



IMPERMANENT VESSELS - REBIRTH

To Carolyn

MICHAEL MORGAN

IMPERMANENT VESSELS

- R E B I R T H

Sculpture, digital photos, video projection on sculpted surface,
sound: Muslim Call to Prayer.

9-25 May 2014, Deakin University Geelong Waterfront Campus, Victoria, Australia

Buddhadassa Bhikku says: The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees and soil. Our bodily parts function as a cooperative. When we realise that the world is a mutual interdependent, cooperative enterprise, that human beings are all mutual friends in the process of birth, old age, suffering and death, then we can build a noble, even heavenly environment. If our lives are not based in this truth, then we shall all perish. ¹

The central concept of the ‘Impermanent Vessels – Rebirth’ is the transient and evolutionary nature of all aspects of existence and life. The ‘impermanent vessels’ are witnesses to the temporality of things whilst being part of the essential process they belong to. The ritualistic process of vessels completed by the artist, and now a story that is to be experienced in space – ‘Impermanent Vessels – Rebirth’ highlights our lack of power over nature while empowering us to comprehend ourselves beyond our limits.

In late 2012, fifty copies of the artist’s head produced in raku clay, significant through its use in Japanese tea ceremony, were placed in five locations along Corio Bay and Port Philip Bay – Swan Bay, Wedge, Point Lillias, Welsh’s Jetty and Point Henry Back Lead in Victoria, Australia. Created from earth material, and fired, they continued to develop in the ocean space. Throughout time, change happened to the vessels as they integrated in the underwater world and interacted with its living environment. The vessels were subject to nature’s forces that added to them, degraded them and even caused their loss.

One year later, in late 2013, the artist began to recover the vessels bringing them back to their initial context but leaving at least one at each site to symbolize the ultimate return of all things to nature. The outcome was the variously altered

physical parts and debris of thirty eight vessels, while others were missing or left to continue their journey.

A substantial part of the project was record-keeping. The evolution of every vessel had to be traced; each had its own identity featuring a unique flowing line pattern formed by two clay colours, and a number that was given in the sequence of creation to allow identification. The vessels were photographed four times: in their initial state upon production, just as they were placed underwater, then a year after placement underwater, and finally after recovery in their present state. The existence (or non-existence) of the missing vessels has been affirmed by the coordinates of their sites. 'Impermanent Vessels – Rebirth' is akin to an archaeological project that has gone through one phase but remains open for the next. This publication includes the visual evidence collected as part of the project and it is the project's legacy at this stage.

In the exhibition, the digital photos give the 'flattened' screen-mediated view of the evolution of vessels, but the actual vessels create a poetic space. The vessels portray the unavoidable change in the light of fundamental connectedness as described in Zen Buddhist teachings. Fragile and impermanent – they are also the 'vessels of life' and part of something beautiful. The Muslim Call to Prayer is the spiritual reference to the sound resonating in vessels. The third component of the display combines the screen-based and poetic perspectives: a digital projection onto sculpted surface gives an illusion of space underwater. It features the artist wearing hard hat diving equipment with the sound overlay of breathing and heartbeat as the helmet represents the 'vessel sustaining life'. Dedicated to the artist's late wife Carolyn, the 'Impermanent Vessels – Rebirth' is a symbolic song of human experience of Life, Rebirth and lasting connection.

Evolution has been in the forefront of Michael Morgan's practice over the last two decades in painting, mosaic and ceramic sculpture. His explorations, further developed with 'Impermanent Vessels – Rebirth', intersect the ideas of quantum theory where the truth is not exclusively what we assume or can see and the reality is subtle. His practice is also rooted in the visualisations of the fractal theory with self-repeating patterns that constitute the regenerative dynamics of nature.

'Impermanent Vessels – Rebirth' is the first presentation of Michael Morgan's 'Impermanent Vessels' series that involve natural processes in the organic, animal and human environment.

Words by Marita Batna

Notes:

1. Cited by the author on Zen Buddhism Robert Aitken, Roshi, Envisioning the Future, (6), A Paper Prepared for the Conference, Dhammic Society: Towards an INEB Vision, Wongsanit Ashram, Thailand, February 20-24, 1995.



