

Jason deCaires Taylor



P O R T F O L I O





Detail of *The Silent Evolution* (2012), depth 8m, MUSA Collection, Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico



Inertia (2011) above and a detail of *The Bankers* (2012) on the previous page at 5-6m depth, MUSA Collection, Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico

British artist Jason deCaires Taylor has created unique underwater sculptures and installations in locations all over the world. We first interviewed him in 2007 when he finished a photo-documentary of one of his earliest works in Grenada. Now a well-known artist and celebrity with international media coverage, Taylor is much sought after by many centers of tourism wishing to draw divers to their waters or rejuvenate sandy sea areas with renewed reef and marine life that thrive on his creations.

Text edited by Gunild Symes
Photos and all sculptures
by Jason deCaires Taylor

X-RAY MAG: How has your purpose or approach to underwater sculpture evolved and developed since the first sculptures you created in Grenada?

JDT: I am always interested in trying out new ideas, experimenting with different concepts and advancing techniques to create the pieces but I am now more focused on trying to highlight the grave threats to our marine ecosystems and the controversial subjects surrounding oceans and climate change.

Now that I am better known, I have more free rein on the design front and able to explore more divisive subjects.

One of the sculptures in Mexico, for example, is of a politician with his head buried in the sand. It was not the first thing the tourist board or local government wanted to highlight. Likewise, the sculpture of the guy on the sofa called "Inertia," it's about our relationship with the natural world and tourism... how people just see these locations as sunny places to go and consume when in fact their interactions directly affect the environments they are going to.

X-RAY MAG: Are you trying to raise awareness in divers about these conservation issues?

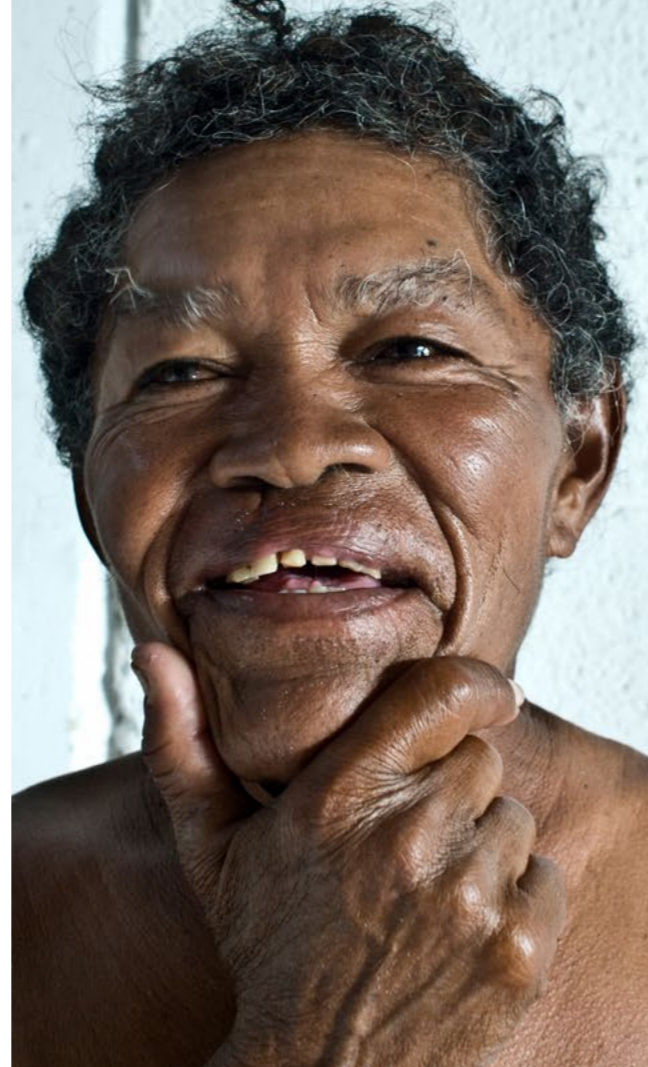
JDT: It's not so much to influence the diving community, but more the general public. Most divers are fairly aware,





—maybe not in Cancun, where there are still a lot of novices or first time divers with poor buoyancy skills and are still touching

the corals. I still see snorkeler's standing on reefs in some places. However, in most areas, divers are fairly respectful. It's more about



Stages in the creative process from local participant to life cast sculpture in reef-friendly cement to coral colonization, *The Silent Evolution*, Mexico; Algae, sponges and hydrozoans on *Viccisitudes Girl*, Grenada, West Indies (left)

trying to connect to a wider audience and bring a piece of our magnificent oceans into their living rooms.

