

WATER WORLD

The **ULTIMATE**
life-sustaining element is
now just as vital to **STYLE**

TEXT: JOANA LOURENCO

I'm standing, stark naked, in a pool on the third floor of New York's New Museum, pressing my face against the opaque plastic walls to make sure that no one outside can catch a glimpse. I'm here because scientist-turned-artist Carsten Höller transformed the museum into an adult playground of "experiences," including this sensory-deprivation pool called the Giant Psycho Tank, an enclosed water chamber that visitors, one by one, float in for 15 minutes of blissful solitude.

I'd been looking forward to this experience for months. Born under Cancer, I'm a true water baby: I feel free when immersed in water, and I have vivid childhood memories of floating in the sun-dappled waters of the Atlantic. So, after waiting in line for an hour, I stripped down in the shower area and scurried into the pool—inadvertently flashing the security guard patrolling the perimeter. I wanted to disconnect from the world, to drown out extraneous sounds and feel reinvigorated—as Höller intended. But as I barely floated in the few inches of slimy, salinated water, I felt just like that security guard: disappointed.

It's impossible to capture the magic of a body of water. And yet artists have long tried to distill its essence, from early depictions of water as a sacred element to the uncontrollable force of nature shown in 17th-century Dutch seascapes to the tranquil landscapes of Monet's water-lily ponds. Our fascination with water seemingly knows no bounds. ▷



Givenchy

Today, more than ever, pop culture is awash in ocean themes. The aquatic underworld surfaced sartorially this season: Models at Chanel's spring/summer show floated down the runway clutching seashell *pochettes*, their wet-looking chignons studded with freshwater pearls. The spectacle, at the Grand Palais in Paris, evoked the ethereal quality of the ocean and even featured Florence Welch, looking like Botticelli's

Venus, singing "What the Water Gave Me" in a gilded seashell—a scene so powerful it made editors weep.

"The shapes of sea life are ultra-modern, beautiful and enduring," Karl Lagerfeld told the press after the show. It seems that the very notion of timelessness is inextricably bound to our ideas of H₂O, or, as James Joyce described it, "fresh cold never-changing everchanging water." However, there's little nostalgia in this season's styles, which tempered iridescent, lightweight fabrics with a darker, urban edge.

Peter Pilotto and Versace collections featured electric wave prints and starfish motifs, while Givenchy's shark-tooth pendants, stingray skins and leather fish scales were decidedly fierce. Likewise, slicked-back hair and moist skin defined Alexander Wang's show; models looked as if they had just emerged from a thalassotherapy pool in Biarritz with their wet, wavy mermaid hair.

And it seems that mermaids are having their moment in the sun. Last year's *Pirates of the Caribbean* was only the tip of the iceberg for mermaids on the silver screen; now there are several films in the works, including a live-action version of *The Little Mermaid* by Joe Wright, who directed *Atonement*.

Author and self-described mermaid expert Carolyn Turgeon isn't surprised



Chanel used pearls on clutches and in models' hair on the runway.



Alexander Wang

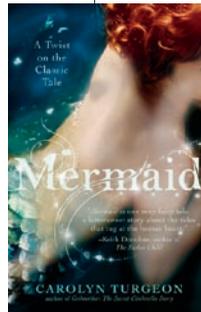
A MERMAID TALE

Daryl Hannah in *Splash*



Historically, these femmes with fins were seen as enchanting sirens, beckoning their prey into the mysterious depths of the sea. (These days, she beckons you to buy a Starbucks *venti* latte.) In the '60s, porthole lounges (bars where patrons could look right into an outdoor mermaid pool through a window) became popular. A fascination with mermaids then resurfaced in the '80s, with movies like *Splash* and *The Little Mermaid*.

