Styrofoam gems, reminding me of the more figurative meaning of buoy — to cheer or lift someone’s spirits.

Arthur Drooker is a photographer and writer based in Mill Valley, California. For more information and to order a copy of BUOYS, please visit arthurdrooker.com