

## visual art

# Martina Amati: the Milanese mermaid

The extraordinary underwater world of the Bafta-winning freediver is revealed in a multiscreen show, says **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

**I**t's an entrancing experience. Martina Amati sweeps you away into the mysterious realm of the freediver in her mesmerising multiscreen installation *Under*. Here is a beguiling world: dreamy and dangerous, disconcerting and seductive, alluring and yet frightening all at once.

This is the world that Amati, a Milanese-born mermaid of a woman, herself inhabits for much of her physical and imaginative life. Growing up in Tuscany, the sea never far away, her father a keen sailor who owned his own boat, she took up freediving (which means swimming, often to great depths and often for several minutes, without an oxygen tank) as a way to draw closer to the element with which she felt such affinity.

With her long dark hair streaming behind her, her body undulating, propelled through the water by her mermaid's "mono-fin" she can dive to

depths of 30 metres on a single breath. Her main interest, however, lies not in pushing physical boundaries. She isn't a world champion or a superhero, she tells me. And the skill she has learnt is not simply about lung capacity. (In fact, she admits, she still smokes.) "It's all about the head. During a good dive you kind of forget. You forget everything ... even the fact that you need

**'It's like trying to tell someone who has never tasted it what chocolate is like'**

to breathe. You relax. It feels beautiful."

"But how can I describe it more than that? I can't," she says. "It's like trying to tell someone who has never tasted it what chocolate is like. You have to try it." And this, as nearly as possible, is the opportunity that *Under* offers. Back on

land Amati is also an award-winning film-maker who has won three Baftas for her dramatic shorts, and she uses her talent to create an installation that conjures the freediver's experience. Visitors to the Ambika P3 gallery in central London will find themselves standing beneath a huge suspended screen, gazing up into depths that flip all sense of gravity, as divers descend into what appear to be heavenly heights.

Across the gallery, a floor-to-ceiling screen turns the world upside down. Swimming becomes flight as the ocean's surface becomes the sea floor above which figures float. Shoals of finning fish look like passing birds. On a third screen the divers dissolve and re-materialise into a boundless darkness. The soundtracks are as stark as they are eerily evocative: the harsh pant of breath, the heart-thud pulse of a fin as it beats against water, the counting down of the metre-marks during a descent.

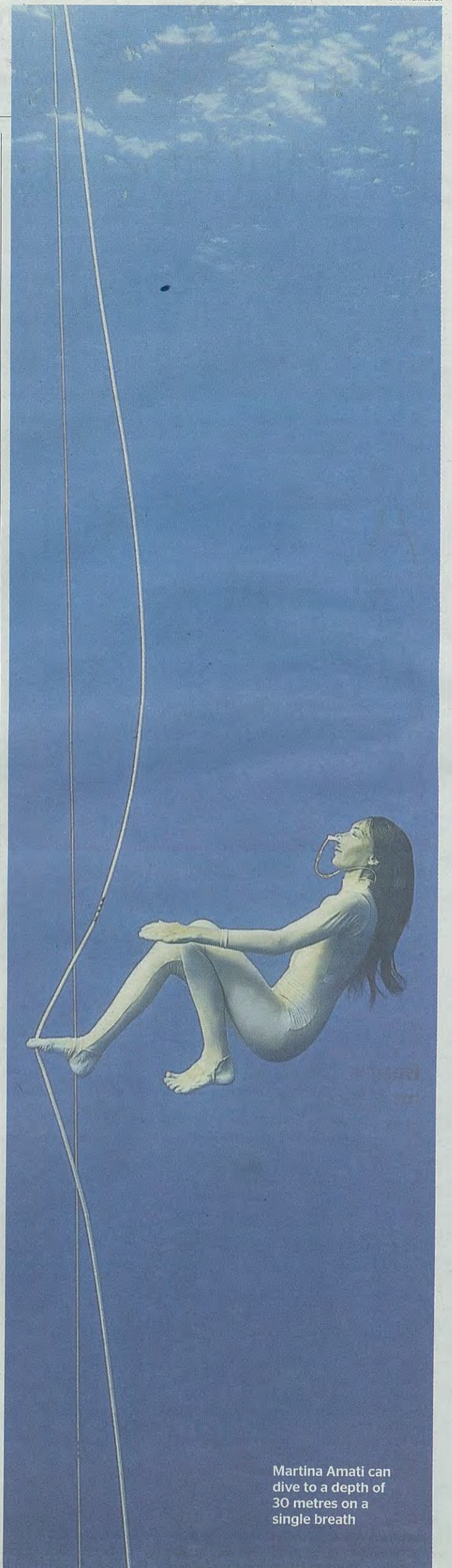
These screens invite us to contemplate, respectively, the ideas of depth, distance and time. The viewer enters a realm in which a human being and a line (the weighted rope down which freedivers descend) are placed in vital relationship. What more evocative metaphor for the artistic act that underpins our entire visual culture? Just as, since the days of the caveman, the artist has followed a line to discover his descriptive way through the world, it is only by means of this rope (this line) that the diver can navigate an underwater domain. At a certain depth, Amati explains, all sense of up and down vanishes. If you lose the cable, you can swim in the wrong direction, get lost forever (as several divers have done, including the protagonist of Luc Besson's

**At a certain depth, all sense of up and down vanishes. You can get lost for ever**

*The Big Blue*) in the boundless abyss.

Further to this, again like both an artist and a diver, Amati follows this line towards more profound depths. She describes an experience, because she wants to capture its feelings: a sense of the lightness and floating, the peace and tranquillity and yet, at the same time, the utter vulnerability of the strange little figures, as fragile as jellyfish, waving and scrambling, limbs weighted by slow underwater motion, amid an endless space. Through these feelings she carries us to contemplative depths. "I dive to find my stillness; my truth," she says. This is the experience that *Under* can offer its viewers.

***Under* by Martina Amati is at Ambika P3, University of Westminster, London, NW1 (020 7911 5864), to October 11. Admission is free**



Martina Amati can dive to a depth of 30 metres on a single breath