

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Stephanie Gavan, "Mark Leckey and the Shapeshifting, Shadowy Margate," *ArtReview*, January 25, 2024

ArtReview

Mark Leckey and the Shapeshifting, Shadowy Margate

Stephanie Gavan, 25 January 2024



In The Offing, 2023 (installation view). Photo: Reece Straw. Courtesy Turner

Contemporary, Margate

***In The Offing* at Turner Contemporary, Margate sees Leckey as both artist and ‘Guest Editor’ of works responding to the town and its nautical history.**

There’s duality at the core of Mark Leckey’s latest exhibition, which is split across two of Turner Contemporary’s gallery spaces: one an eerie labyrinth of blackened rooms; the other a bright ‘white cube’ setup. In the former an airbrushed mural by Darren Horton, a local artist specialising in paintwork for cars and motorcycles, depicts a puddle lit up by custom UV lights. Much like a screen, it’s all surface. Any depth is negated by its high-gloss sheen. But as the lighting dims, a puddle becomes an ocean. The horizon, after all, is all about perspective.

Inspired by Margate’s seafront, *In The Offing* takes its title from a nautical term referring to the state of incoming ships as they become visible on the horizon. Leckey assumes a double role as artist and ‘Guest Editor’, inviting other artists and musicians – including Iceboy Violet, Theo Ellison, Ashley Holmes + Seekersinternational, nakaya mossi, Lucy Duncombe and Charlie Osborne – to respond to the term within a six-minute limit.

Continuing through the first space, a staggered loop of videos and sound swirls around the gallery's speakers and screens as if they were fairground teacups. Leckey, who has a monthly show on NTS, borrows from the DJ's toolbox, creating something reminiscent of a mixtape. Here, as video and sound lap over each other like tides, so too do feelings of hope and despair.

ANGUSRAZE's video *A Love So Vast It Crushes Like A Mace* (2023) sees a young woman write 'give up' on a pebble and launch it into the ocean like some kind of magic trick, while Tracey Williams's ongoing *Lost at Sea Project* presents a slideshow of found objects, each lit and enlarged as if they were fossils from the present – a merman, a three-legged horse, a Lego dragon – plastic totems with which we choke our oceans.

Hannah Rose Stewart's *MIASMA/Hotel* (2022/23) offers a glimpse into such a future, featuring a CGI version of Blackhaine, the choreographer and rapper, who jolts, squirms and paces around a claustrophobic hotel room while flames ravage the town outside the window. The framed image of an abandoned pier haunts the hotel's wall as a melancholic nod to futures foreclosed. Leckey's video *DAZZLEDDARK* (2023), meanwhile, marks the spot where ecstasy becomes unease. It's a dizzying assault of glitter and high-pitched squeals, as two toy unicorns spin nauseatingly fast under the hypnotic lights of Margate's famous Dreamland amusement park. Come morning they resurface, dirt-strewn, on the shore, the shiny stars of the night before replaced by grey concrete imitations. It's familiar territory for Leckey, who has grappled with similar tensions throughout his career: the push and pull of past and future, transcendence and entrapment.



In The Offing, 2023 (installation view). Photo: Reece Straw. Courtesy Turner Contemporary, Margate

The second room stings with the lucidity of a comedown, silent and clinically white. Here a series of paintings by Alessandro Raho exposes the mechanics of desire with glossy depictions of contemporary signifiers – brand logos, streetwear and superfluous consumer goods (like novelty inflatables) – hung opposite a wall of wistful swimming-pool scenes that signal a longing for escape as they look out towards the sea.

While these pool paintings are subtly textured and soft in their dusky hues, others approach photorealism in their flatness, a technique used here to highlight artifice. In Raho's *Magic Box & Mickey Mouse* (2020), a wizard-robed *Fantasia*-era Mickey points to a magic set marketed as a 'deluxe box of tricks', while another shows a white glove peeling back a red velvet curtain to reveal nothing but blackness. It's an unforgiving assessment of our time, and recalls the hollow disenchantment of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which he wrote in a nearby shelter: 'On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.' With international wars and a potential recession looming, our current moment is not unlike Eliot's. Add to this climate crisis, and it's no wonder younger generations report increasing anxiety about the future.

Where Raho's paintings are given ample space to reverberate, Leckey's dizzying 'mixtape' at times risks losing its parts to the whole, as artists' voices are rolled into one, experienced not as separate works but as fragments of discontent, drifting together through the abyss. But in a sleight-of-hand typical of Leckey, it is also precisely this quality that captures the multiplicitous nature of the British seaside, and particularly Margate; a shapeshifting, shadowy place in which pleasure and dread are reckless lovers and time is stacked like a wedding cake. With trepidation, *In The Offing* gleams it all; beneath the neons, burial mounds.

***In The Offing* at Turner Contemporary, Margate, 7 October – 14 January**

Stephanie Gavan