

**arts**  
ForArt'sSake

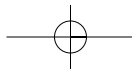
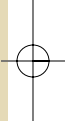
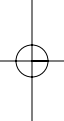
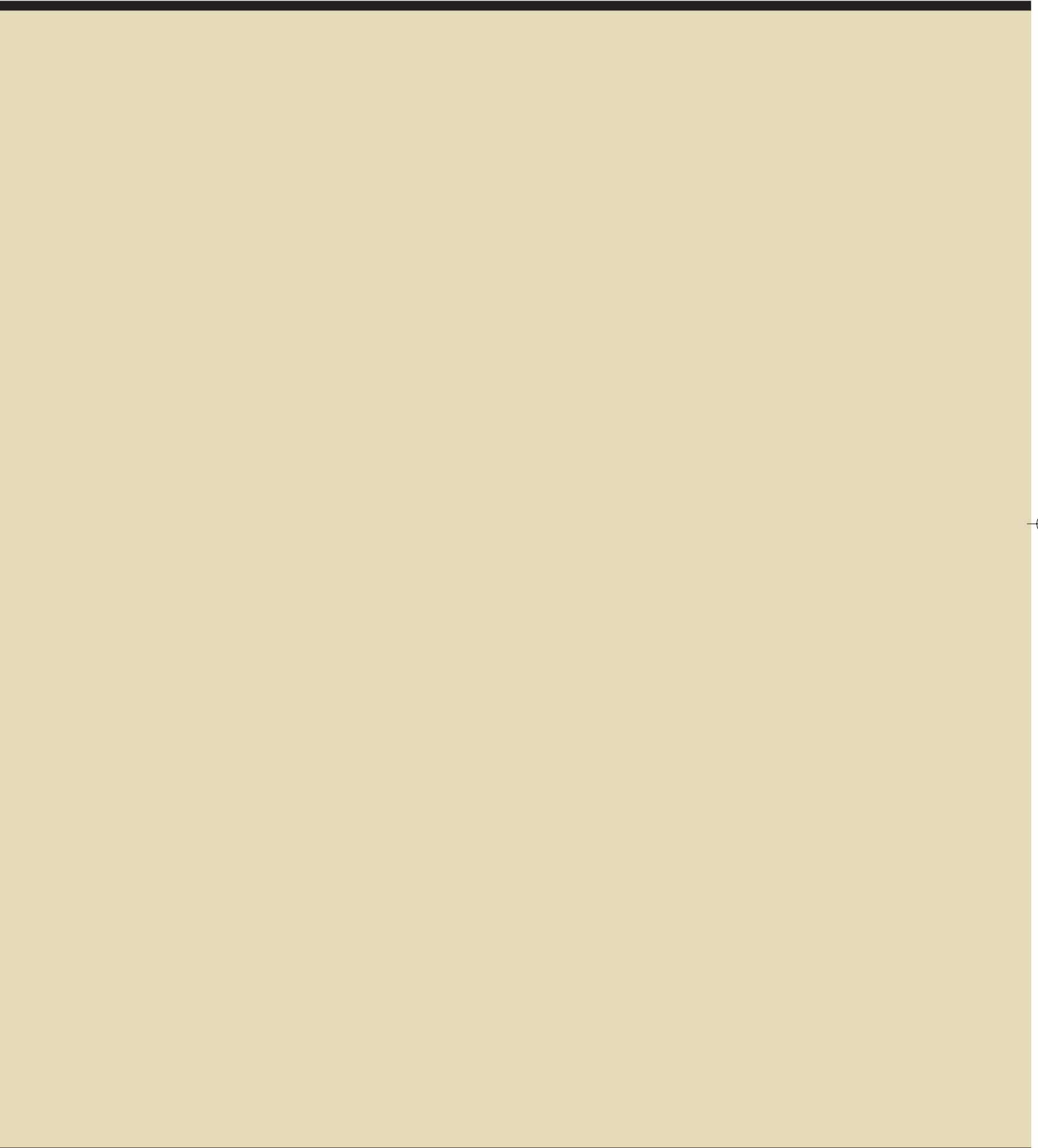


