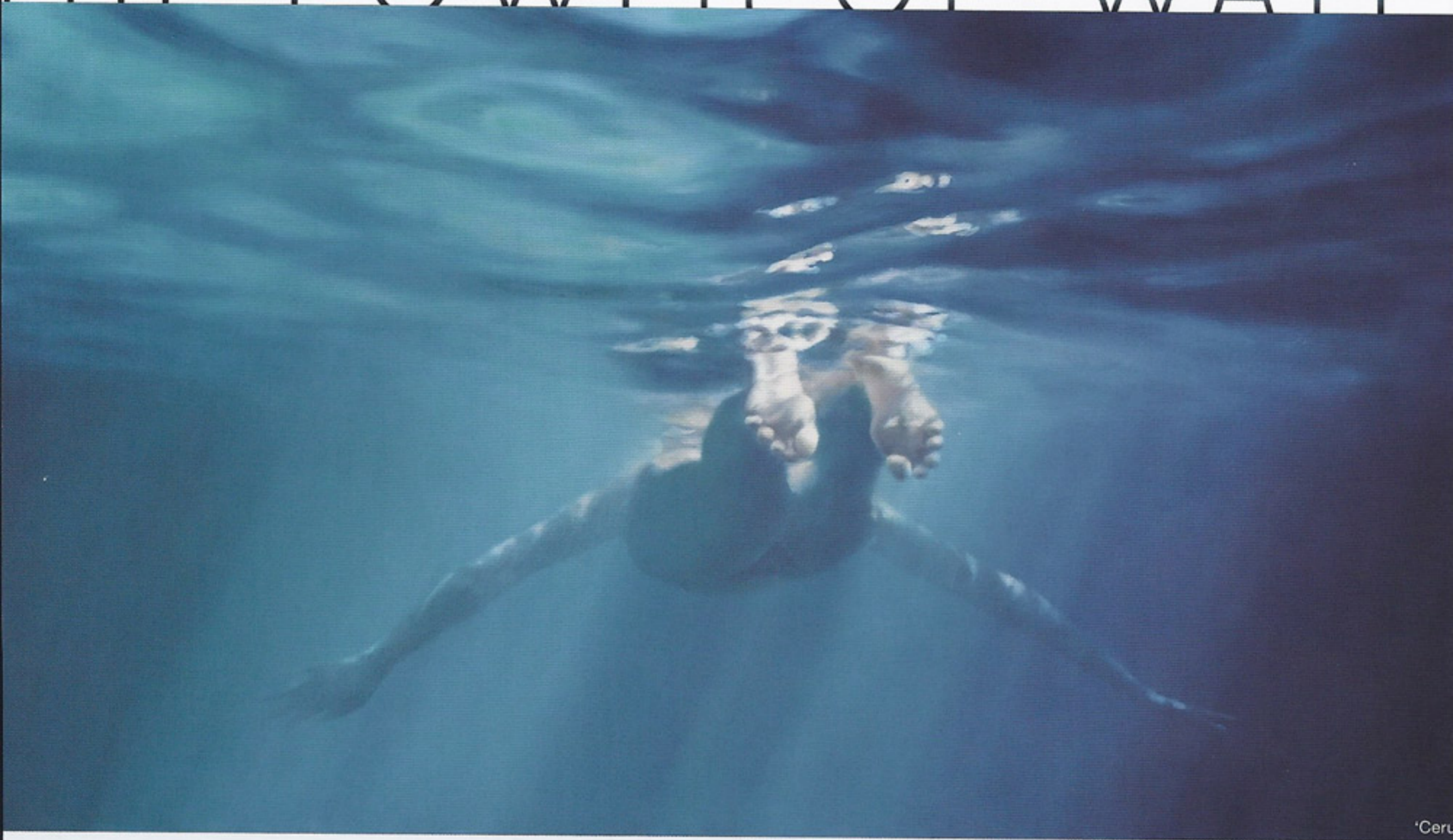




THE POWER OF WAIT



There are large numbers of people hell-bent on owning a piece of work by Australian artist Martine Emdur. The breathtaking works by the self-taught artist lie at the end of a two-year waiting list in Sydney and ahead of her debut Hong Kong exhibition more than half of the show was already sold. Kee meets the diminutive and somewhat shy artist.