SWAN BAY



38°13'456"S 144°40'273"E

No 17



No 18

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No 39

No 41

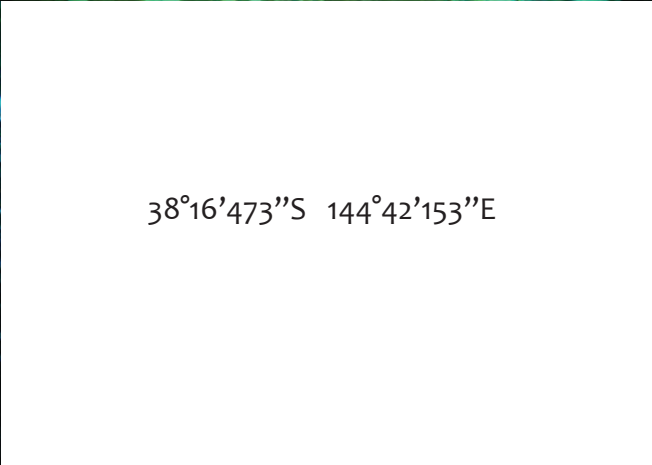
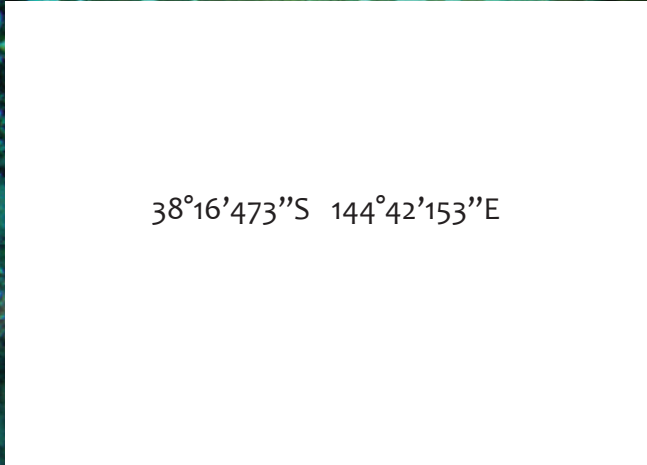


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WEDGE

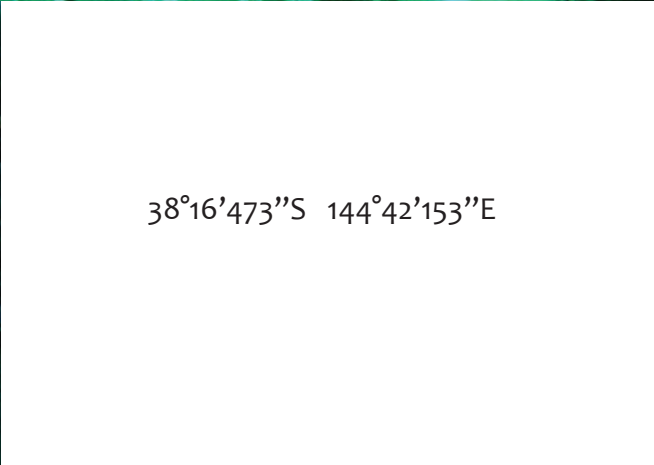
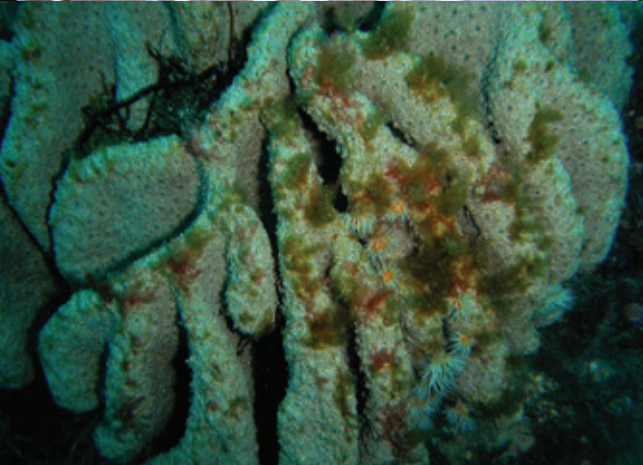
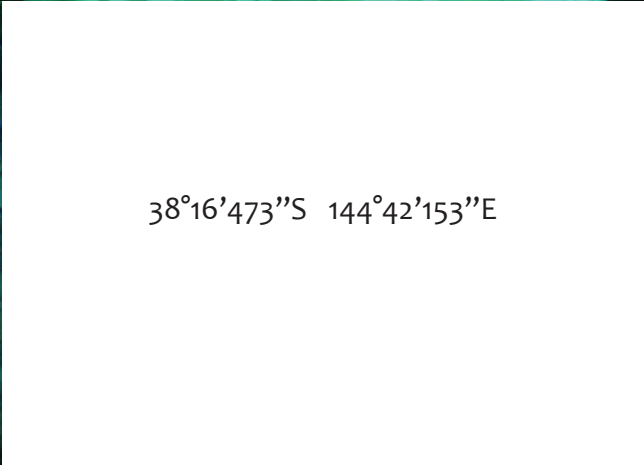


