



Charlie finds new reasons to go to church, 6D

Who would be A mermaid fair, Singing alone, Combing her hair
— Lord Alfred Tennyson, *The Mermaid*



Siren's Ole, Dolphina with a sting ray in the Turks and Caicos.

Photo by TODD ESSICK

A mermaid fair...

Todd Essick photographs sea nymphs —

models who have the amazing ability to look beautiful while swimming alongside eels and dolphins and even sharks.

Essick's nymphs are nude, which makes it hard to find a shot that can be published.

But it is not hard to appreciate the beauty of real-life mermaids, who can turn the undersea world into a work of art. **STORY, 3D**

Persistence joins beauty, beauties on film

Todd Essick had a vision that required money, patience, cooperative marine mammals and women with great lungs.

By PAUL LOMARTIRE
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Nude women. "Beautiful nude women," corrects photographer Todd Essick.

Beautiful nude women swimming like nymphs and sirens with dolphins, manatees and sharks.

Those women, Essick decided about nine years ago,



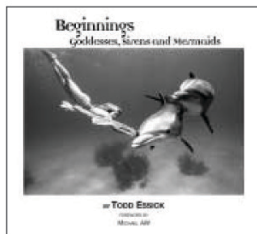
Essick

would elevate underwater photographs from interesting to art. "I never guessed that it would be so incredibly difficult to get those shots," he says, sipping iced tea at the Riviera Beach Marina. "On the third trip to the Bahamas, I was freaking out. I had spent \$20,000, \$30,000, and I didn't have one shot to show for it."

Today, he has plenty of shots. His book, *Beginnings — Goddesses, Sirens and Mermaids* — is filled with unique underwater photos of women as underwater goddesses swimming with dolphins, manatees, rays, eels and even a nurse shark.

Inquisitive, quick to laugh, the outgoing Essick, 44, lives in West Palm Beach, but he's not home much.

His photos have earned invitations to appear at A-list dive and boat shows, art galleries and bookstores throughout the U.S. and Europe. After his 30-minute power-point and film presentation, there's usually a line to buy his book, prints and



posters. Limited-edition prints from the book (\$1,500) and unframed posters (\$25) are available on his Web site (www.essickphoto.com) and at his appearances.

The only magazine that really matters to the deep-sea crowd, Germany's *Unterwasser Magazine*, recently named Essick one of the world's Top 10 underwater photographers.

Just add that to his already interesting résumé: Miami AP photographer, war photographer in Nicaragua, road manager for Nashville country stars The Mavericks, mortgage broker in Fort Lauderdale.

He grew up in Chicago, but finished high school in Coral Gables. After more than 10 years in South Florida, he moved back to the Windy City in 1999 and got a job selling software with a computer startup company.

And he was going crazy. "I was just in the wrong place," he says. "Every time I'm in an office situation, it's like being in prison."

One dreary day, he escaped to Chicago's Shedd Aquarium to see one of his heroes, underwater photographer David Doubilet. Doubilet's show took Essick



Photo from 'Beginnings - Goddesses, Sirens and Mermaids'
Missy Kehoe, one of Essick's models, shares a moment with a nurse shark. She has been an underwater hockey player.



Photo by Mauricio Handler
Todd Essick photographs models by the statue, *Christ in the Abyss*, in Key Largo's John Pennecamp State Park. Some images were blurred intentionally by *Post* graphics artists.

back to memories of swimming with dolphins in the Keys.

And seeing and hearing Doubilet revived Essick's underwater dream that he had sketched out and buried in his computer years earlier.

Inspired and tired of 9-to-5, Essick decided to dive into the deep end and shoot the

beautiful bodies — women with dolphins, women with sharks and shipwrecks — that haunted him.

After three failed, six-day shooting trips, Essick was haunted by debt. The price — airfare, hotel rooms, meals, paychecks — for a crew of 12 was piling up.

Worse than a photogra-

pher having no money is a photographer having no money shots.

He battled indifferent dolphins, tides, bubbles escaping from a model's mouth, winds that stirred the sandbottom. On and on.

And three years into the project, he lost the love of his life.

"Tammy," he says. "There was never anybody more perfect for me."

They met at the Chicago computer startup. Together for two years, he was sure they'd be together forever.

She left in 2003 convinced that her dream of a permanent address and family had no chance against his globe-trotting, deep-sea dreams.

"I more or less became a jerk about it," he admits. "I was a typical guy, fear of commitment. I blew it."

"Sometimes I wonder if I worked harder to make this work because she left me," he says. "Losing her made me more passionate about the project."

On Essick's fourth trip to the Bahamas, a dark-haired beauty swam in and changed his life.

With Essick shooting at about 30 feet beneath the surface, model Missy Kehoe dived down in a sweeping arc with two dolphins — and in the perfect, eternal, blue water, for just an instant, the woman and dolphins fused into perfect curves.

The perfect shot.

When he saw the developed frame — he only uses print film — he started shaking.

"That's when I knew that it would all work out," he recalls.

That shot of Missy and the dolphins is the back cover of his book.

Kehoe, 27, a buyer for a Boca Raton dive shop, was the first model to dive into

Essick's dream. She was experienced in underwater free diving and playing hockey with a snorkel, mask, fins and strong lungs. She first heard about Essick's project from another underwater hockey player.

"It sounded like a neat idea," she says.

After Kehoe, five other models heard about the project and sought out Essick.

For each shot, a safety diver goes underwater with the model. The diver wears a tank, equipped with a second regulator to give the model air.

The marine animals are coaxed into the shot, and the model sucks as much oxygen as she can from her mask, then takes it off and swims in arcs and curves past Essick and his Nikon.

Missy quickly found out how hard it is to look like an enchanting sea nymph when your eyes are burning and saltwater is flowing up your nose for the 30 seconds or so as you swim diagonally and down where Essick is set up.

"And you can't release bubbles or that ruins the shot," she explains. "And, even if the water's clear, you can't see much. It's blurry, like having bad vision."

She loves Essick's photos.

"It was work, hard work, and there were points when you said, 'this sucks,' when you had saltwater burning your sinuses and your eyes," Missy says, "but the end result is so worth it. You have something that will last forever."

She plans to work with Essick for his next project: Nude women with "bigger sharks, whales, manta rays in Hawaii."

Bigger sharks? Manta rays? Whales?

"Sure," he says, smiling. "It'll just take more effort."

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