

Underwater Sculpture Viewers Take Swimmably to Trend

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BOB STERNER

←
DIANE GOUGEON,
*Les (H)istoires que
l'on se conte*, 2003.
Installation *in situ*
dans les fenêtres du
Centre d'exposition
CIRCA. Les deux
fenêtres de gauche:
chaque carreau
mesure 104,5 x 85 cm.
Acrylique de coulée,
plexiglas sablé,
impressions numéri-
ques sur support
Duraclear; les deux
fenêtres de droite:
impressions numéri-
ques sur support
Duraclear, cadres
d'aluminium ano-
disé. 222 x 181 cm.
Photo: Daniel
Roussel.

←
DIANE GOUGEON,
*Les (H)istoires que
l'on se conte*, 2003.
Détail. Photo:
Daniel Roussel.

transparente et laisse place à l'implacable réalité du monde extérieur. Pourtant en se déplaçant légèrement d'un angle de 30 degrés, voilà que le tout s'inverse. Nous voyons s'inscrire par translucidité à droite des motifs de feuilles d'érable et la transparence s'installer dans la fenêtre de gauche — comme si Diane Gougeon avait dynamisé son jeu d'oppositions en interchangeant dans le mouvement la propriété lumineuse des pastilles. Ce jeu de la transparence et de la translucidité risque d'échapper au spectateur dans un premier temps. Il exige qu'il se déplace lentement, latéralement et à répétition devant l'œuvre pour en appréhender toute la richesse formelle, comme cette danse de ronds lumineux sur les motifs architectoniques du Complexe Desjardins.

Le travail de Diane Gougeon se prête à une lecture plurielle. Travaillant à partir de relations extérieur/intérieur, plein/vide, définies entre autres par leur référence à l'architecture, elle me semble les utiliser ici pour les déconstruire. *A priori*, tout ce qui semble s'affronter se conjugue. Du combat du blanc et du noir, chacun joue du passage de la transparence à la translucidité. Du chaud et du froid, le processus de création et son lieu sont indissociables... et même lorsqu'il reste la lumière comme seule écriture, elle s'édifie pour filer la métaphore architecturale, toujours au moins en deux temps.

L'artiste sait merveilleusement bien jouer de ces jeux de perception. Elle a transformé ici tout motif architectural, sculptural et pictural, en un lieu de passage... où se construit le regard, et peut-être même métaphoriquement celui que l'artiste porte sur son métier. Elle s'est jouée également de la permanence des choses. Son œuvre n'est-elle pas d'ailleurs éphémère ? ←

DIANE GOUGEON,
Les (H)istoires que l'on se conte
Centre d'exposition CIRCA
18 octobre - 15 novembre 2003

A scuba diving certification card is the ticket to visit the growing sculpture garden beneath the waves. During the next several years the number of works underwater is likely to double with plans to sink a dozen or so statues at dive sites around the world.

Why sink a statue into the sea where it is off limits to the vast majority of arts patrons? "Sink it and people will come," said Simon Morris. The Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, Canada, sculptor is completing a World War II aviator bronze, slated for installation on Horseshoe Bay, near Vancouver, this year. His 9-foot / 3-meter tall mermaid bronze castings are gracing dive sites off Powell River on B.C.'s Sunshine Coast and Grand Cayman Island's Sunset House. And he's beginning a series of six Guardian of the Reef statues that will be installed at premiere dive destinations worldwide.

"People like to visit these things," Morris said. "Diving destinations require something to differentiate themselves from other sites. An underwater sculpture does the same thing as a shipwreck in providing an interesting dive and a marketing focal point. I've heard that on a good four-day holiday weekend, Sunset House will sell \$4,000 worth of air at \$8 per fill. The mermaid draws thousands of visitors per year, and was voted by Rodale's Scuba Diving readers as the most popular shore dive on Grand Cayman Island."

Dale Evers, Cayucos, Calif., said the statues provide a commercial draw that benefits the artist and the destination. "It has sponsorship benefits. There's media hype building up to the initial installation. And after that, it's not going anywhere. It's constant advertising."

Evers' dolphins have been providing a focal point for divers visiting Cayman Brac since 2003. "A sculpture is a tribute to the destination, its people and its environment," he said. His dolphins herald stingrays and dolphins, two creatures associated with the Caymans. It too is the first of a series of underwater works that Oceanic, a San Leandro, Calif.,

underwater gear manufacturer, plans to install at sites around the world.