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No 43

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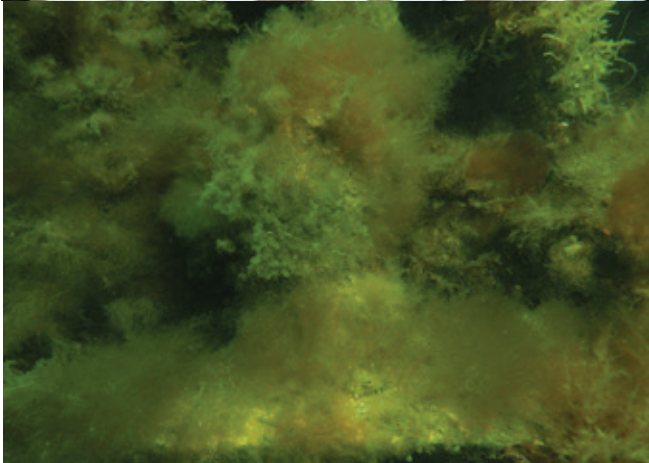
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POINT LILLIAS

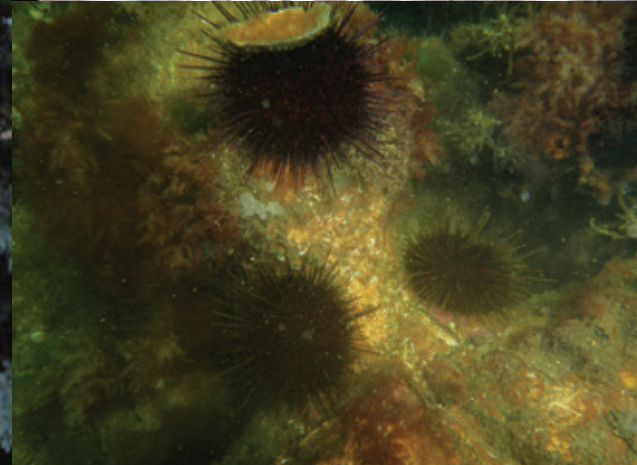
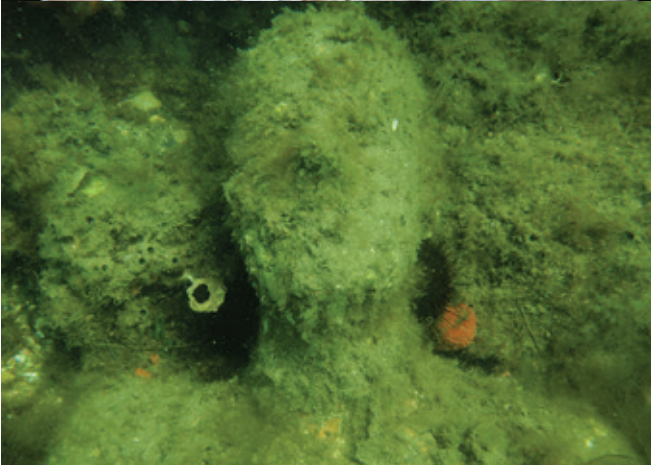


