

PRIVAT
ART

ABOVE THEM, THE WAVES

*One of the 'Top 25 Wonders of the World' is soon to be mirrored
under the sea off the Canaries. James Parry went to look*



6

'T'S GOING TO BE THERE,' says Jason deCaires Taylor and waves his hand out to sea. We are stood on a headland in the south of Lanzarote and, according to the sculptor, the swathe of azure waters before us will soon be home to one of the most exciting art venues to be created in Europe for decades. The Museo Atlántico will be the continent's first underwater sculpture park, and it will be inaugurated with artworks designed and made by Taylor.

Born in 1974 and trained in London, the transplanted Englishman is a pioneer of subaquatic art. In 2006 he founded the world's first permanent underwater art installation at Grenada in the West Indies and went on to develop the Museo Subacuático de Arte (MUSA), off the coast of Cancún in the Gulf of Mexico. Since opening in 2009, MUSA has been included by *National Geographic* on a list of the 'Top 25 Wonders of the World' and is visited by up to 350,000 people each year. Five hundred of Taylor's sculptures are gathered there on the ocean floor, illuminated by an ever-changing kaleidoscope of naturally refracted light and enveloped by evolving marine life.

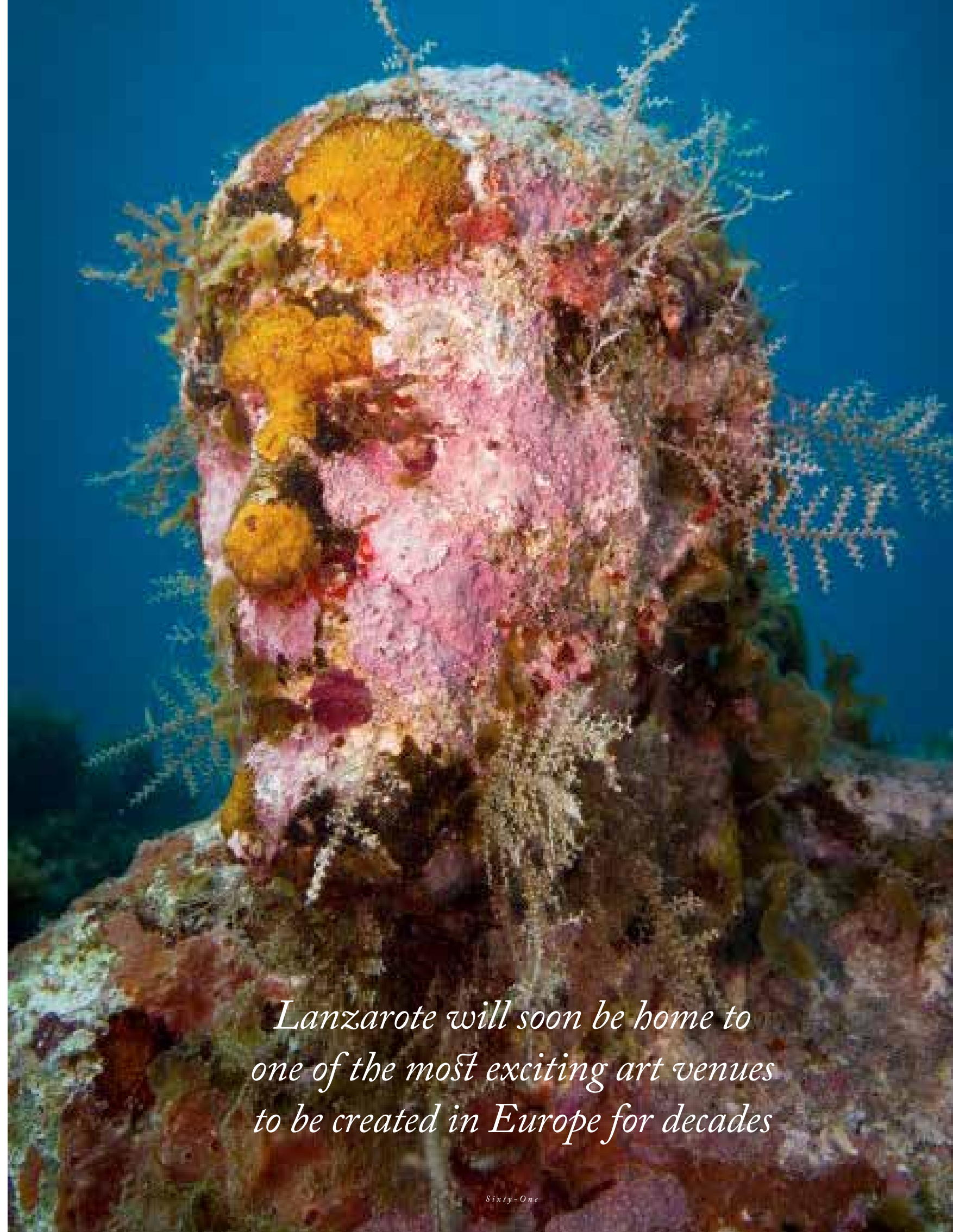
Now it's Europe's turn. Scheduled to open in late 2016, Lanzarote's Museo Atlántico is a joint initiative between the island's governing body, the Cabildo de Lanzarote, and the non-profit Fundación Helge Achenbach. Established to promote contemporary art on the island and to create a dialogue that connects art, environmental issues and sociopolitical concerns, the foundation was set up by art dealer and collector Helge Achenbach. Two sculptures from his personal collection, by Tony Cragg and Juan Muñoz, adorn the terrace of Taylor's studio in the Marina Rubicon, a high-end development in the resort of Playa Blanca. The studio has superb views over the marina and out to sea, and has been Taylor's base since he moved here from Mexico earlier this year.