Reef preservation is one reason why sculptors are being commissioned to create underwater statuary. "You don't put them in your best area or your worst," Morris said. "You place them in an interesting area where divers can visit without trampling the reef." Visiting divers may be

anxious before embarking on the more fragile Machones Reef nearby. The 39-foot / 12-meter high bronze was forged by local craftsmen, and was dedicated to memory of islanders who died at sea during its sinking ceremony on August 17, 1997. The event also marked the 140th anniversary of the settling of the Caribbean island just east of Cancun.

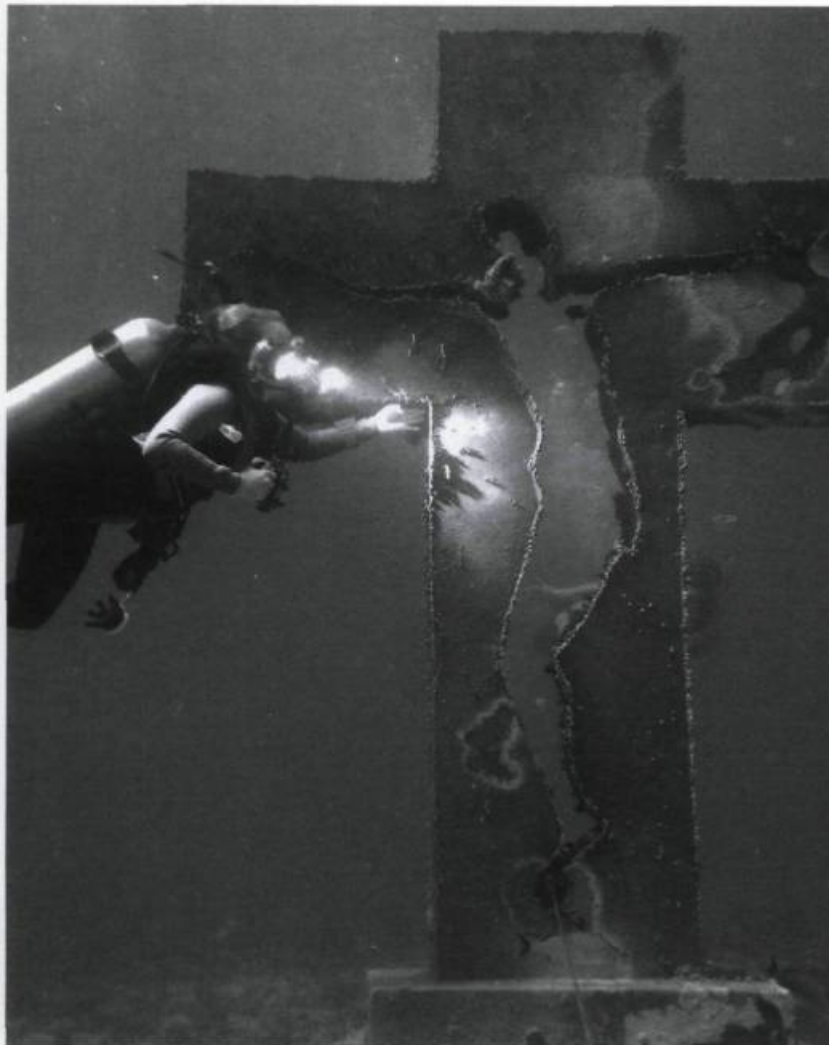


new to the sport or unaccustomed to the local conditions. "It gives them something to look at until they know what they're doing, and raises awareness about protecting the reef."

The *Cruz de la Bahia* was installed on a sandy stretch just off Isla Mujeres, Mexico, by local operators to help divers gain control of their buoy-

Divers visiting Simon Morris's *Mermaid* buy thousands of dollars of compressed air alone from Sunset House, Grand Cayman, on a good long holiday weekend. Photo: Bob Sterner.

Morris's Guardian of the Sea project is especially aimed at reef protection. The first 13-foot / 4-meter bronze of an ancient Greco-Roman



warrior will be unveiled this fall at the annual international show of the Diving Equipment & Marketing Association, an industry trade group that is supporting the effort. The statue, which was purchased by the Diving Association of British Columbia, will join the aviator off Horseshoe Bay some time next year. Morris aims to develop a Guardians of the Reef organization to raise funds for underwater statue installations worldwide.