X-RAY MAG: How have people responded to your message over the years?

JDT: It is difficult to gauge the response, but I must say, overall, in direct feedback and on social media, it has been very positive. I invest a lot of time and energy into good documentation of my pieces and the growth on them in order to help people experience the works. I have been told by many people it reminds them of a line from *The Tempest* [by Shakespeare]:

"Full fathom five thy father lies;

Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange."

X-RAY MAG: What about your artistic methods, has this changed over time?

JDT: I am always working harder to improve ways in which the sculptures become habitats. I have used a lot of traditional sculpting methods in the past, but at the moment, I am designing a project for the Bahamas using 3D digital technology and CNC cutting machinery. It is going to be 100 tons in weight and six metres high. The piece will assemble in sections underwater like a layered jigsaw.

X-RAY MAG: Who helps you? How do you coordinate your team of helpers, assisting divers, in the production of your works?

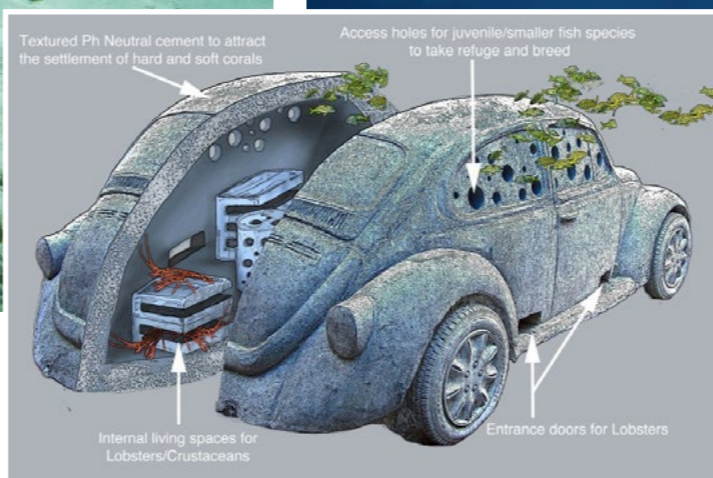
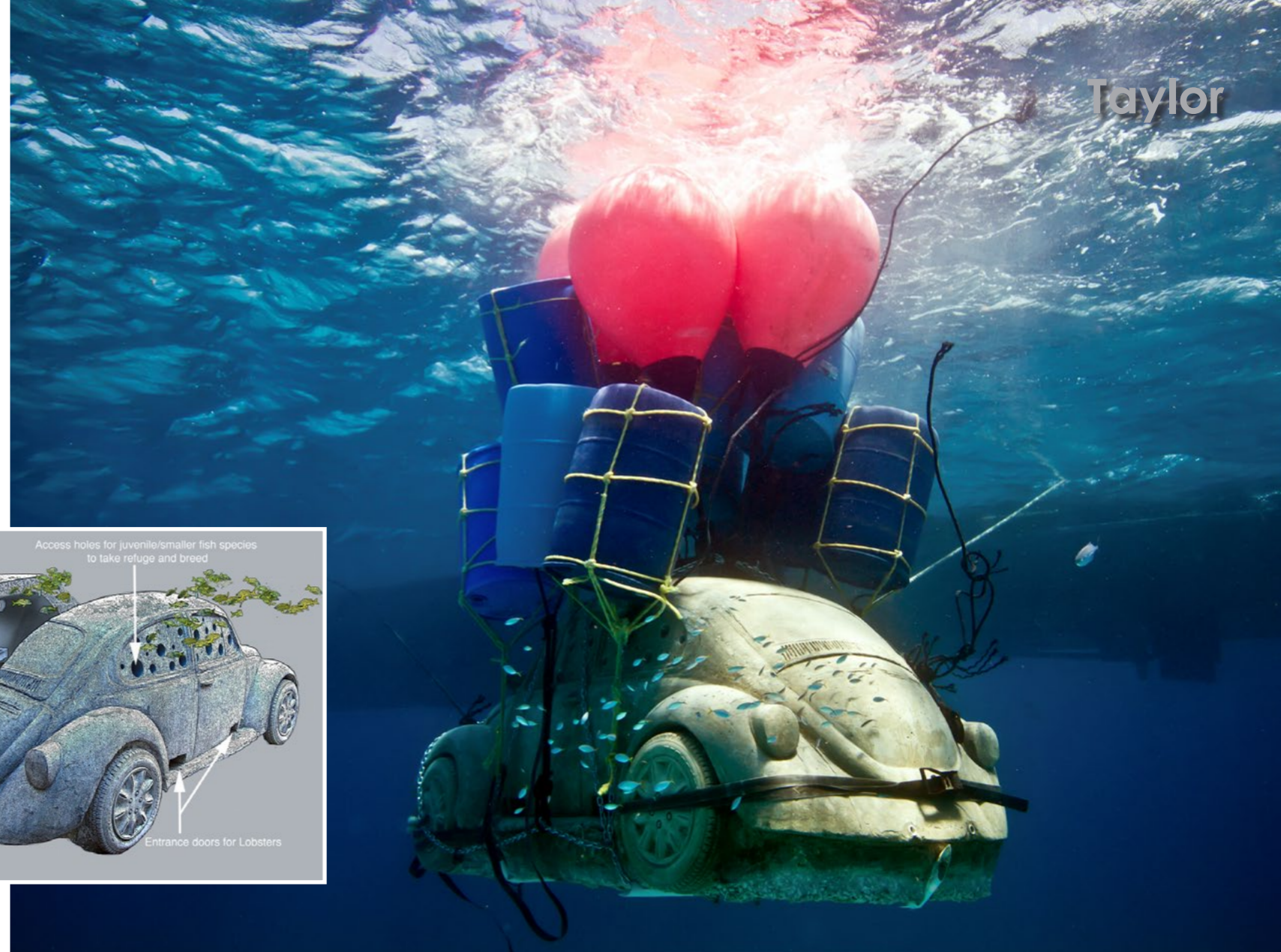
JDT: Various people at different points. The techniques I use require many work hours—i.e. life casting, mould making—so I have a lot of help in the studio, then a different team who work with the installation: marine engineers and dive technicians.