Words: Rache Duffell

Images: Martine Emdur courtesy of The Cat Street Gallery



Since Mandy d'Abo first opened The Cat Street Gallery four years ago, she has had her keen eye for art on Martine Emdur, an Australian artist whose works have become some of the most sought-after in Australia. It is only now that Emdur has put herself on the map in Hong Kong, to a great reception with eight of her 14 works sold before the exhibition even officially opened.

Based in Sydney's Bondi Beach, Emdur's works show semi-submerged bodies from an underwater point of view. From bright turquoise oceans to darker grey waters, the environments of her swimmers and floaters vary, but the accuracy and feeling with which she captures the way the light breaks through the water, causing distorted reflections of the figures and bodies on the underside of the surface as they hover in the shallows, is consistent and hugely aesthetic and it is almost unbelievable to discover that Emdur is almost entirely self-taught, an example of how practice really can make perfect.

"I always wanted to be an artist," asserts Emdur in a rare moment of proclamation. The sweet but shy artist is not keen on being interviewed and is much more inclined to talk when the pen and paper for recording what she says are far from sight. Having worked alone in her studio on her Hong Kong show for six months, the imminent opening of an exhibition that is already proving popular is understandably overwhelming for the reserved artist, particularly as she clearly has many fans who will be attending. In the short period I am present in the gallery before our meeting, a whole host of people have walked in from the street, intrigued and entranced by her appealing and alluring images which adorn the wall of The Cat Street Gallery, all eager to take a closer look.

After leaving high school, Emdur worked in a variety of roles from secretary to waitress before moving into commercial art. However she soon tired of the constraints of the business world and decided it was time she did an exhibition. She rented a space in Sydney "and it all went on from there," she says with a smile. Since her initial foray into the art world she has been wildly successful and has garnered critical acclaim, coming in as a finalist on two occasions for The Archibald Prize as well as being a recipient of both the Waverly Art Prize and the King's School Art Prize.

It is something of a surprise to learn that Emdur has shown an interest in the Archibald Prize, an award which praises portraiture, as there are very few pieces in her oeuvre which ever show faces. While the bodies she paints at times are totally submerged, often they are swimming or facing away, but in most cases their heads are above the water. "I don't like them to necessarily be identifiable," explains Emdur. "When you have a face everyone is drawn to it and it becomes about that person as opposed to the body in that environment."

Emdur's striking, almost ethereal images have often used her friends and neighbours as the model, the artist going swimming alongside them and capturing on camera their suspended yet submerged bodies as they cut through the water. Emdur then works from the pictures she has taken, never completely copying one photograph but using a selection together in order to perfect the reflective and refractive elements of the merging of water and light, especially when forms in various positions affect this convergence. "The colours are complex underwater and I use the photos as a reference to understand the light. There's still a lot to learn and it's an ongoing study," she explains.





Deep Turquoise'

