

# Todd Essick



M E R M A I D S & M A N A T E E S





Text edited by Gunild Symes  
Photography by Todd Essick

ABOVE: Mermaid, Fish and Lion. TOP LEFT: Mermaid and Child  
PREVIOUS PAGE: Manatee Parade

It's been a couple of years since we last sat down with the good-humored Todd Essick to listen to his latest stories and adventures in underwater photography. We caught up with him recently to have a chat and check out his latest images. Here's what he said about his new projects and the impetus behind them.

**What was the inspiration behind the project with the mermaids?** When we were photographing humpback whales in the Dominican Republic, the models were having a tough time getting down to depth without wearing any fins. So, I was trying to think of a way to give them propulsion, and the best way to do that would be fins that are hidden. Well, what's the best way to hide a fin? Inside a mermaid's tail. So, that was kind of the impetus of how it happened. I am not sure I like what happened with these pictures... I am not completely convinced that it goes to the heart of my project, which is to show the connection we all share with the sea. It's our beginning. Mermaids are more of a whimsical topic. It's more of a break from what I do. I am just kind of playing with it. Through the course of it, I am finding a sub-culture of women who want to be mermaids. They want to be photographed. They are extremely motivated and get to live a



little of their fantasy. I am very amazed at how many of them, women and girls, who have made their own mermaid tails. What's interesting is that I get to hear those tales as well. I get to hear the story behind why they want to do it.

One of my models found this underwater memorial park. She thought it would be cool for some pictures. I was basically trying to create something to illustrate it, to give to the people that owned the memorial park—the fantasy image being about mermaids greeting the spirits of the departed, the mermaids as angels. It was a creative outlet.

**Are you going to make another book?** Maybe not of the mermaid series. I am working towards getting more and better pictures for another book with more images of whales, whalesharks and maybe man-tas. And then maybe down the road, I will put together a cu-

mulative of everything that I've shot over the years. Probably at the ten-year mark, which is three years from now, I will put out a retrospective of all the projects I've worked on. And in that book, I will probably include some of the mermaid photos, because it did garner some interesting images.

**Looking at the cemetery images... you have a model with a mermaid tail and another in a white dress? What is the significance of that?**

The woman in the white dress is the spirit, the dearly departed. She is sitting next to the grave markers where people who have been cremated and formed into a starfish or a piece of brain coral are placed. They put them in a cylinder and put them inside the columns. They put a name plate on each spot.

**How do you feel about this practice?** Fine. It's one of those

other options now. You can have ashes on land or scattered at sea or have them formed into something. I'm into choices. People should do whatever they want, you know, as long as it doesn't hurt anybody. I'm a kind of live and let live kind of guy. If you want to do it and it's an option, why not? There are so many restrictions on morality and ethics, why should anybody question this? I am so used to being questioned about my work because I work with the body. It shouldn't be such big a deal. People should be able to do what they want. There has to be a certain amount of freedom in life. If you want to be formed into something and buried under water, why not? I don't want to see restrictions on people. Why should one not be able to do it?

**In the past, you have talked about the Golden Rule in your work and the ancient Greek**



LEFT: *Where's my safety diver?*  
RIGHT: *Shark Dreams*

year, and they got the most letters to the editor from it—almost all of them positive from all over the world. The one negative letter was from a fairly religious person in America.

When I am in Europe, people are loving the work and standing behind me. My European friends say, "Let me get this right... The place where they produce the most and the best pornography doesn't like your work, which is fine art, stand-alone beautiful pictures done very tastefully, and yet, they are afraid of those pictures?" That's pretty much the truth. It's very ironic.

**Tell us a little bit about the manatee images you are now doing and what's behind it...**

Well, it's kind of the thinking: Mermaids and Mermaids, based on the old mermaid story of sailors thinking manatees were the original mermaids. Some models who lived near the manatees in Florida contacted me, and it was a no-brainer. They kind of put the idea in my head without realizing it. I love going to Crystal River (Florida) and photographing the manatees. I go all the time in the winter.

It also has that kind of whimsical feel to it, and I thought that it would make some interesting pictures. Everyone knows the old stories that sailors thought manatees were the original mermaids.

The interesting aspect of manatees is that you can look at the herd, or the grouping, and you can almost tell which ones are going to be friendly by the fact that the cleanest ones are cleaner from people petting them throughout the season. They don't have any growth on them. If you see 15 or 20 manatees in an area and a few of them are really clean,

you can almost guaranteed that those are going to be the ones that come up to you and be friendly.