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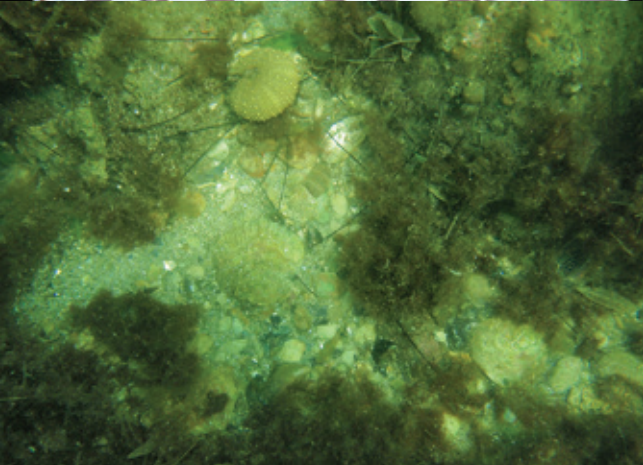
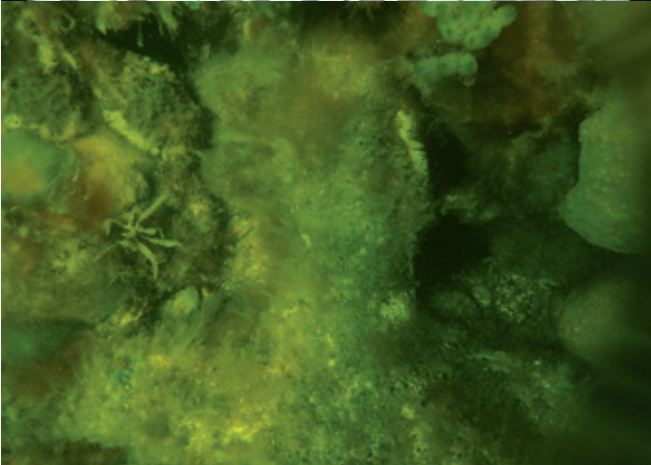
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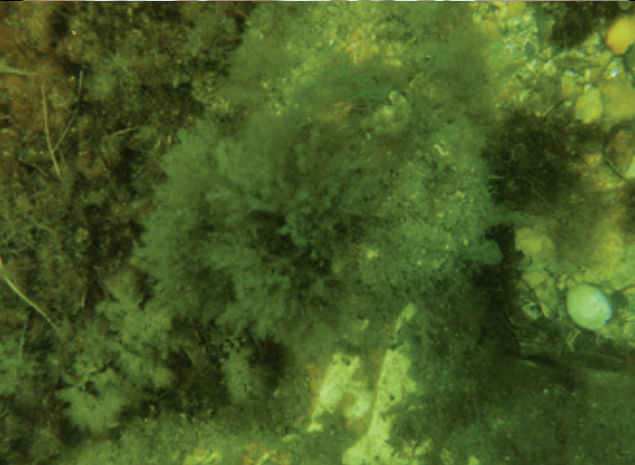
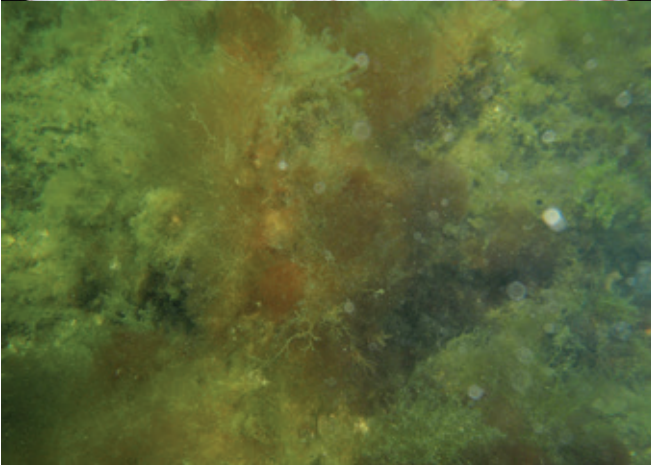
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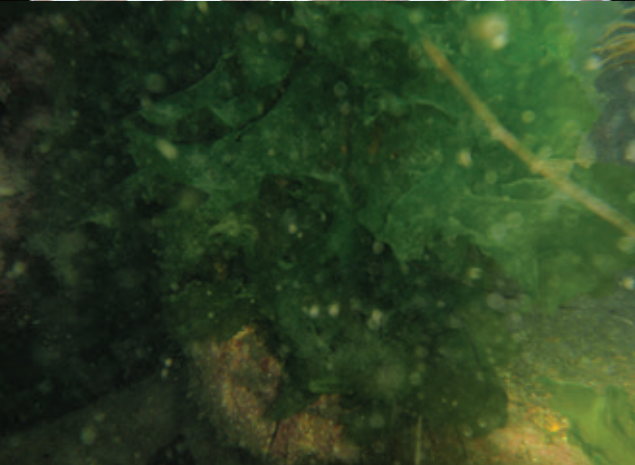
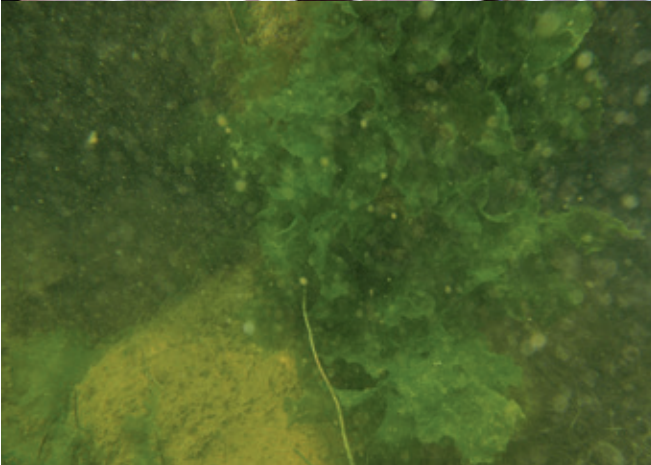
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WELSH'S JETTY