X-RAY MAG: Are they all volunteers or are they paid?

JDT: It depends on the project budget. I certainly prefer experienced staff. Sometimes it's difficult to find sculpting skills in remote places but I always, if possible, hire from the local commu-



Traditional life casting process, with artist Jason deCaires Taylor on the right



Anthropocene (2011), depth 8m, MUSA Collection, Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico; Illustration (right inset) shows access holes and retreats for lobsters inside sculpture; Since the sculpture weighed more than a crane could handle, floats were used to lower it (far right)

nity. Divers can sometimes be hard to get hold of because I only need them for key events when I am installing the pieces. This usually coincides with peak season when the weather is calm and most dive professionals are busy.

X-RAY MAG: Are they technical or commercial divers, advanced in training and skill?

JDT: Sometimes I use commercial divers, which is great because it's quite hazardous work and requires good experience. But often I use instructors or dive masters from local centres. Having a good boat crew is equally as important. As with most diving, the weather generally dictates how smoothly everything goes. Hopefully in the future, when I expand my operations, I will have a dedicated installation crew.

X-RAY MAG: Have you had to postpone the installation of a sculpture due to weather? What are the challenges?

JDT: Yes, there have been lots of delays due to weather. In Mexico it was quite open sea, so winds had a huge influence on activities. We've had our fair share of problems along the way—the 8-ton VW beetle, for example. It exceeded the weight capacity of the crane on the boat so we had to tow it over a 7km on floats. Due to the repeated wave action, it cut the ropes to the floats and it sank in the middle of the bay on a patch of sand. So we had to lift it again, which took so much time it began to get dark and we had to suspend all operations until the weather improved. Eventually, we managed to place it in the right spot.

X-RAY MAG: How has it been working

with governments and agencies involved with some of your projects? Any insights?

JDT: It's a constant challenge, applying for permits, fund raising, contracts, etc. Sometimes the overall objective gets lost. I always try to maintain work in the studio and share the visual documentation so everyone can see the reality of the project and what we are heading towards. Learning to adapt to the working practices of the region has been paramount and listening to local advice.

X-RAY MAG: Do you spend time visiting the location and meeting government agents before the project begins?

JDT: Yes, there's always a scouting trip—collecting field data, finding out

the objectives and the scope of the project, taking on board artistic considerations and getting a feel for the local environment.

X-RAY MAG: What has been your favourite part of the process or the production?

JDT: The photography is the part I really enjoy—I love watching how the sculptures visually change. The photography is sometimes so important it can, at times, actually dictate the making and deployment of the statue. I often make sure the best photographic angle is facing the sun or include intricate details, which I know will be lost in days but will make a great shot.