"I suspect those '80s-era creators might have had formative experiences with mermaids in their youth, the way those of us had formative experiences with those '80s movies," says author Carolyn Turgeon.



by Ariel's renewed appeal. "The mermaid is a really powerful female image: wild, beautiful and alluring," she explains. "She's incredibly sexy." Turgeon's recent book *Mermaid: A Twist on the Classic Tale* stays truer to the dark undercurrent of the original Hans Christian Andersen version than to the Disney fairy tale. And Turgeon finds similarities between our recent obsession with vampires and the rise of the mermaid. "Both have this potent mix of seductiveness and danger," she says. "They are desirable, but, at the same time, they can kill you. The vampire has a need for blood, and the mermaid can kill by accident—the mermaid must remind herself that the human in her arms cannot breathe under water." Even *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer has been seduced: She has left the world of brooding vampires to focus on a new series about mermaids.

Celebrities are also now embracing the fins-and-clamshells look: Lady Gaga channelled Daryl Hannah in her "You and I" video, and Kristen Bell, Anna Faris and a few Kardashians were made over as mermaids for ▷

**"I KNOW
WHERE
YOU WERE.
AND IT'S
NOT WHERE
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TO BE.
IT'S OVER."**

photographer Mark Anderson's *Mermaids of Hollywood* series. There's less whimsy in these photographs than we normally associate with mermaids, though—the finned celebs lounge lazily on couches and in dirty kiddie pools.

So perhaps the contemporary mermaid is more subdued than romanticized because her habitat is threatened. Experts agree that the earth's waters are in trouble. Maude Barlow, national chairperson of the Council of Canadians and author of *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*, says that the situation is truly dire. "The world is running out of available, clean fresh water at an exponentially dangerous rate just as the population of the earth is set to increase again," she writes. "It is like a comet poised to hit the earth."

I can't help but think of the Mayans, whose civilization was likely wiped out by drought. In 2012, the year the Mayans predicted as our last, we're facing a looming water crisis: The UN estimates that by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in regions with "absolute" water scarcity.

We see water as cheap and abundant, but it's not—less than 1 percent of the earth's water is usable fresh water, and that slim percentage is in trouble. For example, consider that 24 billion gallons of untreated sewage flows into the Great Lakes every day—and they provide 90 percent of North America's fresh water. These are issues that Alexandra Cousteau, senior adviser for the advocacy organization Oceana, founder of the non-profit Blue Legacy and granddaughter of the famous Jacques, takes to heart. The tireless Washington-based advocate believes the time has come for us to redefine what it means to live on "our water planet." "We must start shaping the conversation on how we want to manage our water resources," she

says. "It's not simply a matter of telling people to turn off the tap when they're brushing their teeth; people need to find out where their water comes from and really understand the issues that face their own watersheds."

As global water issues seep into our cultural consciousness and it becomes the issue du jour, we're becoming more mindful of protecting our marine ecosystems. Oceana enlisted January Jones as the spokesperson for its recent campaign to raise awareness about dwindling shark populations and the brutality of shark finning. The message is slowly spreading: Last October, the sale of shark fins was banned in Toronto, adding to the growing number of cities protecting the creatures.

It would be easy to let these issues overwhelm us, but I think there's a desire to move forward—a sense of rebirth in this Age of Aquarius. "We suddenly want to break free from fear and aggression," muses France-based trend guru Lidewij Edelkoort. "We want to open the sluice that has oppressed and contained us for so long to let the waters float freely and wildly, spilling out to discover new terrain and to carve out new matter."

So as I lay in the pool at the New Museum, Florence & the Machine's "What the Water Gave Me" floated through my head. "Lay me down / Let the only sound be the overflow / Pockets full of stones...." The evocative song alludes to the dark lives of Virginia Woolf and Frida Kahlo, but there's also a strong sense of water's ability to bring about renewal.

"It took us to where the water was / That's what the water gave me." As I emerged from Höller's tank, with bits of salt flaking off my skin, the next person in line bounded up the steps, eager for the chance to immerse herself in the experience. Such is the power of water: We are—and have always been—drawn to it. □