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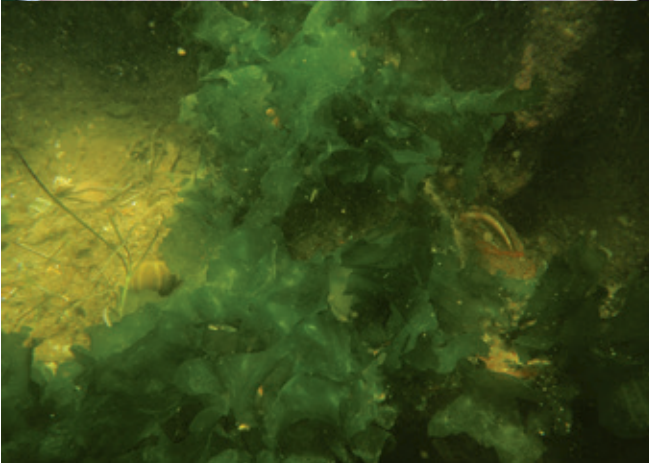
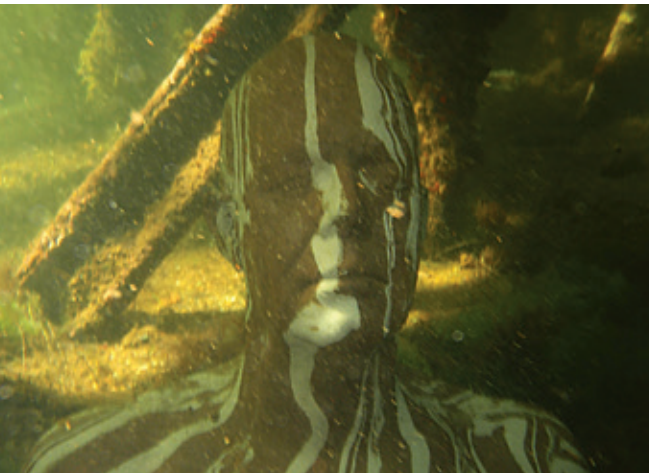
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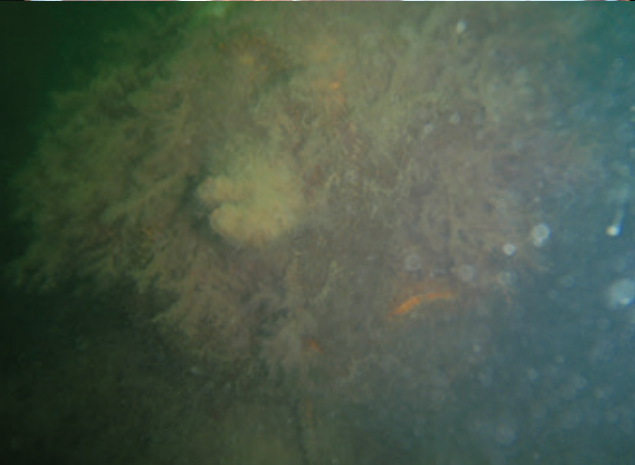
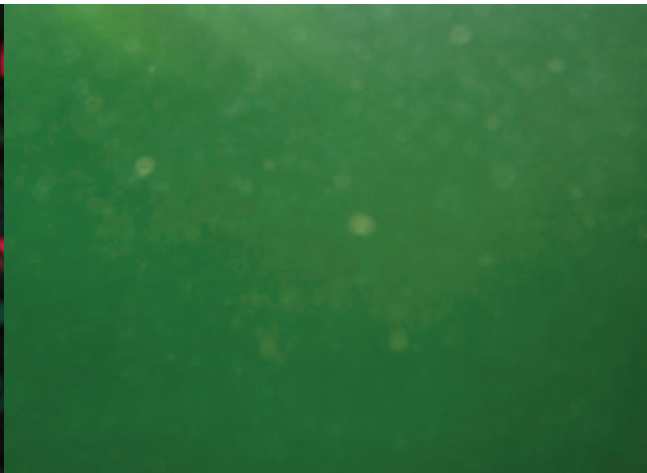
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BACK LEAD

