

GLADSTONE

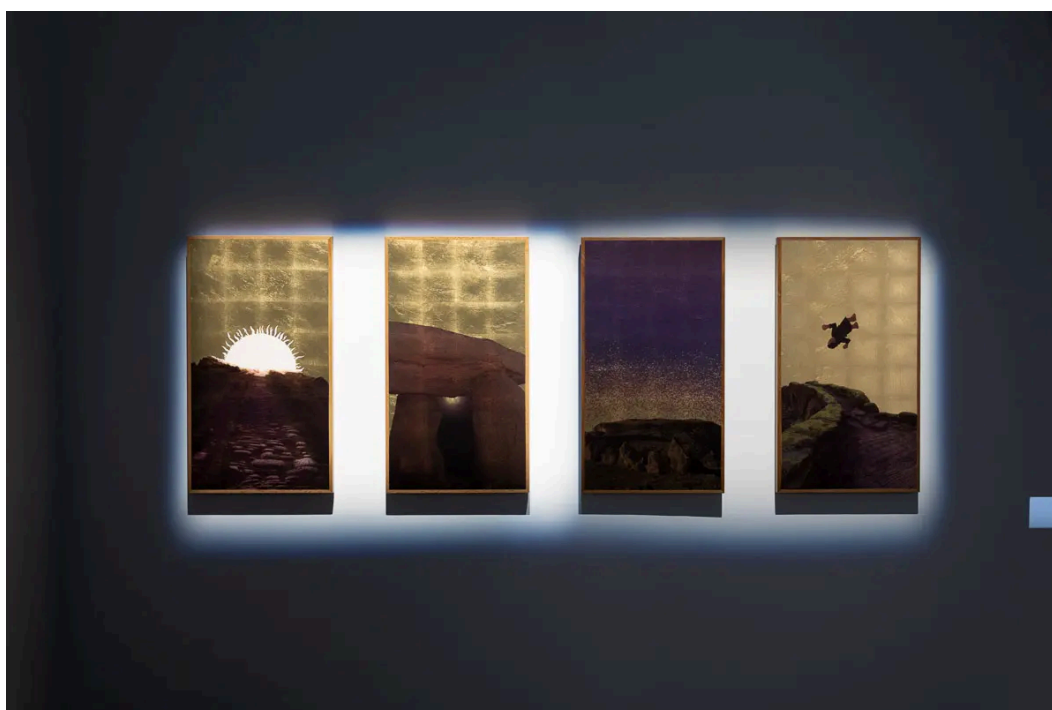
Andrew Paul Woolbright, "Mark Leckey: 3 Songs from the Liver,"
The Brooklyn Rail, January 29, 2025

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ARTSEEN | FEBRUARY 2025

Mark Leckey: *3 Songs from the Liver*

By Andrew Paul Woolbright



Installation view: *Mark Leckey: 3 Songs from the Liver*, Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2024. © Mark Leckey.
Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

For Antonin Artaud, it was the mountain of signs he encountered on a 1936 sojourn in the Sierra Madre mountains that disconnected him from the perceptible world, and from his own mind. For Mark Leckey, the “mountains” are both physical and virtual, spatial and personal, and the signs are the space of history. Leckey’s *3 Songs from the Liver* at Gladstone shows us that we are lost in a Warburgian maze of images and the scopic regimes that they suggest, constructing a palace of mirrors and screens that we are unable to escape. Leckey has turned Gladstone’s 21st Street gallery into a dark zone, a sparse stage occupied by an empty bus stop. It feels like a decommissioned reality, but it is also the site of the artist’s own unraveling, a product of the neurotic pareidolia of images and their history that Leckey has long investigated, here tinged with memories of Y2K, COVID lockdowns, the gold-leafed surfaces of Byzantine icons, and the sudden transcendent crash of a body through a glass window. Somewhere between manic élan and traumatized breakdown, the work entombs a longing for something else, something lost, or something we never had.