Lanzarote generally, and Playa Blanca specifically, might not seem an obvious destination for art aficionados. The fourth largest of the Canary Islands, Lanzarote received over two million visitors in 2013, mostly drawn by the island's reputation for year-round sunshine and beautiful beaches. Yet moves are afoot to reposition the island as a high-profile cultural destination, building on the achievements of celebrated local architect and artist César Manrique.

PREVIOUS PAGES

AND LEFT: *Silent Evolution*, eight metres below the waves off the coast of Cancún in the Gulf of Mexico.

RIGHT: algae and coral colonise one of Taylor's sculptures – as intended



Lanzarote will soon be home to one of the most exciting art venues to be created in Europe for decades

Once underwater the sculptures transform from purely manmade creations into artificial living reefs



Alarmed by the potential impact of uncontrolled tourism on his home island, as early as the 1960s Manrique was lobbying for the protection of Lanzarote's vernacular built heritage and for a contemporary architecture that paid homage to traditional materials and spatial design. Practising what he preached, he set out a series of design guidelines – no high-rise buildings allowed, for example – and masterminded a host of remarkable projects before his death in a car crash in 1992 at the age of 73. His achievements included the remarkable Jameos del Agua, a nightclub and concert venue fashioned from a dramatic natural cave setting.

Taylor's sculptures dovetail neatly with Manrique's wider legacy of art in the landscape, drawing on the island's elemental qualities and extraordinary scenery. Lanzarote was convulsed by a series of violent volcanic eruptions during the 18th century, with lava spewing over a quarter of the island, burying entire settlements and much of the productive farmland. The epic expanses of solidified lava streams, ash domes and extrusive rock formations define the island today. Taylor recently placed a series of temporary sculptures around the island, human figures marching across lunar landscapes. Meanwhile the region remains geologically volatile: an underwater volcano off El Hierro, the smallest island in the Canaries, is constantly rumbling and threatening to erupt.

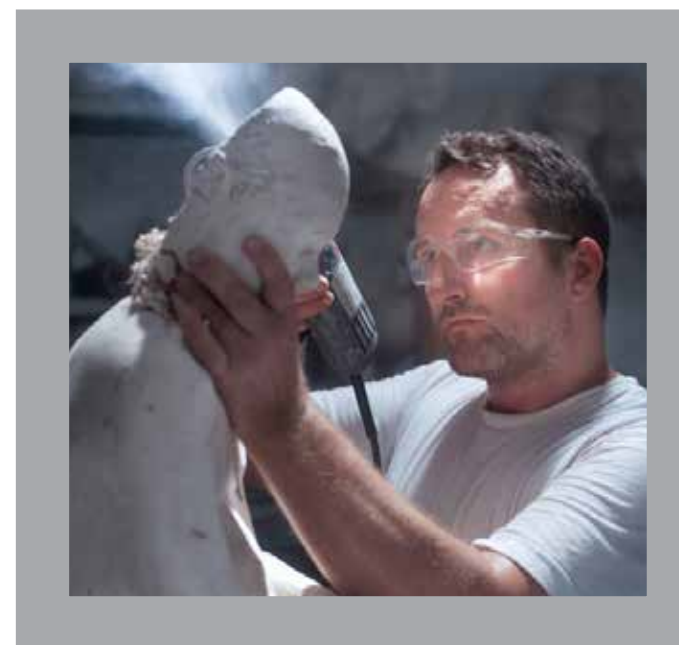
The location for the Museo Atlántico is approximately 50m offshore, in shallow water some 10m deep. The flat sandy seabed provides the ideal environment for Taylor's sculptures, which will be prepared in his studio and then cast in a boatyard nearer the shore before being winched into position by cranes. 'The conditions here are generally benign,' he explains, 'and we are on the leeward side of the island, so it's sheltered from the prevailing wind.'



