

Museo Atlantico

by Wojciech Dopierala

Canary Islands - Spanish archipelago of 8 islands is a well-known place for European divers. But not only the underwater landscapes, marine life or good weather conditions define this place as a perfect holiday destination.

For those who enjoy art Lanzarote has something special to offer. 15m below the surface of its crystal-clear water, a very unique art exposition can be found. It's the very first, and so far, the only Underwater Museum in Europe. Since January 2017 it tells its story and teaches awareness to everybody who comes to visit.

British sculptor, marine conservationist, underwater photographer and scuba diving instructor Jason deCaires Taylor is a sculptor, environmentalist and professional underwater photographer. Born in 1974, Taylor graduated from the London Institute of Arts in 1998 with a BA Honours in Sculpture.

His permanent site-specific works span several continents and predominately explore submerged and tidal marine environments. His multi-disciplinarily sculptural works explore modern themes of conservation and environmental activism; Over the past 10 years Taylor has created several large-scale underwater "Museums" and "Sculpture Parks", with collections of over 850 life-size public works.

A prolific sculptor, he became the first of a new generation of artists to shift the concepts of the Land art movement into the realm of the marine environment. He gained international notoriety



Olympus OMD EM-5 mk1. Olympus PT-EP08. AOI DLP-08. Panasonic Lumix 7-14mm f4. 1/200s f/5.6 7mm ISO 200

in 2006 with the creation of the world's first underwater sculpture park, situated off the west coast of Grenada in the West Indies.

Now listed as one of the Top 25 Wonders of the World by National Geographic the park was instrumental in the government declaring the site a National Marine Protected Area. This was followed in 2009 when he co-founded MUSA (Museo Subacuático de Arte), a vast collection of over 500 of his sculptural works, installed between Cancun

and Isla Mujeres in Mexico.

Other major projects include Museo Atlantico (2016), a collection over 300 submerged sculptures and architectural forms in Lanzarote, Spain, the first of its kind in European waters. The Rising Tide (2016 Thames London) and Ocean Atlas a monumental 60-ton single sculpture located in the Bahamas.

The works are constructed using pH neutral materials to instigate natural growth and the

subsequent changes intended to explore the aesthetics of decay, rebirth and metamorphosis. His pioneering public art projects are not only examples of successful marine conservation, but works of art that seek to encourage environmental awareness, instigate social change and lead us to appreciate the breathtaking natural beauty of the underwater world.

He has received numerous sculpture and photography awards and is a member of The Royal Society of Sculptors, Ocean Ambassador to DAN (Divers Alert Network), Ocean Exemplar of The World Ocean Observatory and a featured TED speaker. In 2014 he was awarded The Global Thinker by Foreign Policy, described as the Jacques Cousteau of the Art world. is already well known for his sculptures on the sea shore or underwater: Cancún Underwater Museum in Mexico, sculpture park in Molinere Bay (Caribbean Sea) or famous among Instagram influencers “Nest” from Gili Meno (Indonesia). These are only a few among many of his works around the globe.

Museo Atlantico is one of his projects. He spent over a year living in Playa Blanca designing and creating more than 300 sculptures to tell the story about refugees, climate change and human impact to life on Earth. Swimming from one part to another



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you learn a bit of Lanzarote’s culture and nature, see the problems refugees face and the lack of empathy towards this. Sculptures of more than 30 people all facing the same direction can make you ponder, especially with regards to the fact that after crossing “The Rubicon” there is no return.

Behind this border, you can

see the artist’s vision of what would possibly happen to the world afterwards...

One of the most beautiful things about this museum is to see how it is evolving thanks to nature, which is now in charge of the sculptures. Sea life has conquered it amplifying the artist’s message, and making

the dive experience even more interesting. Environmentally friendly, neutral pH cement creates a perfect base for growth of algae, which is the foundation for every marine ecosystem. Schools of fishes, taking advantage of all the hideouts which it provides, fill the area with life. All this attracts bigger fish, so barracudas

or Angelshark are often found here. A precise selected location far from sea currents, boat traffic and fishermen pressure guarantee that this new ecosystem will continue to grow thus making it an even more interesting dive site.

Art inspires and leads to more art, so we decided to take some photos in Museo Atlantico. As passionate freedivers we decided to do it our own way – holding our breath.

After seeing photos and videos of this museum and other similar monuments around the world I was overwhelmed with ideas that started running through my head; one after another, countless possibilities of taking photos way different from all the others I had seen so far. On top of that, the famous underwater contest in Canary Islands: Fotosub Lanzarote “Mar de Lava” opened a special category for the best photo of the Museo Atlantico. We couldn’t be more packed with motivation. We had to go there and do our best.

In doing my research everything I saw was very similar. As expected, I found mostly photos of the sculptures themselves, or people diving in the museum. And my idea was to go further; I didn’t want to document the art gallery. I wanted to extend it, play a part in the story it tells, interact with it.