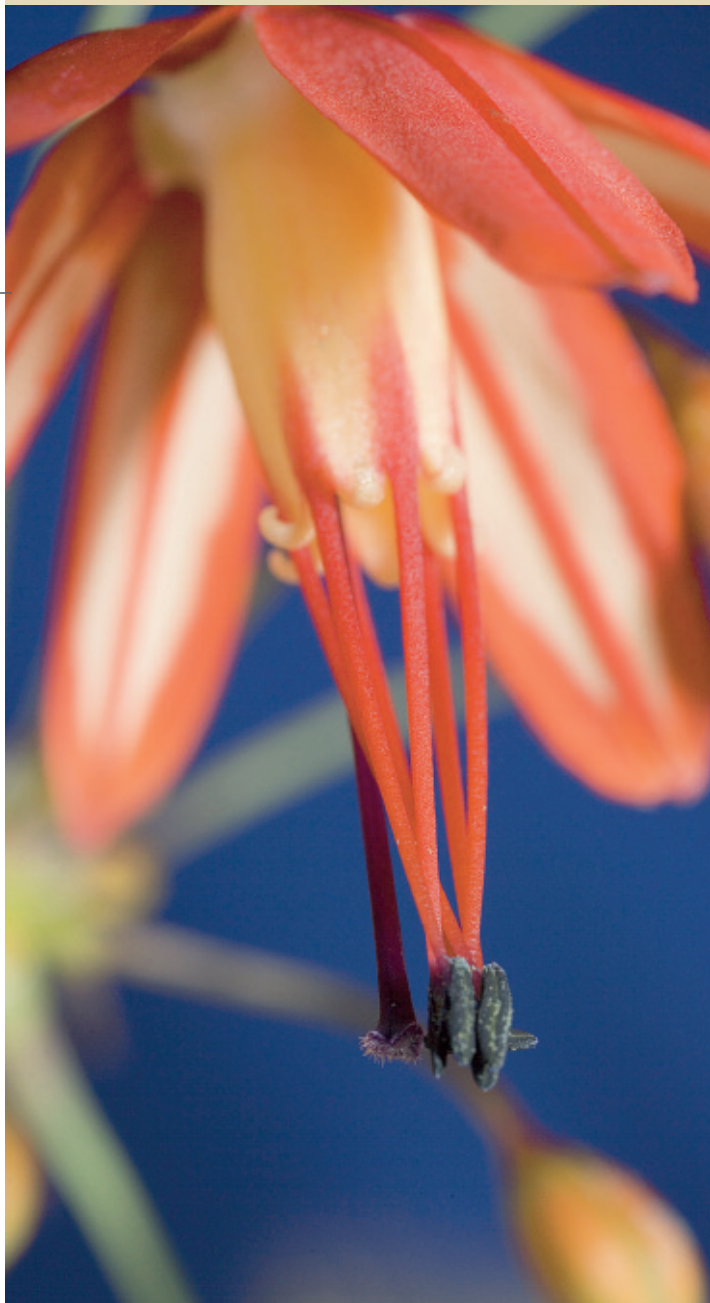


PHOTO: NICK COOPER

Above  
Roger Smith

## Up Close and Personal

Nick Cooper looks at the work of photographer and digital artist Roger Smith



Unless you are extremely observant and in the habit of carrying a very powerful magnifying glass when you go out in the garden, or for walks in the countryside or on the beach, there is every chance that some of the minute details that Roger Smith finds in the landscape will completely pass you by.

