



# *D R E A M*

WRITTEN BY **TRISTAN RUTHERFORD**

Jason deCaires Taylor's career included roles as a paparazzo, scuba guide and theatre designer. He combined all three to create photogenic living sculptures backdropped by an ocean stage. Taylor's dozen seabed installations can be viewed by snorkel, scuba or submarine. Yet his latest human forms, frozen under Norway's ice floes, may prove his most vital yet.





*S C A P E*



## It's an Atlantis as imagined by Pablo Picasso. Contemporary art meets marine science, restyled by coral larvae and Neptune himself.

**I**n the luculent waters off Grenada, a circle of children hold hands under the Caribbean Sea. In 2006 these statues were cast from pH neutral cement and sunk on a barren sea bed. Nature then completed the living art project. Amber staghorn sprouts from heads. Turquoise fans wrap like scarves around necks. And when a silver barracuda noses past the haunting scene, lobster hide between the children's legs. It's an Atlantis as imagined by Pablo Picasso. Contemporary art meets marine science, restyled by coral larvae and Neptune himself.

Like all of Jason deCaires Taylor's aquatic installations, his inaugural work remains imminently accessible. *Vicissitudes* sits 10 minutes by boat from the Camper & Nicholsons Marina in Grenada's Port Louis. As the sculpture resides in 5m of translucent shallows, it can be dived on by everyone from scuba pros to novice snorkellers. All are in for a surprise. Because objects appear 25% larger under the waves, Taylor's orphans stare with ghostly gazes through eyes shimmering with purple coralline algae. Each sealife-emblazoned statue tells a wider story. Shallow seas like this make up less than 10% of our oceans, but host the majority of marine life.

RIGHT Jason deCaires at work

Like all of Taylor's subsequent works, *Vicissitudes* sits downstream from another reef. This attracts marine pioneers like coral polyps and fireworms that colour the sculptures like a Jackson Pollock dreamscape. Shockingly, these original sculptures were cast on a wing and a prayer. Some 15 years ago, the now 44 year-old sculptor had drifted from a childhood in Grenada and Malaysia to roles as a theatrical set designer and paparazzo photographer. He had begged, borrowed and saved £40,000 to start a diving school when his genesis of an idea struck: to synthesise sculpture and cinematography on a dynamic stage that shifts with sunbeams, starlight and submarine characters from across the Caribbean Sea.

Slowly his 26 child statues and 39 other cement installations distorted with colonising species. On the Grenadan shore another quiet revolution took place. Authorities understood that Taylor's artsy artificial reef had enlivened a deserted seabed. Better still, the attraction had deflected visitors away from the overworked Elkhorn coral diving spots around Flamingo Bay. From humble beginnings, *Vicissitudes* inspired the creation of the Molinere-Beausejour Marine Protected Area. It's one of four undersea reserves around the vast Caribbean island, which will cover 20% of its coastal zone by 2020.



