

Deep Seeing: Meaning and Magic in Jason deCaires Taylor Otherworld

by Carlo McCormick

At some fundamental level art works in areas beyond our understanding and articulation. Through means of representation, and even abstraction, it shows us something we do not otherwise see, puts to visual what eludes explanation in other terms. This is not merely a reason for the surreal or spiritual in art, it is just as much why we continue to paint landscapes or human figures, because something like beauty is so very hard to describe. As such much of the best art resides in mystery, mapping zones of experience that no matter how frequently we return to them seem nearly uncharted. Our virtue and delusion among all species resides in how we use imagination as a tool to fill in the voids of comprehension, to picture what might be there or conjecture the reasons for what is. Call it our horror vacui- the pathological fear of the empty that insists we fill it up- or perhaps it is our equally innate compulsion to make our mark wherever we go, but in mind or the material world we can only comprehend what is not of us by somehow making it our own. Much as early man looked to the vast unknown of the heavens above and projected a diagrammatic cosmology of animals and gods upon the stars, using the known and recognizable to make intelligible aspects of the universe beyond our ken, Jason deCaires Taylor proffers the identifiable as a kind of literal anchor by which we can navigate the mysteries of the ocean deep with some level of discernment.

This process of filling in the gaps, of mapping the unknown and of seeking (even needing) an explanation, is so essential to the human condition that it must be hardwired into our psyche, as integral to our consciousness as it is to our propensity for creativity. This is not to say that deCaires Taylor is wholly as clueless as those of yore who made up implausible pictures in the sky and left us astrology, religion and so many other foolish superstitions that only continue to dominate our lives as a testament to how truly desperate our collective desire for some explanation remains. In fact Jason's art emerges out of a great deal of primary experience, direct knowledge and science- so much so that when he tries to explain it to an art critic, well, my eyes just glaze over. Nonetheless, Jason deCaires Taylor is practicing a kind of art making that is as ancient and elemental as conceivable in this Twenty-first Century of civilization. Unless of course you are among the more unorthodox of the aforementioned believers such as perhaps believes in the lost city of Atlantis or how our history is built on advances given to us by alien visitors, we would have to agree that in process and content Jason's art is very much predicated on the present- at once enabled by scuba technologies such as pressurized air tanks, enabled by the increasing facility of materials and casting techniques, informed by our evolving understanding of marine biology, and driven by the urgency of new ecological imperatives in which human behavior from industry to tourism and trade is threatening already precarious ecosystems.

What connects deCaires Taylor's work to the most ancient lineage of art and artifact is neither the craft nor knowledge behind it but rather how it is beyond all that still predicated on faith. The worlds he invents and the narrative possibilities he conjures involve a kind of magical thinking,

not simply in their fantastical aspects but more specifically in the anthropological context of belief systems whereby dreams invoke realities, and as corollary changes in thought impact the real world. For all its otherworldliness, the Underwater Museum is obviously more a behavioral intervention in our reality than a mystical one- its premise that these sculptures can be home to marine life based on science rather than prayer, and the real need it addresses of trying to create new tourist ventures to divert human traffic away from frailer, endangered spaces is closer to the logic of urban planning than the “build it and they will come” optimism that has engendered so much of our architectural folly.

Perhaps not the kind of wishful magic that gives us voodoo, any number of clichéd superstitious habits of avoidance (from black cats to broken mirrors) and aspiration (like wishing wells and good luck charms), and shamans, there is an unmistakable aura of metaphysical at play in deCaires Taylor’s aquatic installations. We trust these to be more a matter of ideas or representation than divine forces, but ultimately they work in a similar fashion. Highly symbolic, at once metaphorical and allegorical, these issues of transcendence, transpersonal experience, mortality, decay and any myriad number of questions into the nature of human existence, are inevitably posed by his sculptures, particularly so in the context of their environs. How much the average scuba adventurer will want to ponder the profound riddles of life is not for us to speculate on, no more at least than we would presume how many of those who visit the Pyramids or Parthenon do so to attain spiritual revelation. That’s hardly the point in an age where even the humbling spectacles of nature or human endeavor are reduced to photo-ops. What is relevant however is how the effect of an experience works regardless of whatever questioning or insight in levies on the soul. You don’t have to know anything about the peoples or their deities when you look at a tribal mask to still feel the juju. Maybe like many visitors to the world’s wonders you might simply ask how the hell did Jason do that.....*cont.*

To read the fully essay please obtain:

The Underwater Museum, The submerged sculptures by Jason deCaires Taylor