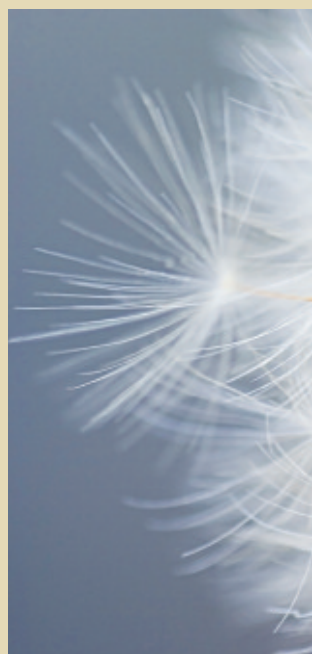
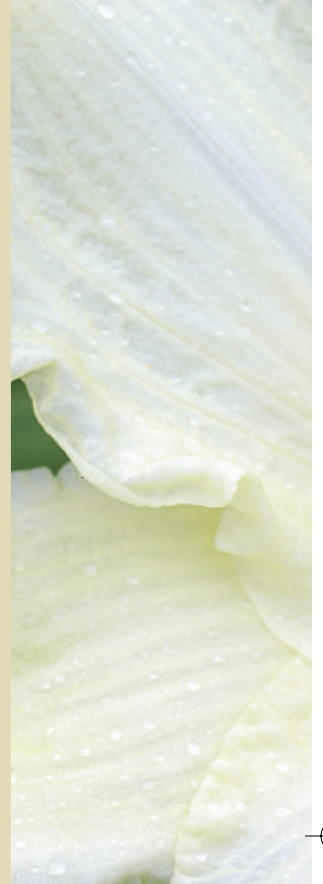
For the past three years, Roger has been photographing the natural world and seeking out the increasingly tiny, in his quest to find subjects that, either standing alone or when combined with his paintings, add to his colourful collection of digital art.

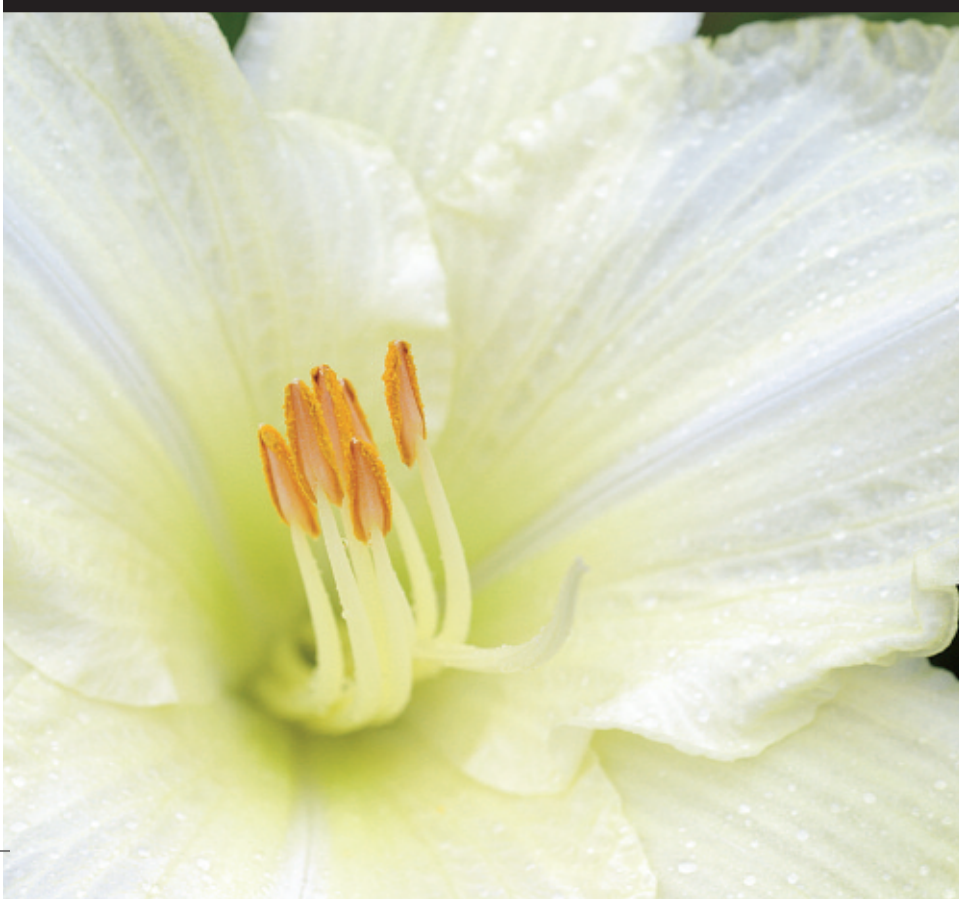
I meet Roger at the family home, a 30-acre former dairy farm in Wyke Regis, which is fast becoming a large gallery in its own right, as the walls fill with his colourful and increasingly diverse canvases. Growing up in and around Weymouth, his original ambition was to be either a doctor or microbiologist, as he had a fascination with cell structures and things on a microscopic level. At the same time, he had always liked art and admired artists and it was during his gap year from college that he decided, with encouragement from an artist friend, to abandon his science studies and change direction.

