

LA JOLLA LIGHT

New Birch Aquarium exhibit focuses on meditative qualities of the sea

'Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base,' focusing on the world's only operating underwater research laboratory, opens Nov. 20, replacing 'Embodied Pacific: Ocean Unseen'



A diver sits on the platform of Aquarius Reef Base in the Florida Keys. (Meditation Ocean Constellation)



Birch Aquarium in La Jolla is inviting guests to slow down and be present with its newest exhibition, set to open next month.

“Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base” is described as “a multi-sensory art and science installation” displaying footage and re-creations of Aquarius Reef Base, a unique undersea research hub in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Aquarius is considered the world’s only underwater research laboratory in operation, more than 60 feet under the surface. Operated by Florida International University, it has six bunks, a cooking and seating area and an array of research tools.

The new exhibition, which opens Thursday, Nov. 20, at Birch Aquarium at UC San Diego’s Scripps Institution of Oceanography, reimagines the research hub as “a meditation space inspired by life beneath the ocean,” according to Birch. It was brought to life by artist Hope Ginsburg and a group of collaborating artists, writers, educators, musicians, curators, divers and scientists called the Meditation Ocean Constellation.



Megan Dickerson, director of exhibits at Birch Aquarium, said she connected with Ginsburg after seeing a climate impact report about her work at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio.

That project, called ["Meditation Ocean: Turtlegrass Meadow,"](#) saw a team of eight divers spend four days in Biscayne National Park, also in the Florida Keys. Capturing footage with three underwater cameras, Ginsburg created the exhibit, curated by Jennifer Lange of the Wexner Center for the Arts.

"We saw her report that she published about the climate impact of this exhibition she'd done ... and I just kind of cold-called her and I said 'I think your work is really interesting and I think you're doing some cool stuff,'" Dickerson recalled.

Footage for "Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base" was shot in August 2024 and interviews were conducted in February this year, Dickerson said.

The exhibit features the footage and audio alongside simulated underwater spaces and an "abstracted re-creation" of aquanauts' living quarters, showing what it's like to be underwater for two weeks.

It also has a three-channel video installation, "Meditation Reels from M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow," incorporating Ginsburg's previous work. Guests are invited to join in meditation with pre-recorded audio.

Ginsburg said "Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base" is inspired by the link between spending time in nature and empathy.

"Our exhibition explores this by focusing on the uniquely awe-inspiring situation of living on the seabed with the animals of the reef," Ginsburg said. "Viewers to the exhibition are invited into this underwater world, which we hope will create a feeling of connectedness to the ocean, its wildlife and each other."

Dickerson said she's particularly interested in how students can engage with the new space.

"We want to provide a place for students to connect with the ocean and each other," Dickerson said. "So we're working with UCSD Recreation to host a series of yoga nights, also with maybe even some sound meditation in the

Before the opening of “Meditation Ocean: Aquarius Reef Base,” its predecessor, “Embodied Pacific: Ocean Unseen,” will close Sunday, Nov. 2. That exhibit [opened in October 2024](#) as a part of the regionwide Getty Foundation initiative “PST Art: Art & Science Collide.”

Admission to “Meditation Ocean” and the final days of “Embodied Pacific” are included with admission to Birch Aquarium. Learn more at aquarium.ucsd.edu/exhibits. ♦

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