Guido Galletti is the sculptor who started the trend in underwater statuary. His 8.5-foot / 2.8-meter bronze depicting Jesus Christ standing with arms up-stretched can be seen in two locations – Portofino, Italy, and Key Largo, Florida. *Il Cristo Degli Abissi*, which was installed in 1954, recently underwent complete restoration after one of its arms was knocked off by an errant boat anchor two years ago. Technical experts from Liguria regional Archaeology Department and Rome's Restoration Center have spent more than a year reattaching the arm, restoring the patina and structure. The work is to be completed in time for a gala re-installation event this summer that is tied with the 50th anniversary of its statue's creation.

Galletti's mold was used to create the *Christ of the Abyss* statue in John Pennecamp Park, which became the United States' first underwater pre-

serve in the early 1960s. The statue, modelled after the record-setting Italian swimmer / diver Duillo Mercanet, has drawn millions of visitors since it was installed in 1965 Key Largo Cut in the park. No trip to the Florida Keys is complete without visiting the statue, local tourism authorities say. Besides divers, the statue is favoured by families as a site to commit loved ones' ashes to the sea.

Christ of the Abyss, at a depth of 25 feet / 7.6 meters, like many underwater statues, is shallow enough to be visited by snorkelers as well as certified scuba divers. The shallow depths create technical considerations for sculptors. The marine environment is harsh on materials and storm surges can create intense buffeting that no top-side statue is likely ever to face. Air pockets in the hollow investment castings must be vented or the statues might float despite their heavy weight on land.

"You need to use an environmental bronze alloy similar to what is used to make ship propellers," Morris said. "You need to be cognizant of impurities in metal. I use only virgin ingots when I make a statue for an underwater installation. For regular statues, I cut off and reuse the sprues and risers from the casting; but for underwater ones, I use only virgin ingots. You have to make sure that the welding rods are compatible with the casting material

and use tungsten-inert gas (TIG) welding to join the sections. The rods and the material must match. If not, you set up a metal difference that acts as a battery and weakens the statue over time. A zinc coating then can provide cathodic protection to further preserve the statue."

Evers said his biggest concern is hurricanes. "If it's at 35 to 40 feet (/10 to 12 meters) at low tide, there is going to be lots of wave action and currents in a hurricane. Redoubling all efforts on welds is important. You have to make all of the connecting points with twice as much surface area as you would for a land-based sculpture. Bronze has a lot of copper and zinc in it, but it won't last forever. However, by the time it's completely gone we surely will be forgotten."

Some artists are forgotten long before their underwater works have washed away. Asking who created the *Cruz de la Bahia* will draw a blank face from Isla Mujeres residents and tourism authorities, even though it was installed only seven years ago. Another statue there, the *Virgin of the Lighthouse*, has slipped into anonymity as well. The 5-foot / nearly 2-meter solid bronze casting was sunk decades ago by local fishermen at the base of a cantankerous rock that had sunk more than a few skiffs in stormy seas. Tossing offerings of coins and jewelry to ward off

perils at sea was a common custom among fishing boat captains, who plied their hardscrabble trade in all kinds of weather. The *Virgin* was reinstalled on a pedestal in 1994 and is visited by thousands of snorkelers annually now that it is but 3 feet / 1 meter below the surface. Offerings no longer pile up at her feet now that tourism has supplanted fishing as the island's main industry.

A 6-foot / 3-meter long bronze alligator stumps dive operators on Grand Cayman. The casting has been at the 55-foot sea bottom beneath Bonnie's Arch for longer than the island's dive masters have been involved in the sport. A thick patina of colourful encrusting coral attests to its long life as an underwater art object.

That an artist can be forgotten despite leaving a monument to time was not particularly bothersome to Evers. "I think that it's neat in that it adds mystery to the sea."

And for Morris, the important element of the underwater statue is the same as that of one on land. "Man likes to leave his mark. We're embellishers. We like to make changes, hopefully in a positive way."¹

NOTE

1. Bob Sterner operates Sterner Editorial Services, Hoboken, N.J. He can be contacted at bsterner@prodigy.net

Christ of the Abyss in John Pennecamp Park off Key Largo, Fla., is made from the mold of *Il Cristo Degli Abissi*, the statue off Portofino, Italy, by Guido Galletti, the father of modern underwater sculpture. Photo Courtesy of Florida Keys TDC.

Virgin of the Lighthouse, installed decades ago by fishermen as a talisman for seagoing safety, now draws tourists to Isla Mujeres, Mexico. Photo: Barbara Krooss.