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'I found that I had a natural ability and aptitude for art,' confides Roger, as he shows me one of his earliest paintings; the brief for it was 'magnification' and his work featured cell structures – mitochondria, ribosomes and different strands of DNA, he explains. His art studies led him to do many paintings, before he also became hooked on photography about 15 years ago. A foundation course in Trowbridge led to a degree course at Exeter University, with a specialisation in photography, but he was forced to leave in the second year, through ill health.

'I didn't touch a camera again for about four or five years,' Roger tells me, 'but one day I suddenly felt a desire to start again.' The purchase of a digital single-lens reflex camera rekindled his interest in photography. He had used film during his studies, but





From that point on, one thing led to another. As a student, he had taken photographs using a close-up lens which attaches to the front of the camera lens and works in a similar way to holding a magnifying glass in front of your eye, but he now wanted to explore the subjects he was photographing in much greater detail. By investing in a macro lens, which enables small objects to be recorded at up to life-size, he could fully investigate the many shapes and patterns that he believed were waiting to be found within the flowers.

Roger's series of botanicals then started to take shape. Some are straight photographs to which further digital techniques have been applied in processing, in order to emphasise the rich colours of his subjects. Others combine photographs of plants with those of some of his Op Art paintings, as well as computer-generated shapes and colours using fractals software, to arrive at entirely different finished results.

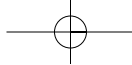
If the enquiring mind of a scientist leads Roger to look at the world around him in increasingly fine detail, it is the discovery of abstract forms in the subjects he analyses that spurs him on as an artist. Finding a box of fossils he collected in his younger days recently led to the acquisition of another lens, giving Roger an even closer view. The extreme levels of magnification this offers him opens up many further possibilities, as he can now work at sizes up to five times larger than life. To put this in perspective, imagine that your subject is a spider; not only would you be able to count the spider's knees, you could even see him wink at you through the viewfinder (if spiders have eyelids).

the use of the newer technology and perhaps the ability it offers to instantly review the results in great detail on a computer screen, started him on a journey of discovery.