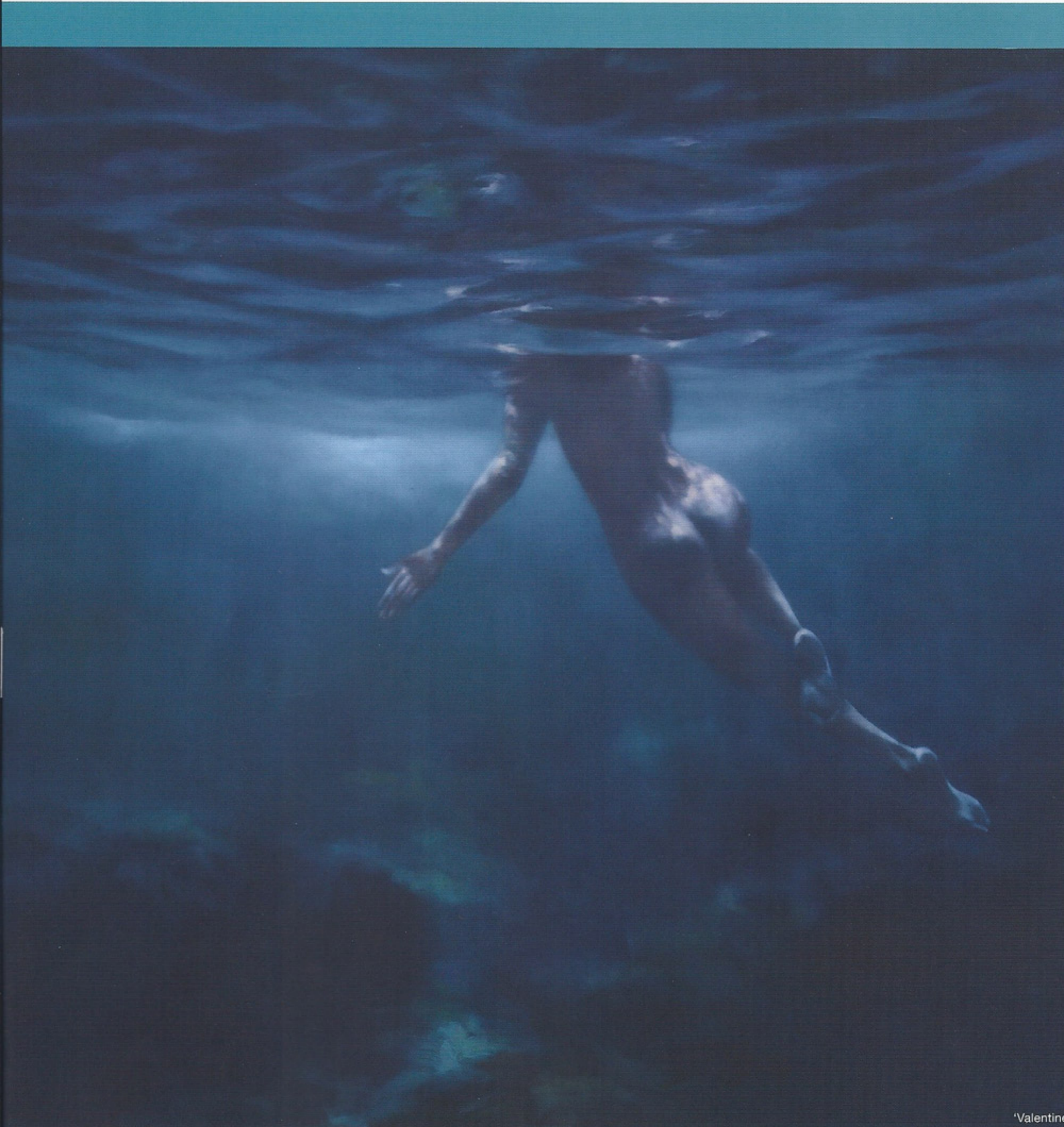
It is a unique angle to work from, both metaphorically and literally, as Emdur uses her current works to hone in on the scene of a swimmer from underwater. The ocean, however, has always been something that has appealed to the artist, ever since that first exhibition which she staged for herself. "My work was sea-themed, but it was more scenic with works from above the ground. I got closer and closer to the subject, I started studying just the water and then I went under," she says with a shy laugh. "I live in Bondi so this is my surrounding area."

From moving closer to the subject, Emdur has since started to change her artistic vision slightly and is currently focusing her latest works on water studies, pieces without figures in them and something she admits to being much more difficult as there is no initial starting point and no central figure from which to work around. However, it is also a series with a great deal of potential for development. "There is plenty of scope for works without figures. I can venture into the abstract and it's rich with possibilities at the moment."

However, it is the images with various figures in, often curvaceous female nudes, that have caught many a collector's eye to date. "It's a good choice of subject matter," says Emdur of the appeal of her works, both in Australia and

Hong Kong. "Water is so soothing. Everybody loves water, floating in it, and its gravity-defying power," continues the artist, who clearly feels the same way as her collectors do about the natural element. Emdur created the whole show, entitled 'Lazuline' perhaps in reference to the varying blue colours of the water she depicts, specifically for Hong Kong and as a request also completed some smaller pieces to suit her audience, something which was not an easy task for the artist who despite her petite size, is more familiar with working on larger pieces. "I like being able to represent the figure as close to life-size as possible. It has more impact and allows me to explore depth and distance. It's hard for me to resolve them in a smaller scale as it's more fiddly and difficult to get the amount of detail in them." However, from the Hong Kong response to her work it seems that she has done an excellent job with the show and her smallest piece was in fact the second one sold. With a significant following of her underwater pictures already Down Under, it seems that the attraction of Martine Emdur's enchanting works could well be set to spread much much further.

Martine Emdur's Lazuline runs until January 29th 2011 at The Cat Street Gallery, 222 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong +852 2291 0006 www.thecatstreetgallery.com





KEE

Hong Kong Shanghai
the magazine for kee players
issue number forty nine
January 2011