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 practically 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
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momentum and protest. Strangely enough the site on the river banks was 5 minutes walk
project was planned and executed within two months, which gave it a real feeling of
the protagonist, and the location in front of the houses of Parliament, the activist.
contemporary and apocalyptic civilizations. In the Thames works the changing tide becomes
focus
underwater reef
decaires taylor: the rising tide, although constructed using similar techniques to the
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.