Diver at work installing sculpture



X-RAY MAG: What camera and video equipment do you use to document your work?

JDT: I have a Canon SLR with Sigma lenses and video capability in a Sea&Sea housing. I used to have two cameras, but now they are combined into one. I also invested heavily in an underwater lighting system with underwater tripods and time-lapse equipment, placing small

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sea turtle swims over sculptures at night; Algae and coral growth on figures of *The Silent Evolution*; Gray angelfish over installation; and Southern stingray at *The Silent Evolution*, MUSA Collection, Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico

cameras on the sculptures to record time lapses or deployments. I have a series of different lenses—but mainly macro and wide angle.

X-RAY MAG: How have you learned how to use this equipment? Did you take courses or learn on your own?

JDT: I am self-taught. Sigma sponsors my lenses and also provides technical support. Learning

how to use the equipment has mostly been through talking with colleagues and the camera crews who I have worked on projects with over the years.

But I am still not happy. I am a perfectionist. I want to get a new multi-panorama system, which is being developed in Spain and Germany. I am in talks with the developers, but the system costs around 40,000 Euros, so it needs carefully researching.



Taylor

There is also a permanent underwater time-lapse camera, which can be installed near the sculptures and also provides a live webcam feed. It cleans itself every minute to prevent algal deposits.

I recently collaborated with Google Maps. Their survey, the Catlin Seaview Survey, mapped the sculptures in Mexico, so now people can move in and through the sculptures virtually.

X-RAY MAG: How do you find out how divers, people, kids in the different parts of the world where your creations are displayed react to your art works?

JDT: Sometimes I go on tourist boats as a tourist diver to listen to what people say about the pieces and to see their reactions. What I find funny is how the dive guides invent their own stories behind the

meanings of the sculptures. You can see how so many myths come from the sea.

X-RAY MAG: What kind of fish and other marine life have interacted with your work?

JDT: Oh, it's another great pleasure to see what actually is colonizing the pieces—all sorts of bizarre things. In Mexico, there are very few gray angelfish. You'll see an odd pair here and there. But as soon as the sculptures were installed, very quickly a couple of gray angelfish came to swim on top of the sculptures. Then two months later—the viz was not so good—but I turned around and saw almost 100 huge gray angelfish, all full-sized adults. Other local divers said they never saw that many angelfish over the past 30 years.

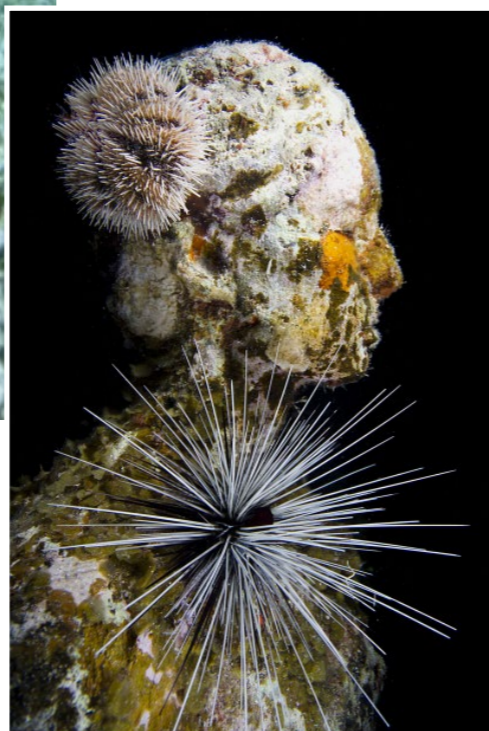




Then there are the crustaceans. We were really pleased that after a year there were 100 spiny lobsters on the "The Silent Evolution". It was great! But the next day, every single one was gone. A fisherman had been there and pulled all of them out. That's why we put the VW there with the habitat retreat for the lobsters. It's made with doors and curves that prevent the fisherman's barb from pulling them out. A year went by

and no spiny visitors. I thought it had failed, but then, just three months before I left, there were between 50 to 60 lobsters inside, and fishermen couldn't get them out.

I have seen some really beautiful sponges and tunicates, mainly on the high areas where there's current and the filter feeders can find nutrients. There are lots of polyps. It's great to see the growth from a tiny polyp to a full



size colony of corals.

X-RAY MAG: Your "Reclamation" sculpture, the angel with wings

made of sea fans... How did you devise that piece?