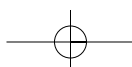
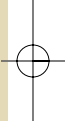
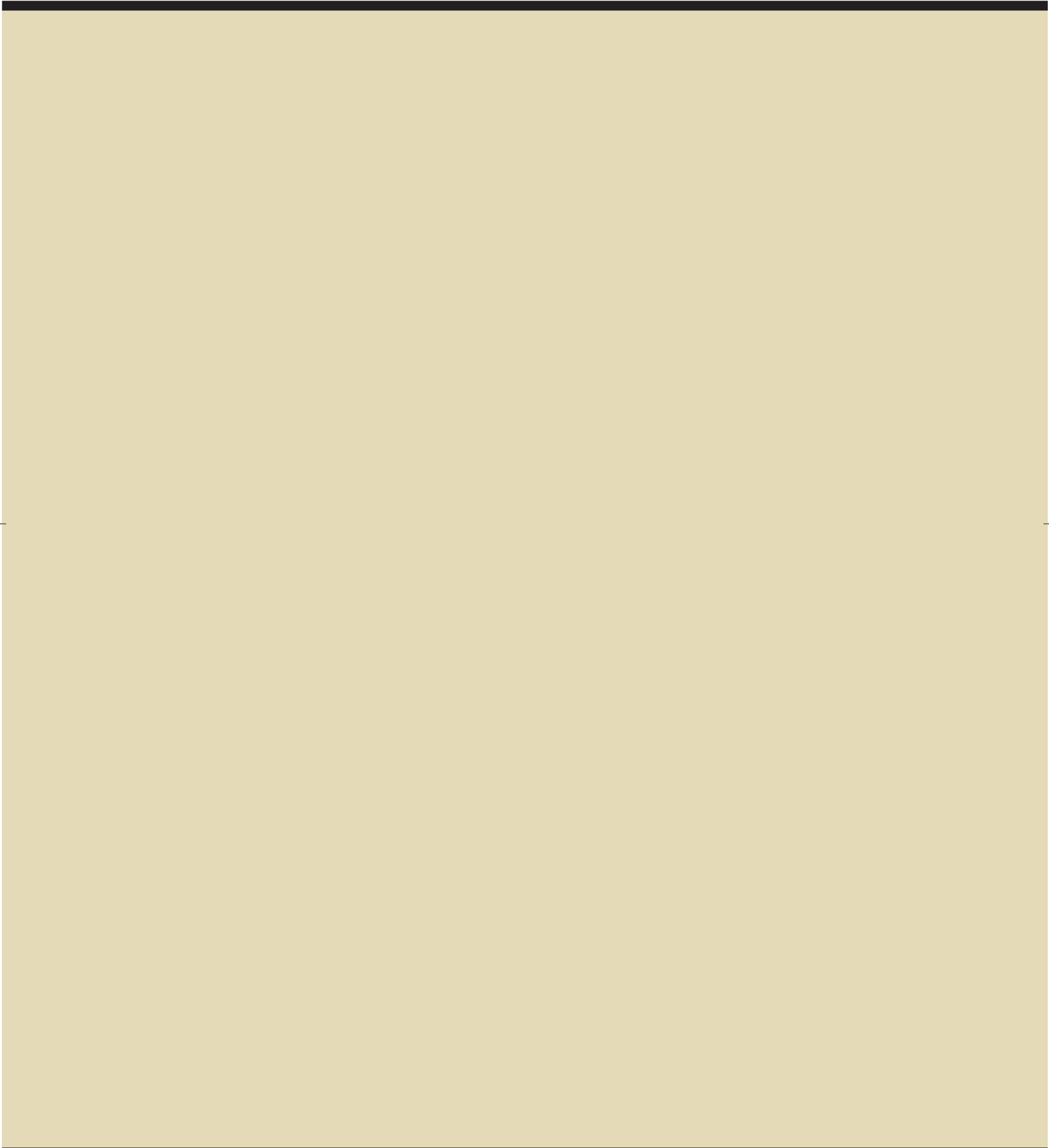
'After photographing things all around the house, I went out into the garden and started snapping away at flowers,' says Roger, whose parents are very keen gardeners. 'It was when I was looking at the shots later that I realised there was something interesting going on in them.'

Working at such extremes, the photographer is presented with a number of obstacles which demand considerable skill and patience. When focusing this close to the subject, the depth of field – the amount directly behind and in front of the main subject that will be in acceptably sharp focus – becomes very shallow and may be just a few millimetres at best; what is critically sharp will be far less than this. Also, the greater the degree of magnification, the darker the viewfinder image becomes, making it harder to focus. For this type of work, the camera and lens is typically used on a ▶





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sturdy tripod with a rail, so it can be moved back and forth as a unit in very fine amounts, in order to focus.

Geometric shapes have been something of an obsession for Roger from the time he started painting, when he became interested in the optical art styles of Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely and he makes a point of seeking out the abstract shapes and forms offered up by the natural objects he photographs, which have included various barks. Of particular interest to him at the moment are naturally-occurring spirals, as he photographs ammonites, nautilus shells and sunflowers. He is currently working on a series of images, as he goes through his fossil collection hunting down the well-concealed abstracts awaiting discovery in pieces of petrified wood, obsidians, jasper, crystals and a variety of other stones and minerals. Portland and Lyme Regis Museums have recently invited him to photograph their fossil collections later this year, too.

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'I often find raw, unpolished pieces more interesting,' says Roger, leafing through his portfolio and explaining the stages of his process. 'What continually fascinates me is what can come from an example that's interesting. You have got a kind of landscape going on in it. You can find something in it as you photograph it; it then changes as you get it on a computer screen and, as you get it blown up on canvas, it becomes something different again. It's a complete cycle and there are always little rewards as you go along.'

Roger has put together and exhibited a large and extremely interesting body of work over a comparatively short period of time, and a permanent gallery should be open at his home, Martleaves House, by the time you read this. He will also be joining several other digital artists when he takes part in 'Caution: Wet Pixels!' at the Peacock Gallery in Poole in June, but if you hurry there is a chance to enjoy his work right now, as a solo exhibition is currently taking place at Highcliffe Castle and Roger's art is being displayed in the Drawing Room there, until 20th May. □