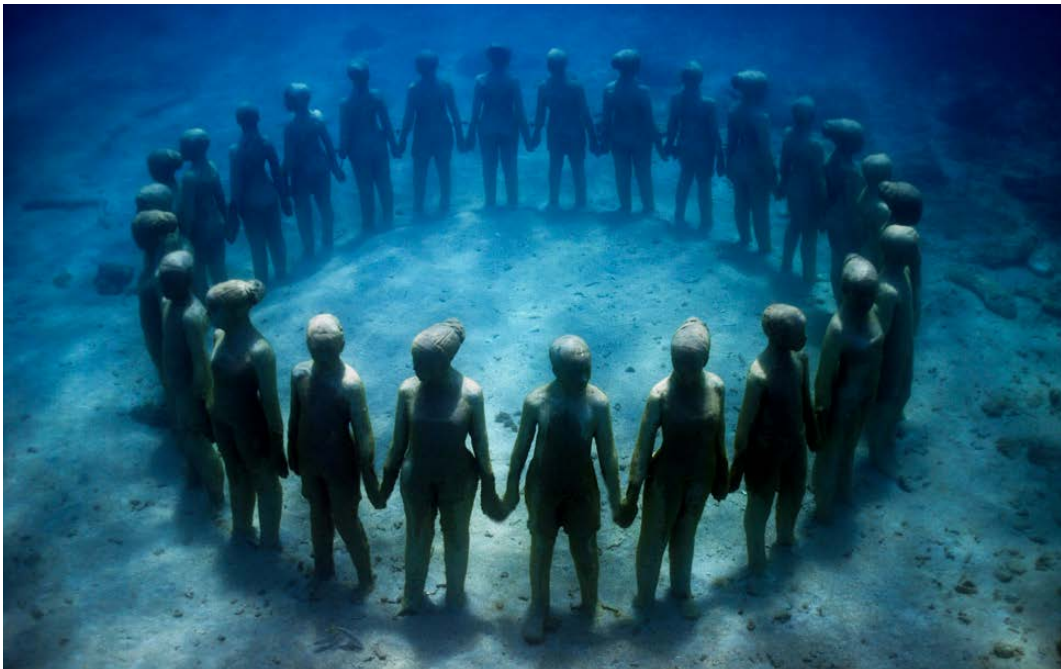




ABOVE *The Rising Tide*, River Thames, Vauxhall, London 2015  
RIGHT *Cruising the Rubicon*, Lanzarote, Spain 2016







The work also anointed Taylor an accidental environmentalist, a Banksy of the seabed, who could spin statements from his subaquatic art. These include *Ocean Atlas* (2014) in the Bahamas, where a gargantuan schoolgirl supports the ocean on her shoulders, as stingrays and triggerfish feed at her feet. Plus, the far-larger *Museo Atlantico* (2016) off Lanzarote, which includes a faceless couple taking a selfie while an African migrant raft flounders beyond. The latter project saw a 200% increase in marine biomass after installation, from rare angel sharks to butterfly rays.

This winter SEA+I caught up with Taylor as he makes a splash in colder climes. In a fjord near Oslo, his latest work crafts another tale by tethering humanoid sculptures to the ocean floor via a precarious umbilical cord. Each one was created using a new form of floating cement. This allows the inert beings to hover in the inky ether, before colonising species lend them a soul. And as the icy surface creaks into a frigid block, the green algal water imprisons the sculptures in an emerald half-light. Next summer the statues can be paddled past aboard a glass-bottomed kayak. Braver souls may even snorkel in Norway's 16°C summertime seas. Can't wait until then? Experienced scuba divers will soon be able to carve a hole in the ice then drift past the frigid exhibition, while the glacial layer above glitters above like the *Aurora Borealis* itself.

As Taylor explains, the idea to plant living sculptures in northern waters seemed curious at first. "When we think of underwater exploration we imagine tropical seas in Asia and the Caribbean," says the London-based artist. "The murky brown waters around Norway don't initially compare." But Taylor shines a Scubapro light on an ecosystem just as varied and vulnerable.

ABOVE *Cruising the Rubicon*, Lanzarote, Spain 2016  
BELOW *Viccisitudes*, Moillinere Bay, Grenada 2006

Alongside his floating statues, kelp forests form an Amazonian tangle that offers shelter to sea snails, rockfish, seals and gulls. "We also thought that marine life would take longer to colonise the sculptures in Norway compared to the Caribbean," says Taylor. The opposite was true. Just six weeks after his team lowered the statues using cranes and air props, blue shell mussels settled to filter the immediate water, rendering it clearer than elsewhere in the bay. All too chilly? Fear not. Because the most accessible of Taylor's works is currently being installed alongside the Great Barrier Reef. By 2020, Australia's first Museum of Underwater Art will become animated by zoetic waters that host 600 species of colonising coral. It's said that Captain Cook's ships were inexorably attracted to Magnetic Island, around which many artworks will reside. Little wonder, as the seas team with coral trout and black marlin, which will expand the museum's dramatic cast like one of Taylor's theatrical productions. On Magnetic Island itself a colony of 800 koalas and 2,000 human residents will have the installation to themselves come nightfall.

Like all of the sculptor's imagery, the Great Barrier Reef museum will weave a cautionary tale. An intertidal piece on the shoreline will be inundated by rising waters each day, with ocean flotsam visible when the tides recede. Although Taylor's works have reached an audience of over a billion over the past decade, his artificial reefs can't stop environmental degradation on their own. "Jacques Cousteau said that you protect what you love, and protect what you understand", he concludes. By allowing the world to fall in love with his poignant sculptures, Taylor has made environmentalists of us all.