

Holoscenes: Lars Jan's 3,500-gallon warning to humanity

The LA artist is putting performers in a slowly flooding plastic box as part of London's Burning festival - but it's an omen of greater disasters to come

Autumn culture: |||||



Jan's Holocenes, in which performers act out menial tasks while a chamber gradually fills up with water, is a stark warning of the effects of climate change on rising sea levels. Photograph: Lars Jan

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For years the Los Angeles-based artist Lars Jan was haunted by an image he just couldn't shake: "A man is turning the pages of a newspaper and slowly the room fills with water. Rather than reacting like there's anything out of the ordinary, he just keeps on turning the pages until water rises over his head, the paper is submerged and the pages

disintegrate in his hands.”

Jan’s performance installation, *Holoscenes*, is remarkably faithful to this unsettling vision. Performers occupy a plastic chamber that fills with water while they go about everyday tasks, submitted by members of the public from all over the world. As each performer puts on makeup, drinks coffee or pretends to sell fruit, a pump pushes up to 3,500 gallons of water into their tank in less than a minute, creating an effect rather like a flash-flood - if that flood were confined to an elevator.

Ever since Hurricane Katrina, Jan noticed footage of people in moving water started to affect him powerfully. “It really grips me and pulls me into their story,” he says. As a longtime fan of the California light and space movement (and its most famous proponent James Turrell), he wondered whether, instead of using light to manipulate an environment, he could use water to choreograph the human form.

The result is part surrealist performance, part sculpture, part escapology-style spectacle. The figure inside the tank could be cleaning the windows one minute and totally submerged, floating upside down the next. And that title? It refers to the geological period that began at the end of the pleistocene era about 10,000 years ago.



A performer is submerged as they try to sell fruit. Photograph: Lars Jan

Evidence suggests that with global warming the planet is now entering a new era, sometimes referred to as the anthropocene: an epoch whose conditions have been shaped by human activity. If this is so, it will be the first time in the history of the planet that a living species will have impacted the environment in this way. The defining features of the anthropocene era would be an abnormally high level of CO₂ in the atmosphere, and its corollary, rising sea levels. “There’s just so much data,” says Jan. “It occurred to me that one way I could respond to this complex load of information

was to make a moving bar graph.”

During Art Basel, Jan was approached by a young Cuban immigrant who had recently arrived in the US. She was an aspiring actor working three jobs, one of them cleaning windows. “She identified with the performer in the chamber. She wanted to know if she was swimming in her own tears.” He also felt compelled to intervene in a three-way argument between a group of children over whether the piece was about dreams, mermaids or death. “They were all right,” he says.

Jan admits to a phobia of deep water. Perhaps it’s this fear, so common and so ancient, that leaves audience members surprised by the intensity of their own reactions. “People get really worried for us,” says Annie Saunders, one of the performers, “They feel this enormous anxiety about the water: that it keeps coming. Or it never goes away.”

Spectators needn't feel too guilty. The water is kept at skin temperature and Saunders insists she loves the experience. "We do a lot of very long exhalations, so we can sink to the bottom of the tank. And that puts your body in a very zen state. So we're really blissed out in there." Being submerged for an extended period flips a primordial, water-mammalian switch, she says. "For the first 10 minutes, we just look like people in water, and then, around 10 minutes in, something just shifts. As a viewer, you forget that we have to breathe."



Performers dance as their tank fills with water. Photograph: Lars Jan

Having travelled to Toronto, Miami and Sarasota, Holoscenes will be coming to London as part of London's Burning, an arts festival marking the 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of London. Jan suggests there is a rightness to commemorating the fire with a performance that not only explores our fraught relationship with its elemental opposite but embodies our adaptability.

"What's the global Great Fire?" he asks. "What is the coming disaster that we need to organise around and adapt to?" Although the possibility of fire was obvious to some 17th-century observers, it took a catastrophe to change people's behaviour. It makes you wonder if we'll still be cleaning the windows as the waters rise.

Holoscenes is at Exchange Square, London from 1-4 September as part of London's Burning festival.

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