**Aren't there rules about touching the manatees?** The Marine Mammal Protection Act has some loose wording which is called harassment, which can be interpreted in so many different ways. If you go to Crystal River and see the cattle boats drop all these people in, you could interpret that exactly what these people are doing as harassment. They touch them, play with them. It basically comes down to not impeding their travel. They are really only going to stop you when you are cornering the manatees and impeding their travel or standing on top of them. Basically, you are not supposed to go underwater with them, but any photographer knows it's really difficult to get a picture from up above, so you are going to go under the water. If they wanted to reinforce that rule, they could. In theory, you are not supposed to touch them at all, if you follow the rule

by the book. But it's interesting to see the people that come. You can really tell the people that know the rules and know how to appreciate them. And then you get the guy or the woman who has never swam with the manatees, and they are really all over the place, flying with them or chasing them. You just want to go up to them and shake them and tell them, "You know, if you just hang back, you can really enjoy this." The manatees will eventually come to you.

I probably dove with the manatees the most times, but have the least pictures. It really has to be the perfect storm before it all works. When I say "storm", I mean that it has to be the right cold front. The tides have to be at the right point. I can almost look at a tide chart and a weather chart and tell you if its going to work out a few weeks ahead of time. But there are certain days in January and February that I think are perfect days, tidal wise, and if there's a cold front coming through, you are almost guaranteed a great experience. Not that you



**ideal of beauty.** Yes, it's been around for thousands of years. You put a statue somewhere like Venus or Michaelangelo's *David*... Why should my work be more or less offensive than that? I get far more response and reception in Europe for my work. People like it here too (in America). They're just afraid to say it. In one breath, I will meet somebody at a show like DEMA, and they will love my work, and yet, they're afraid to display it and/or publish it. I always get this, "You know, I really love your work, but we couldn't put that in a magazine." That kind of says to me that you don't have

any balls! The US magazines seem to be so afraid of losing readership and offending people, that they don't want to take a chance. And what's even funnier is that I've been published in so many magazines around the world, even in what is technically a Muslim country—Singapore—and they don't have a problem printing it. They find pictures that are not offensive and can publish it there, and yet in America, even the inference that there's nudity, or you're doing something that's off the beaten path—it upsets them.

But I was published in *Scuba Diver* this



LEFT: *Stairs*, shot at the underwater cemetery. ABOVE: *Inspiration*, Essick works a model

can't have one on other days, I'm just talking about the most optimum time. It's very difficult to get the cold front, the tides right, the manatees, getting the models there—have everything fall right into place—but I keep trying. I love going and swimming with the manatees. It is never a wasted trip, but I just don't ever get exactly what I want. Which is true of all my pictures, actually. I never get what I want (laughter).

But, there's going to be some dramatic images, and I am just looking forward to people's reaction to them.

**When you look around, what do you see or what would you like to see happen in the future in the dive industry?** I would like to see an American dive magazine publish my work (laughter). But of course, that would be the beginning of the Apocalypse, or hell freezing over, but I would still like to see it!

**What changes do you see in the attitudes towards underwater photogra-**

**phy?** It's fascinating to me how digital photography has just opened up underwater photography to divers. Taking a new underwater photographer and letting them see instant gratification can show them so much, so quickly. Underwater, they can make the adjustments to make the good pictures. It's such a learning tool. They're going to come back from a dive trip—even with a reasonable point-and-shoot camera and housing—they will come back with some really nice pictures, which I think really promotes diving and photography and opens people up. At the same time, for all of us who have been taking pictures for a long time, it can almost be disheartening. For teaching people, it's great. It's funny how long it took me to learn through so many lessons. Now, someone can go out on a few dives and learn it instantly. The learning curve is so much shorter now.

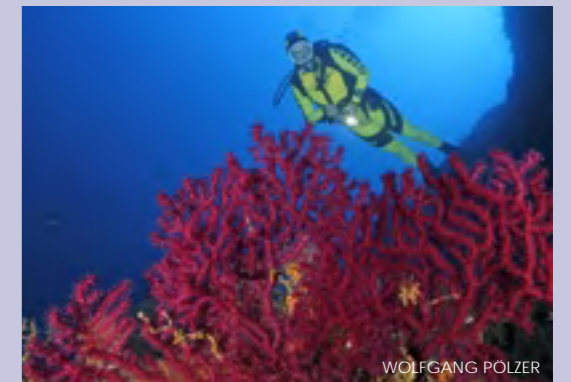
For more information about Todd Essick and his photography or to order prints directly, visit: [Toddessick.com](http://Toddessick.com) ■

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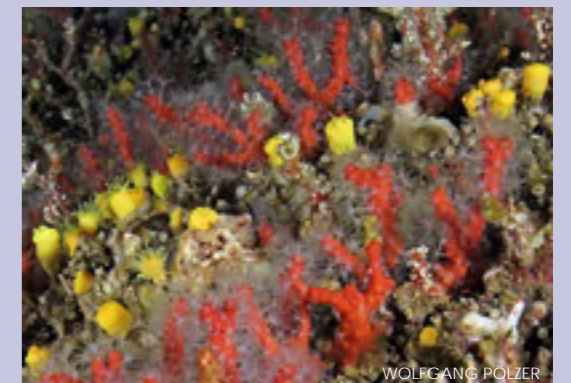
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