

Sculpture Magazine

Interview by Robert Preece

Robert Preece: When did you first think about placing sculpture works underwater?

Jason deCaires Taylor: I have been exploring the ocean since I was 8 years old and from an early age became fascinated by its endless possibilities, presenting both a physical space to explore and a mental place of escape. I have been interested in developing art projects using the underwater world ever since I was at Art College in the early 90's. At the time I was very much influenced by the land art and earthworks movements and felt the ocean represented such a vast arena to further explore the boundaries of art. At Art College my studies were focused on creating landscape installations both in urban environments and coastal settings. However studying in central London made the practicality of realizing an underwater project very difficult, so I put it on the back burner for a while. I was also troubled by the resources and materials that large-scale installations consumed, it was only when I realized the conservational element of my work that I became more comfortable with it.

Preece: Looking back, what situation gave you your important break into the field?

deCaires Taylor: Losing everything and becoming disillusioned with the rat race. I spent many years in unfulfilling occupations. I reached a point where it became critical for me to concentrate my efforts on something, worthwhile and beneficial. To leave this life knowing I had made a small difference. Funnily enough many of the skills I developed in these "unfulfilling occupations" have aided me greatly in developing these projects. Years building sets for Theatres and corporate exhibitions gave me a firm understanding of engineering logistics and teaching scuba diving around the world obviously gave me the technical ability.

Preece: How does your process work? What things do you have to consider from idea to making to installation of the works?

deCaires Taylor: I often begin my installations by life casting models, mainly local residents that I research, invite to the studio and then full body cast. From the plaster positives I create a series of moulds that go on to be filled with high-density pH neutral marine cement. A material that is both safe to install in the sea and can mimic natural rock formation on which corals like to settle. From an early point I have to carefully work out the weight loadings, anchoring methods to the sea floor and transportation, as floating or craning a 10 ton structure out across the ocean leaves little room for error. Artistically speaking I really need to study the site where the work is going to be placed, the viewing angle, scale (sometimes I place my works in an open space and climb to the top of a nearby building to view them as this is the angle you are most likely to see the works underwater) also the colour of the water, atmosphere, visibility, current, existing marine colonization and direction of the sun all play a fundamental part in how the final work will be interpreted.

Preece: What are the other technical challenges and government permissions required in placing works underwater that one needs to consider?

deCaires Taylor: There are many technical challenges, the majority of public land sculpture utilize metals to some degree, underwater this is prohibited as the life span is short and not very effective when trying to seed corals which can take 100's of years to form. Open Ocean is also a very volatile place; the power of waves and currents can inflict immense forces. With this in mind I have to choose the placement sites very carefully, generally areas which have barren seabeds and are protected by some kind of land mass. Permitting is one of the hardest parts and months (sometimes years) are spent conducting environmental impact analysis reports, archeological surveys, and underwater mapping.

Preece: What kinds of reaction by fish, coral, etc. have you seen? Have there been surprises?

deCaires Taylor: Every day I visit the works there is some kind of surprise. I have over 25 years diving experience and yet it is virtually impossible to always predict the changes. On every level you can see incredible transformations; on a macro level you can see intricate patination of coralline algae, white tubular worms, pink sponges and coral membranes that have pores like human skin. Zoom out a little and you can see fire-worms feeding on the

coral, crustaceans such as hermit crabs and coral banded shrimps grazing on algae and seaweed and starfish and sea urchins marching across the surfaces seeking protection in crevices.

The large congregations of figurative works provide “void space” areas in-between limbs, which provide protection to shoaling fish like snappers and wrasse. These then encourage pelagic species such as sharks and barracudas, which predate on the smaller varieties. Over the years I have tried to tailor each of the installations further for endemic marine life, positioning them in areas which will catch natural coral spawning, creating surface textures that help embryonic marine polyps attach, creating cavities of particular sizes to attract certain species to take residence. The biggest surprise for me has been the rate at which the sculptures change, sometimes within a few weeks the works can be barely recognizable. The colour pigmentation of some of the sponges is something I have never seen recreated by any industry or artists palette.