To visit Museo Atlántico is fairly



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easy. The problem was that we wanted to take photos, which meant that going there with the guided group with a bunch of divers, and limited time wasn’t the most promising scenario. After email negotiations we had our visit planned. The diving center was quite open to the idea, providing us

with a separate freediving guide, but didn’t allow us to stay longer than the standard 45 minutes.

There are over 300 sculptures organized in 15 groups. This required extremely good preparation and planning, we had to have clearly defined ideas for the photos and go

quickly from one to the other if we didn’t want to run out of time.

The gear was easy to choose (and not only because it is all I have!): Olympus EM-5 mk1 in Olympus PT-EP14 housing is small and handy. All the shots we have planned were wide angle so I took Panasonic Lumix

7-14mm inside of 8" acrylic dome from AOI. This set is what I use in all of our freediving shootings so I know it like the back of my hand. The camera offers good dynamic range, flexible RAW files, sensor stabilization, nice colors, quick auto focus and even inside the housing is fairly small which is important swimming up and down for every shot. The Lumix lens, for the price you pay, is the best option I have found for underwater wide angle. The f2,8 of Olympus's 7-14mm lens would be more than welcome, but the price difference and extension tube for a dome which are required is not for everyone's budget. The museum is 15m deep which is quite a lot for ambient light, but I decided not to use any color filters. I hoped for sunny weather and clear water. And I was lucky! The sun was up high together with decent clear water and this gave me enough light to bring up nice colors in the post processing.

Once packed and prepared the fun part began. Water is our element and we had a great time enjoying taking photos in the museum. At the beginning the excitement was consuming my oxygen pretty quickly and I wasn't handling the 15m dives as well as my model Marta (competitive freediver). But quickly I managed to relax and focus on the photos. It was great to see that many



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of our previous ideas were working out and the planned shots started to appear on the camera screen. Of course, some of them didn't work out at all, but many unexpected ideas cropped up so after 45 min we ended up with the SD card full of very good

photos. The tricky part was to dodge the groups of divers in order to get clean shots and to not focus too much on one subject. In normal situations we would stay longer and try many different shots in some areas of the museum, but the clock was ticking.

Our guide Mara from Italy was of great help here, as she knew the museum perfectly. She was taking us directly to the areas we wanted thus saving us precious time.

The most important photos which we had planned were related

to “Human Gyre”, “The Raft of Lampedusa” and with the wall of “Crossing The Rubicon”.

The “Human Gyre” is one of the most known parts of the exposition: around 100 sculptures laying on the floor forming a “donut” circle. The first photo was quite obvious with the model laying in the center. The pose played a very important role here, to make her part of the scene: one sculpture more.

The wall, with the gate and dozens of figures is the biggest and most visible. We were trying different things, with the model right in the doorway, or walking alongside the others. But in the end, the best shot was taken when we were swimming back up: Marta with a light in her hand and a school of sardines between us. I was slightly higher so behind the main subject, in the background, all the sculptures walking towards the gate were visible. Marta looked like a one of them who had escaped destiny.

The light played a crucial role in the photo, which had been roaming in my head since the very beginning. “The Raft of Lampedusa” shows the zodiac with refugees running away from their country in hope of a better life. But they are weak, sick and most likely they are not going to survive the journey. All of them but one, the guy who is sitting at the front. Although even if he is the strongest of them all,



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he needs something more to make it to the end of the voyage. So, we decided to bring him hope; and how to show hope in a better way than as a light?

The crucial factor was the cooperation with Marta. The adequate camera gear, photography and freediving skills – all this helps. Nevertheless, those photos are

all about the teamwork. In every single moment, on the surface, or underwater there has to be the connection, information has to flow in both directions, discussing each photo beforehand on the surface. Preparation, breathing, are we ok to go down? Communication underwater – we have less than 2 minutes,

make the most out of it! Again, on the surface, check the photo on the camera display. Is it ok? Do we need to repeat? Wait, I have an idea! ... All these things are the most important throughout the process even though it's something we rarely talk about.

We have finished the session with many good photos, but in the end the



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powerful message of “Bringing Hope” was the most successful one, winning the first prize at the competition.

It was a great experience and we ended up feeling even more inspired than before. There were many ideas which we didn’t have time to turn into photos. Many new ideas have surfaced. Unfortunately, Enai – our great friend and part of our freediving photo team - couldn’t go with us. His creativity and the possibility of having two models would have enabled to create even more. But in winning

the competition we managed to get a free entry to the Museum, and this time only for us. So, we decided to take it further and make a video. It wasn’t an easy task at all, but that is a completely different story.

We hope you have felt inspired to visit this amazing place. If you need more information “dive” into the official web site below.

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