

# A TEXTURAL STUDY – AND LESSON

## Tekla Zweir

BY CHRISTINA LEVERE

**W**hen Tekla Zweir made her first coral sculpture, she sat back, looked at it and thought, “I have to make another.”

“When I start creating something I think in series,” Zweir said. “I get curious. It comes from working in the classroom — kids are curious, and I am too.”

Zweir is an artist and an educator who has taught studio art at The Williams School in New London for 16 years; she’s also Chair of the Art Department. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in sculpture in 1999 from Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts and a Master of Arts in Art Education in 2013 from Boston University.

Although her education laid the foundation for her career, her foray into coral was a drastic departure from her training.

“That was definitely a change for me because as a student at Lyme Academy, the figure was emphasized,” Zweir said. “You’d never create something ugly, and some of the coral is definitely ugly. My students have told me as much. This project was moving away from my education there. I was breaking rules to create something new.”

Her interest in coral was two-fold: as an artist, coral provided textural intrigue; as an educator, coral gave her the opportunity to research some of America’s reefs



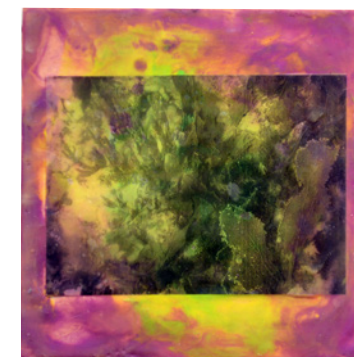
Tekla Zweir with plaster relief sculptures as part of her Coral Reef Project at the Mystic Museum of Art

and to share her knowledge.

“I was visualizing creating sculptures with texture and thought of coral, and I needed to do some research,” she said.

She studied coral at the Mystic Aquarium, Credabel Coral Lab in New London, the Boston Museum of Science and the Key West Aquarium. She also visited coral reefs at the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park in Key Largo, Florida. While there, she took photographs and sketched different coral species.

“In the Keys I learned about their indigenous coral. Some have died off but have been regrown and cultivated.”



Top to bottom: Coral paintings; photo transfer, beeswax oil paintings; bleached coral sculptures

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Project” exhibit ran February through April 2018. It included plaster coral sculptures, studies of coral in oil on canvas, experimental encaustic paintings utilizing her underwater photographs of a coral reef and plaster relief sculptures to represent bleached coral.

The exhibit aimed not only to showcase Zweir’s years of hard-work but to educate — most importantly to show the diversity of coral species, to demonstrate the fragility of the coral reef and to teach the public about coral and its habitat. They’re important points to consider. According to Ocean Health Index, “Coral reefs are the ocean’s most diverse and complex ecosystems, supporting 25 percent of all marine life, including 800 species of reef-building corals and more than one million animal and plant species. Sixty percent of reefs are already seriously damaged by local sources such as overfishing, destructive fishing, anchor damage, coral bleaching, coral mining, sedimentation, pollution and disease. When these types of human threats are combined with the influence of rising ocean temperatures, 75 percent of reefs are threatened.”

As discouraging as those numbers are, Zweir is optimistic. “We communicate differently with art,” she said. “Rather than just talking about how and why we need to fix coral reefs, art lets us see it first-hand. If you encounter it visually, that creates that thought process.”

And if things go according to plan, Zweir’s exhibit will continue the conversation. “The Coral Reef Project” just finished a run at Mystic Museum of Art, and Zweir envisions it becoming a traveling show that continues to evolve. Ugly and all.

As her research progressed, she became more and more transfixed by the subject — and how best to turn it into art.

“I was fascinated by all of the different types of coral but broader than that, there are soft and hard coral,” she said. “Soft coral doesn’t have a skeleton, so I wondered how I would sculpt it.”

Her wonderment didn’t slow her down: “When I was creating the sculptures I wasn’t sure how they’d look together. I made 50 and I was ready to make more, but my husband said, ‘Maybe you should see how they look together first.’”

The sculptures weren’t exact replicas — that wasn’t her main goal.

“I did play with color,” Zweir said. “Once the pieces were sculpted it wasn’t about being true to the coral. At that point it was about what would look good. It was about authenticity with form, not color.”

While she was creating all that coral, she decided to put out a proposal to the Lyman Allyn Art Museum for an exhibition. After a year or so of planning with the museum, her efforts were realized: “The Coral Reef