Preece: As an artist, you are partly working in the sphere of a business model creating a site for tourism development. What are its benefits and, are there any shortcomings?

deCaires Taylor: I feel tethering the works to a business model makes them far more sustainable in the long run. All the large-scale installations I have produced, the local authorities now charge a small entrance fee. This helps provide revenue for local staff and tour operators but more importantly help finance a system of marine patrols for coastal waters. Many of the issues facing our oceans are that the laws protecting them are not enforced and being able to provide funds for marine protected areas and park wardens is a huge advance. An important part of the projects has also be about changing the iconography of the area, highlighting local natural and cultural resources rather than them just being known as places to jet Ski and drink Pina Colodas. The reason I called many of the projects Museums is that Museums are synonymous with preservation, conservation and education and I want people to assign those values to the underwater world. In terms of shortcoming; the fact that to really appreciated and connect to the works it is best to scuba dive them and this obviously has limitations on range of audience. One of the greatest challenges I face is balancing the creative process that involves spontaneity, evolution of ideas and experimentation within a long and often drawn out process of politics, planning and logistics.

Preece: To what extent do you consider your underwater works “eco-driven”, and not?

deCaires Taylor: I would say the ecological aspect been one of the major driving forces for the work. Besides the practical benefits of creating marine habitats, the narrative of the works also concerns wider ecological and social issues like the anthropocene and our apathy to towards a rapidly changing planet. Once all the statues have metamorphosed into some thing else, only traces of humanity will live on. The relationship has been balanced; we are reminded that we too are not separate to the environment but an integral part of it. An ultimate inter-dependency with which could bring acceptance and hope. The otherworldly presence draws the viewer in with intrigue, a familiar face in a strange world, a bridge from which to explore a fundamental part of our planet.

Preece: Your work in the Thames seems quite different. Was this idea-to-realization development markedly different from your exclusively underwater works?

deCaires Taylor: The Rising Tide, although constructed using similar techniques to the underwater reef works was markedly different. The submerged artificial reef installations focus more on the environment itself being the artist, blurring lines between ancient, contemporary and apocalyptic civilizations. In the Thames works the changing tide becomes the protagonist, and the location in front of the houses of Parliament, the activist. The entire project was planned and executed within two months, which gave it a real feeling of momentum and protest. Strangely enough the site on the river banks was 5 minutes walk from where I spent most of my time as an art student, so it felt like a real home coming.

Preece: What things did you not learn in your university education that, looking back, you wish you had?

deCaires Taylor: Diving of course! No jokes aside I remember at university we were not allowed to use work benches and always began projects working from the floor, it was backbreaking and we quickly leant to scale up the works and think on a different scale. I would have loved to have taken this a step further and always begun an idea from a different starting point, context or environment. I really believe art can change the world and when teamed up with science can provides some very powerful synergies. Maybe a greater focus on collaboration rather compartmentalization would have been beneficial.

Preece: Your media coverage has been rather full-on in the general press internationally. As we know, part of the art world can be very old school, conservative, academy values-driven. What do you now think about the coverage? What has it done for you—and what maybe hasn't it done for you that you didn't expect?

deCaires Taylor: The coverage has been very intense, it sometimes makes me feel like an observer or commentator looking in. It's interesting, I place something in an inaccessible place and it actually becomes more accessible than ever before. I just saw a report that over the last 5 years I have connected to an audience of over a billion people, certainly a sign of the times and testament to how digital media is rapidly changing the world and can help shape artists careers. It also has changed my practice significantly, as I spend equal time on the documentation of my work as the construction, I find myself making details on works that will be lost within days to the sea but ever present in my images. The media attention has without doubt helped me attain many new commissions and really helped me connect to a wide-ranging audience, which is vital when forming a debate around global environmental issues.

Although I studied sculpture for my degree I still view myself as an outsider artist who has not necessarily passed through the traditional gallery system. As a result I probably focus more of my energy on the actual site-specific installations and less attention to the art market and exhibitions

