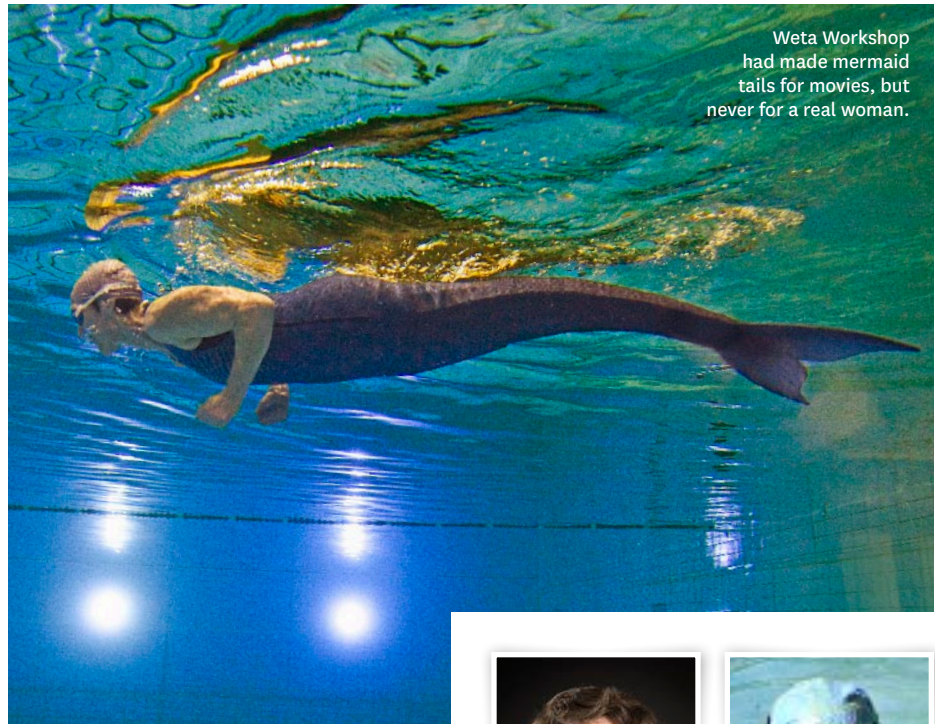
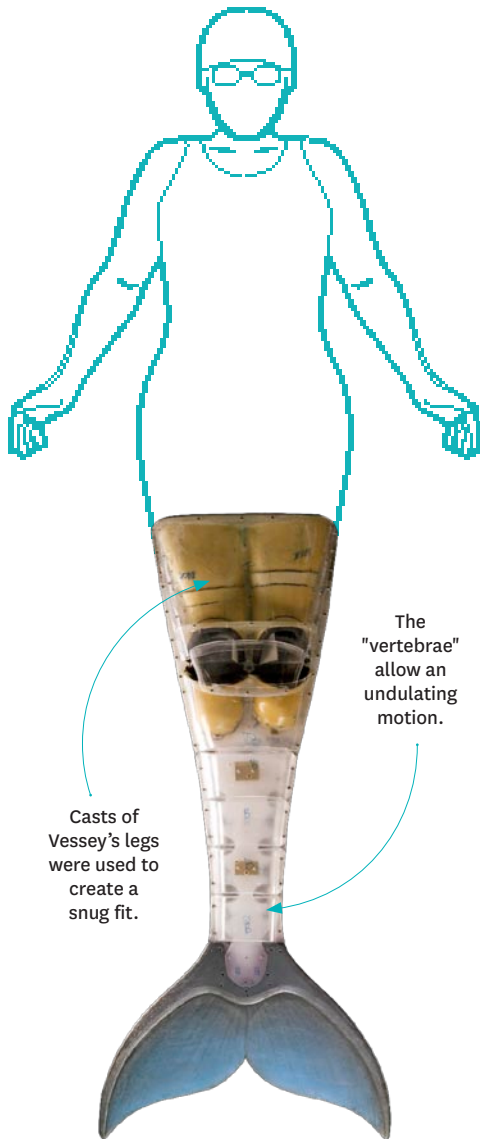


because we can!

# Tall Tail

With help from a team of special-effects artists, a double amputee morphs into a mermaid.



Weta Workshop had made mermaid tails for movies, but never for a real woman.

➔ **NADYA VESSEY** never actually dreamed of being a mermaid. But then one day, as the life-long swimmer was taking off her prosthetic legs before an ocean dip near her home in Auckland, New Zealand, a little boy asked why she had no feet. Vessey didn't explain that she was born with a congenital deformity, or that she lost one leg below the knee when she was 7 and the other at age 16. She told him simply, "I'm a mermaid," and then slipped into the sea.

Inspired by her own little white lie, Vessey decided to write an e-mail to Weta Workshop, the special-effects company that won four Oscars for its work on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. She wanted to know if the artists might consider building her a tail to help her move more gracefully through the water. Cofounder Sir Richard Taylor's resounding reply: "Yes!" Two years and nearly 800 pro bono hours later, Taylor's team unveiled a six-foot-long neoprene-and-plastic appendage covered in a Lycra sock that sparkles with digitally printed "scales." Now, three Kiwi summers later, Vessey says swimming with the tail is finally starting to seem natural—as if it is actually a part of her.

—STEPHANIE PEARSON



**Richard Taylor:**

"The tail looks so simple in photographs, but it was unbelievably complicated and expensive to make. We had to get its buoyancy exactly right for Nadya's proportions. And we also wanted the tail to look beautiful and feel feminine. We're pleased with how it came out. Nadya looks very elegant in it. I imagine that for a double amputee, walking might feel a little awkward. But when she gets in the water, she is free."



**Nadya Vessey:**

"Throughout my life, whenever I needed inspiration, I'd go swimming in the ocean. With my tail, I've learned to swim in a completely new way. I swim faster, and I use my back muscles more. It takes time to adjust to a prosthetic, of course—it has to become part of your body. There's a mental shift that occurs. A limb fitter once made me a pair of legs that fit so right they made me feel like a ballerina. Once I've fully integrated my tail, I expect I'll really feel like a water creature! But the tail isn't just for me; I believe it's meant to bring others joy."