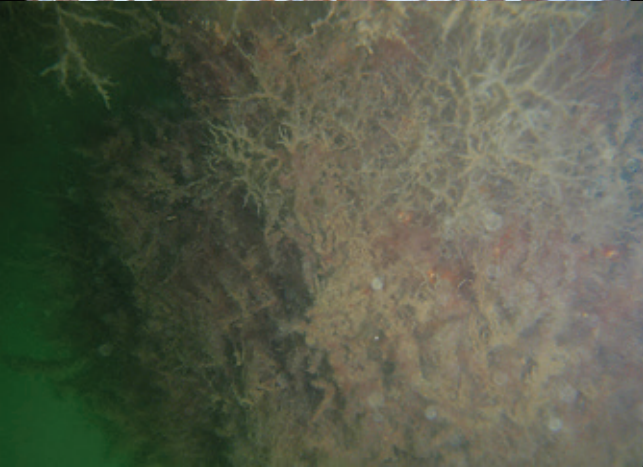
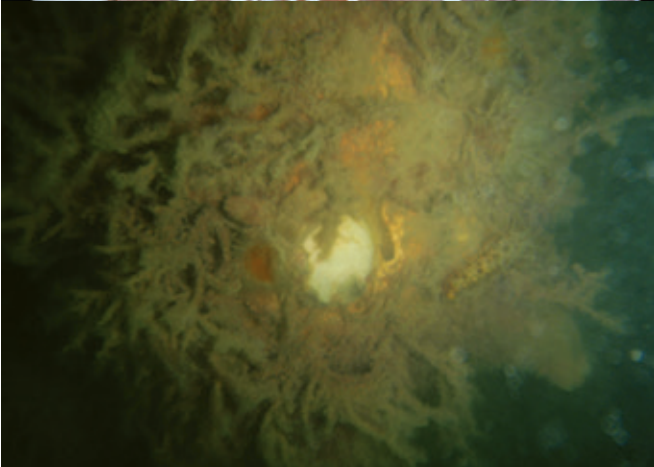