OPPOSITE: Vein Man is constructed of a network of tubular highways for coral to travel along.

THIS PAGE: 39-year-old British sculptor Jason deCaires Taylor and some of his creations.

NEXT SPREAD: Banker at the Cancún's Museo Subacuático de Arte



The water is very clear but also relatively cold, and while in tropical Cancún Taylor goes scuba diving in shorts and T-shirt, here he dons a dry suit. The difference in sea temperature will have a bearing on how the sculptures in the Museo Atlántico will evolve once immersed.

In his previous projects Taylor has intended that his sculptures, once underwater, transform from purely manmade creations into artificial living reefs that sustain life and become their own independent ecosystems. 'The higher the sea temperature, the more rapid the growth of formations,' he explains. 'At Cancún it was just months before the sculptures became encrusted with algae, sponges and other marine organisms. Here the process will be much more gradual.' Taylor expects his Museo Atlántico pieces to remain quite clean, but still develop a thin white patina of calcium that will give them what Taylor hopes will be a 'Pompeii-esque' look: 'I'm making the sculptures more individual in shape and expression, because I'm expecting that they will retain their original character for much longer here.'

The layout of the Museo Atlántico will follow the pattern of MUSA, with a series of underwater installations that can be accessed by visitors in different ways. These will include scuba diving, snorkelling, glass-bottomed boats and even a submarine. Visitors will be encouraged to join approved guided tours, but the intention is for the site to not be overly controlled. 'The rules on access to artworks in the sea are obviously not the same as for those on land,' explains Taylor, 'and so the visitor and curatorial experiences are dramatically different too.' A terrestrial visitor centre is planned, with webcams and other viewing options for those who prefer to stay on terra firma.

*At a time when up to 70 per cent of the
from destructive human activity, Taylor is*

*world's coral reefs are under potential threat
offering an artistic and practical solution*



The underwater museum will feature a series of installations built around an underwater botanical garden containing works inspired by the indigenous flora of the island. It will be approached by an entrance gateway that has crowds of sculptural seabed visitors streaming towards it. Taylor is working on these at present. He is a specialist in 'life casting', in which a mould is taken directly from a real-life person. He finds his models in cafes and bars, or on the street, but for this project he is also planning a new approach. 'We will be offering people the chance to be immortalised under the sea,' he explains, 'in return for a donation to the Fundación.'

The moulding process can take up to two hours and sees the model covered almost entirely – only the nostrils are left clear, for obvious reasons – in a layer of alginate, a natural form of viscous gum similar to that used by dentists when preparing dental impressions. The alginate gives super-high definition, right down to tiny wrinkles and even skin pores. Fabric strips and a fast-drying plaster shell are applied on top of it and, once dry, the whole casing is cracked open to serve as a preliminary mould for the future sculpture. 'Reactions to the experience are really interesting,' says Taylor, 'with some models going into a meditative state inside the mould or even falling asleep.'

With powder kegs like El Hierro likely to blow at any time, the context for the new underwater sculpture park could not be more compelling. 'Lanzarote's volcanic landscapes have a primeval quality that suits my work,' says Taylor, 'and this character extends under the sea.' With the island's landforms and seascapes in a constant state of metamorphosis, the new museum and its installations are designed to highlight the delicate and evolving character of man's relationship with the fragile marine environment. 'My works



ABOVE: sculptures being lowered onto the seabed in Cancún.

BELOW: a sea-change turns two statues into something rich and strange

hopefully demonstrate how human intervention can be positive and life-enhancing,' he says.

At a time when up to 70 per cent of the world's coral reefs are considered to be under potential threat from destructive human activity – which can include unmanaged tourism – Taylor is offering an artistic and practical solution. He makes his works from marine-grade cement with a neutral pH level and uses fibre-glass and stainless steel – rather than corrosive and polluting iron – for the supports and fixings. The sculptures are designed with niches and crevices for marine organisms such as algae and sponges to colonise naturally and in some cases nature is given an additional helping hand: Taylor salvages fragments of living coral that have broken off in storms and fits them into clamps on his sculptures. In most cases these corals regrow, helping transform the sculpture.

The Museo Atlántico will not only provide a window on a largely hidden underwater world but also offer opportunities to experience at first hand artworks that are designed to be in a constant state of artistic and ecological transformation. They do not conform to conventional perceptions of sculpture, and nor is Taylor confining himself to artistic life entirely below the waves: this summer a series of his floating, tethered figures can be seen striding across the sea off Brazil as part of the celebrations for the World Cup. 'I shall never turn my back on terrestrial art,' he laughs, 'but somehow the ocean offers a much greater range of opportunities.'