JDT: I wanted to create a kinetic element to the works as the gray cement finish can seem quite static. Sometimes after storms, sea fans are ripped off the reef and are either left on the sea bed or washed up on the beach. They eventually die. I developed a system whereby the fans could be rescued and clamped onto the body of the figure.

I have learned so much along the way. Algae for example—good algae and bad algae—it's really interesting. Divers always want to see the big pelagics, but all the hard work on the reef is done by herbivorous fish and urchins that keep check of the algal invasions.

My favourite time to dive is at night because then you can see

everything out working, in all its colour. You can really focus in on what is going on.

I found out that the sea urchins clean the sculptures every night, which is very convenient. So some of the newer designs include living spaces for urchins, which need protective spaces to retreat to during the day. The pieces that are cleaned by urchins have the best coral growth because the invasive algae is held back. Urchins do not walk on sand very well, so we also sculpted bridges to assist them.

Each sculpture dictates the



Reclamation (2012) and Resurrection (2013) of the MUSA Collection in Cancun incorporate rescued fan corals ripped off reefs by storms (top left, center); Sea urchins clean the sculptures each night (above, lower left)

design for the following sculpture.

X-RAY MAG: Many of the sculptures are meant to support coral growth. How has it developed on your sculptures in the various locations?

JDT: Most of the sculptures are



Seahorse on figure, Moliniere Bay, Grenada



THIS PAGE: Fish feeding and schooling around figures of *The Silent Evolution*, MUSA Collection, Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico; Algae and coral growth on night photo of figure, Grenada (right)

designed to support marine life and provide a platform for corals. However, on a select few, I have actually propagated hard corals onto the surface from underwater nurseries and these seemed to have fared fairly well, but after a particularly hot summer in Mexico, I did see a lot of bleaching.

The most dynamic transformation has been in Grenada where great water quality and nutrient-rich current have resulted in some spectacular sponge growth.

The marine life is of course very endemic to the location. Techniques that work in one place may not work in another place. I am currently working on a project in the Canary Islands where the water is much colder. The plan is to make an underwater botanical garden with architectural features, walls, archways and trees. The coloni-

sation is different—it won't be inundated with organic material, not like in the Caribbean where algal growth is faster. It's a lot slower in development, and indigenous species of sea urchin are being threatened by a newer invasive species.

In the past, I replicated sculptures, because I knew that the marine life would quickly colonize and change pieces. But here, there will be many more one-off pieces.

X-RAY MAG: I am sure you will be curious how it all will look after 5-10 years.

JDT: I will be curious after six months! There are so many works in so many places now it's a fulltime job just documenting the work. I would love to retire at 50 and just travel around photographing the pieces.



The Dream Collector (2009), Depth 8m, MUSA Collection, Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico



Solar Man in Brazil has solar panels and solar lights and goes up and down with the tides



The Silent Evolution (2012) above, with 450 figurative pieces, and *The Gardener* (2009) at right, with staghorn coral growth, are part of the MUSA Collection in Cancun/Isla Mujeres, Mexico

X-RAY MAG: *Did you have any idea it would get so big when you started all those years ago back in Grenada?*

JDT: No, definitely not. It was actually the first time in my life that I did not have a long-term plan. I got to a point in my life where I did not want to worry about the future anymore and just decided to focus on what I was best at and enjoyed.

X-RAY MAG: *You have said that you want people to come away from your sculptures with a feeling of seeing the world in a different way, perceiving the tiny part we are in the grand evolutionary scheme of things... What do you want to wake up or inspire in the minds of the humans who partake of your work?*

JDT: I have been diving and travelling for over 20 years now. Over that time, I have seen habitats disappearing, getting worse across the board in numerous

destinations. I talk to fishermen, locals and divers, and they all say the same thing, "You should have seen this place 30 years ago. It was paradise."

We inhabit this is incredibly beautiful planet and are slowly ruining it, but we still have an opportunity to safeguard its future, and that's the message that I try to convey.

X-RAY MAG: *You've had some extensive international media coverage of your work and projects. Has this helped or hindered your mission or message?*

JDT: Mainly, it's helped. Obviously, I am working in areas where tourism is a major part of the economy, in places desperate to be noticed in a very competitive market, so it has helped me in that respect. It also helps to change the identity of place. In Cancun, for example, we wanted to alter how it was perceived as just a party town. Art, culture and environment were not words you



heard often in association with Cancun, but that has now started to change. The world needs more sustainable tourism. □

For more information, visit the artist's website at: Underwatersculpture.com