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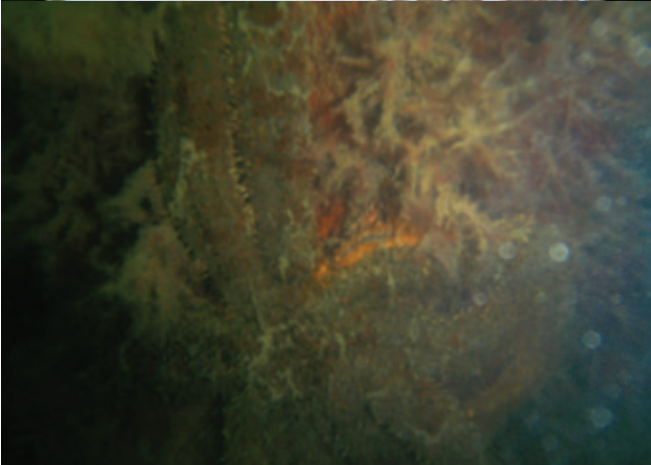
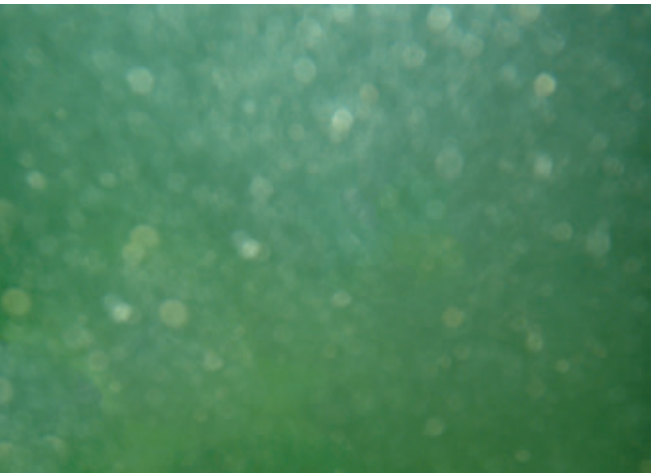
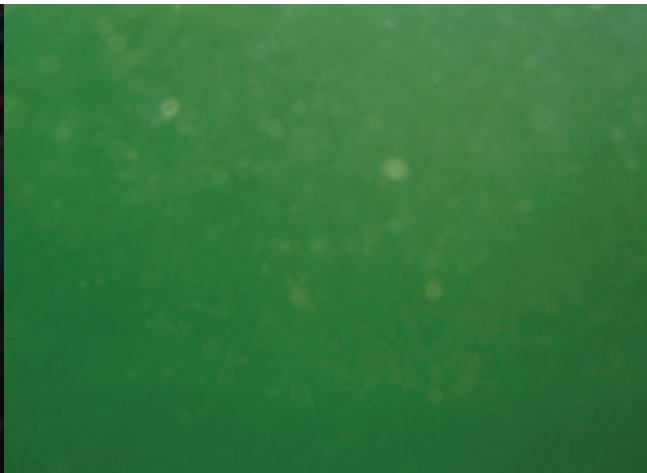
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CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

Your previous work has been much inspired by the organic world. For example, your painting pulsates with energy through the use of colour, vibrant and flowing patterns and ambiguous anthropomorphic, plant or animal-like forms. Your visual perspective of the world relates to the theory of fractals describing the evolutionary process of environment. Impermanent Vessels seems a natural development of your practice. However, can you go back to 2012 or earlier and recall how the idea of the project actually emerged?

It was a lot earlier than 2012 – probably five or six years ago and, I suppose, it was the progression from the idea of interconnection with nature. As I recall, I was thinking about combining some interactive process with nature with other things that I enjoyed – particularly, the underwater world and diving. It just seemed like a great way to express the idea to just put things in the sea and leave them for that process.

Is the project reflecting a concept of time?

I don't know if it is about the concept of time, but it is about our obsession with superficiality, the veneers of things even though this can be altered and changed. The vessels contain what might be seemingly empty, but it is actually the substance of things more often than not. The exterior is something that can be changed by the environment, but the core of things is more important. However, people look past it and only see the veneers. In time, everything changes and evolves into something new. The sense of impermanence is not something people see, they think that everything is immortal. They have the idea of their bodies as something much more substantial, but they are incredibly fragile. Like vessels.

It seems to be a human thing to imagine we are immortal...

In ancient cultures people didn't think they were immortal at all, they had understanding of their place in nature, and how connected they were. But in the modern world we are marketed through the concepts of beauty and longevity. Being a consumer is different than being a person in the environment. The idea of being consumers makes people feel we are immortal, because one can buy more product, one can consume more, and it gives an impression that one can possibly work to achieve more and that's forever.

So, did this current mentality of people actually inspire you for this project?

Yes, it makes me explore that idea. I am sort of fascinated by the way people are obsessed with materialistic things, just the total pursuit of the things that are the veneer that changes with time but is not the core of things. I don't think it has been always that way.

The work is very symbolic – you have incorporated a range of symbolic references relating to human history and religions. You used a human image – your own head for vessels subjected to change. The use of raku clay is symbolic in relation to Zen Buddhism, and the Muslim Call to Prayer is another spiritual reference that you used as the sound resonating in vessels. You have also given them another name – ‘vessels of life’. You said you were going to make 50 vessels and only then realised you were 50 at that particular time. Does the number have any meaning?