3 Songs from the Liver
Gladstone Gallery
November 21,
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Leckey's map of the world is shaped by virtual, iconographic, and psychic paranoias, all condensed into a moment of ecstasy or, as he put it, "muchness," that the artist felt in the park at Alexandra Palace after lockdown restrictions were lifted. We are treated to a map of Alexandra Park on the way into the gallery, but Leckey has replaced its actual geography with fictionalized and virtual terrain. The artist's narration of the incident streams through the gallery. He sounds on the verge of tears or speaking through them. "I just well up. I just fill up. Just everything fills me up and then it's too much and it's too great. I can't bear it. I'm fucking overwhelmed man." The light coming through the park's trees was for Leckey a post-lockdown cascade of undoing that made it impossible to carry onward without some kind of acknowledgement. Leckey chose to record it, and then investigate it. The current exhibition is the phenomenological echo of this moment that, for Leckey, cleared away the snarling thicket of emotional and psychic repression to briefly reveal how miraculous every second of existence really is. But now these experiences of the infinite beneath it all risk feeling like an overshare, albeit one that doesn't rob the experience of its potency, but instead wants to circulate the vulnerable moment, to test its durability and see if it can escape our collective cynicism.



Mark Leckey, *Ally Pally Map*, 2024. Digital print on paper mounted on mat board, artist's stickers, 44 1/2 x 59 inches. © Mark Leckey. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen.

And then there's Leckey's images of the wilderness and the city as it was depicted in the Byzantine era, framed by the artist's ambient breakdown. The city on the hill, surrounded by caves and Canaan, is depicted as a sandcastle on the wall in a white 3D print; but we also glimpse it through the far wall of the gallery, visible in small windows, upwardly slanted and cut to be in reverse perspective, wider at the front edge and narrowing as they climb away from you. The panes are coated in gold leaf—thin as paradise. As the gallery lights all go out at once, a video plays of a walled capital, partially visible through the apertures, denying full visual access. The sun rises and sets in fast cycles, and its gold illumination tinges it with longing, not fear or paranoia. Leckey makes of this city an idealized society of sunrises and sunsets. This time outside of time and space outside of space is permanent, he seems to suggest, and only perceptible in rare moments, something glimpsed, in Leckey's case, through the trees of Alexandra Park.

Then we encounter a video sequence sourced from UK social media that shows a figure jumping through the glass of a bus stop window. The event is played on monitors that have replaced the glass of the recreated bus stop, complete with bird spikes. The video of the person running and diving through the glass for their friends to watch is broken down and played from every angle, demonstrated and re-demonstrated. Someone, somewhere, did it. They broke through the screen. They put their body at risk for the clout. It looks painful the way he lands, but the rupture of laughter you can hear over the sound of the broken glass explains the *why* of it. There's a kind of purity to it, the exhalation and reverie of a dare or a drunken stunt. Leckey turns the ecstatic response into a beautiful, polyphonic, autotuned choir of angels, or the ethereal passage of an Aeolian harp. Knowing Leckey's interests, this literal shattering of the screen is likely analogous to the spatial composition of one-point perspective, the uniformity of the picture plane that dictates the way we visualize the world around us. Leckey elevates the stunt to a romantic praxis. Maybe it is the stuff we do for no sensible reason that provides the only credibility remaining to us, that there is something unclaimed by capital in a clumsy body used like a wrecking ball, disconnected from mind, expressed in ragdoll physics IRL.



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All of it together—the breakdown, the muchness, the Byzantine icons, the bus stop—seems to be more largely about a kind of containment. The drunken breakthrough seems to be Leckey’s way of articulating pathos, allowing it to go viral, captured on a phone and uploaded, in a way that keeps the sensation replicating without loss. Within the pile up of all of the future we are killing for the immediate present, Y2K is a switch on the tracks in time, before everything was recorded on our phones. It built up a boom that never came. Or maybe it did, but delayed, like Wile E. Coyote pushing down on the detonator switch only for it to go off later, when he’s standing over the payload. Society didn’t collapse at 12 a.m. on January 1, 2000—it’s happening now and has been all along. The manic, the clumsy, the unexpected tears, everything that breaks through is an attempt to understand this ungraspable slow-motion collapse.

Leckey’s own response is unflinchingly Romantic, in the sense that he evokes images of the wilderness, the grotto, and the cave, but his wilderness of 1300 CE is already misconstrued. It is less the reality of Alexandra Park (which we never actually get to see) and is instead the

model of it, the map, the virtual and temporally fluxed mesh of it. I can’t tell if this exhibition is a love letter to the world before the Renaissance or a breakdown, and that’s what makes it so good. It’s as if Leckey wants to know what would have happened if Nietzsche livestreamed his moment with the Turin horse. Would it have staved off the mental breakdown that followed or would it have broken everyone else along with him? This is the search for some inviolable thing. Our contemporary scopic regime is a prison, but also we’re all stuck in it together, and do strange things for each other when we are out of control.