The number is coincidental, 50 was also my age, but it seemed like an appropriate number. I wanted to have an overview of the process of change, so I used the scale and different locations, placing [the vessels] in groups. They are like little symbolic communities. Being underwater – in a place like that, the vessels connected to very primitive forms of expression and ritualistic placement. It’s always like a different tribe in a different place that is going to evolve slightly differently to another tribe in parallel: that makes some kind of historical reference. It gave almost a feeling of antiquity – some things are lost, some destroyed, but then there is a chance to rediscover and reinterpret something old.

You mentioned a ritual – the process of the whole project associates with a ritual: the repetition of acts through the stages of making, placing underwater and then recovering the vessels. How would you describe your role as an artist in this process?

I suppose it is almost a kind of sacrifice. It’s like you are giving it up but it is quite a process to get to this stage – you are working with clay, then working with fire, and water, and then let nature do its work. There could be a complete loss of the piece; in the end, all is returning to this source. In some way, it is a statement that I have gone through the process, and I accept the loss.

Would you call your work symbolic rather than ‘artistic’?

I was not trying to create artistic masterpieces, each clay head was quite rough and I didn’t mind that they came out imperfect. It was definitely part of the statement. I didn’t reject any head. Making them was a learning process, it was really the matter of producing them and then placing them, so probably it was more a symbolic work that was involved.

The project is also very personal – symbolic of your life.

They are all images of me so it might be symbolic of me. The extra vessels I made and their numbers are symbolic of special people in my life. After [my wife] Carolyn passed away, it was all very symbolic to put the vessels in the ocean – even though the idea was conceived long ago, it was like a healing process for me to start the project and symbolically put the vessels in the ocean one year after her passing away. It seemed an appropriate time to do that. I suppose the connection with my life fits into the reflection of an ‘impermanent vessel’.

Your approach was to give it all up to the material and nature to determine the outcome. Failure and mistakes were irrelevant. Instead, the effort was directed to document the process.

In most of my projects I let material evolve. Filming and photographing make different types of records of the work. On the one hand, I am giving it up to the process, but then, somewhat paradoxically trying to capture these moments. It feels good to be able to reflect on the processes of change, create the impression that when people observe it – they can see something at different points of its lifetime and understand what’s happening. It’s like having photos to see someone young, and then a bit older each time, and be able to look at them when they are gone. For some of the vessels that are missing there are only two stages recorded, and nothing after that. Documentation seems to give people the opportunity to share that journey, see where it began and if they see the work they can realize where it’s at. The vessels are in a fairly static state now but they have undertaken certain degrees of change in the process. One can see it in digital images and project videos – I enjoyed doing that and explored something completely new for me as well.

Involved in your project, I have observed – it was a very dynamic process: particularly being on board when you dived, having lots of equipment around... Is this dynamics a reflection of how you approach the creative process?

I think it’s just reflective of my view of life, how I approach things. I find that while I am physically capable, it is natural for me to do things with energy. Diving is something I have done for a long time and which seems natural. I have enjoyed that experience so much all my life – I find it a very calm and relaxing place to be in the water. To me it is like another world and it has a different energy – you feel like you are totally connected to it but it also appears like an alien place, where your life has to be supported by artificial means to enter it. You are disconnected from all the external noise – this experience to me is just harmonious, tranquil, where I can hear breathing, the environment crackling sometimes. It’s a very primal sort of place, like being in a cave. You come to the surface and are back in the modern world, where we are overwhelmed by the external.

As you already noted – the process of recovering the vessels replicates recovery of artefacts from the past. When people look at an old artefact they connect with its seemingly lost beauty. Even though the object has been altered, while generations change, people connect with the past poetically. Does the feeling of beauty give some sort of permanence within impermanence?

Yes, when you are diving it is like you are looking for treasure, you know that something is there. It is the same thing but it has been in a different space and it gains new relevance because of the way it has been treated. That’s what it feels like when you bring things back to the surface.

When the ‘vessels of life’ go through the transformation, perhaps the core of them stays the same?

The memory of them is the same but the physical characteristics have changed. If they were pulled out in a thousand years, they would have undergone even bigger transformations but the core of them, the idea, would still be the same. They are in a different place, and they are part of the process but their value is still the same for me.

Questions by Marita Batna

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Curated by
Marita Batna

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Cover Image: Studio shot of video projection on sculpture



