

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Miranda Collinge, "Mark Leckey: The Changeling," *Esquire*, September 20, 2019

Esquire



Mark Leckey: The Changeling

The Turner Prize-winning British artist has made art about acid house, smart-fridges and Felix the Cat. Now, he's building a motorway bridge inside Tate Britain. Then again, he always was away with the fairies

 BY MIRANDA COLLINGE 20/09/2019

In July of this year, I stood under a concrete bridge, somewhere near the town of Eastham on the Wirral. A small road ran underneath it next to a huge concrete ramp. Overhead, the M53 thundered towards Wallasey in one direction and Chester in the other, the high pillars on which it rested giving the space beneath the loftiness of a cathedral. I trudged over flattened bottles and cans, between mounds of wet mud. There was a scuffle to my left: a cat, frozen for a few seconds with its claws embedded in the trunk of a tree. A little further on, the rustle of a dry-cleaning bag draped over branches. I took pictures on my phone of the graffiti scrawled on the concrete columns: a face with two sets of eyes stacked one above the other; the words "Eastham Über Ales" [sic]. I was looking for I didn't know what. A sign perhaps. A feeling. Maybe, if I got really lucky — and no, not in that way — a someone.

If I'd just kept my powder, and more to the point, my feet, dry for another couple of months, I could have found an almost full-sized replica of a section of this very bridge in Tate Britain in London, where it is being recreated by the British artist Mark Leckey, who spent some of the early years of his life in Eastham, for his solo show that opens there in September. The bridge segment — which will consist of a metal skeleton covered in plywood sheets painted to resemble concrete — will run diagonally across the gallery space, a floor above the one in which the 2008 Turner Prize exhibition was displayed, which Leckey would go on to win.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Incorporated into the walls of the bridge will be a 16-channel surround-sound system that will play a recording of a new audio play Leckey has made with teenage actors from Manchester and Liverpool. The bridge will have screens built into it too, onto which he'll project an accompanying film which will look like CCTV and camera-phone footage and include snippets of young adult gymnasts scuttling around in poses that make them resemble bridges. At some point a Pepper's ghost will appear — an illusionist's trick made famous by the English scientist John Henry Pepper in the late 19th century.

Leckey describes the play, which runs to around 18 minutes, as “an urban drama meets folklore”. In the narrative, one of the teenagers is taken away and replaced with a changeling — a recurring idea in European folk stories in which a human child is stolen away by elves or fairies and substituted by one of their own.

“I don't want it to be menacing,” says Leckey, who is now 55 and hasn't lived in the north-west of England for many years, though he still speaks with the warm, regional uptalk that makes it seem as though he's not telling you his thoughts so much as inviting you to participate in them. “I want it to be sort of magical. But it is going to be a bit scary. The bit where he gets taken by the fairies is a bit scary.” He pauses to consider. “And at the end it gets a little bit scary as well.”

'Winning the Turner Prize was really joyous. I went on a two-day bender. I lived in Fitzrovia and I knew everyone, so in the newsagents, people would be like, "Hey! You're in the papers!" It was lovely'

Leckey outlines his vision for the Tate show — fast approaching when we meet — in a chain coffee shop on the Caledonian Road in North London, between the red brick housing estate in which he lives with his wife, Lizzie Carey-Thomas, head of programmes at London's Serpentine Gallery, and their two young children, and the small studio in a big office complex he has hired in the run-up to the show, which is crammed with tape decks and a sodium street light and a scaled-down model of the room in the Tate that will have the bridge in it. The exhibition will be called *O' Magic Power of Bleakness*, a title borrowed from a lyric in an early version of the proto-punk song “Roadrunner” by The Modern Lovers, though Leckey added the “O” (“I like slightly archaic titles”). There is still the odd hiccup to iron out. “There always is,” he says, “because basically it's theatre I'm doing, so that means a lot of electronics, a lot of devices that can go wrong.”

Before I met Leckey, a friend who'd worked with him told me he was “very nice”, and “dresses like a street pirate”. She was about right. He is not terribly tall and has a kind face and longish blond-brown hair that he scrapes back from his face with his fingers when he's lost in thought. When I met him he had on a pale T-shirt and trousers, a couple of thin gold chains around his neck, and the dangling pearl earring that he has worn in recent years since deciding, accurately, that his beard and moustache give him the look of an Elizabethan miniature, albeit one who wears Reeboks.

The piece at Tate Britain, he explains, which is called “Under Under *In*” is based on something that happened to him when young, which was in turn based on something that happened to him when he was even younger. One day, when he was eight or so, he was hanging around with friends on the concrete slope under that motorway bridge near Eastham, the village in which he lived with his younger sister and their parents, who both worked for Littlewood's department store. Suddenly a feeling came over him. He sensed someone else.

“I remember this presence,” he says. “It had a ridiculous costume, a pixie costume, with bells on its shoes and all the rest of it. It was small, but it was aware of its own ludicrousness. There was a sort of mocking. It was like, ‘I'm a pixie. In this ridiculous pixie costume’. And that's what was disturbing about it.”

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Leckey didn't give the pixie incident much thought for the next decade; as a kid he was always away with the fairies anyway, he says. "It wasn't like I was super-bright. I wasn't having Blakean moments under trees. It was more I just couldn't engage with the world as it was."

He left school at 15 with only one O-level — though it was, presciently, in art — and spent the next four years "getting into trouble and on the dole". He'd go to the football with his mates; he discovered dance music and, later, raves. At 19, by which time his family had moved a few miles south and east of Eastham to Ellesmere Port, he began to wonder what else he might do, so he enrolled at a technical college. For one of his assignments he was asked to write an essay about a childhood memory.

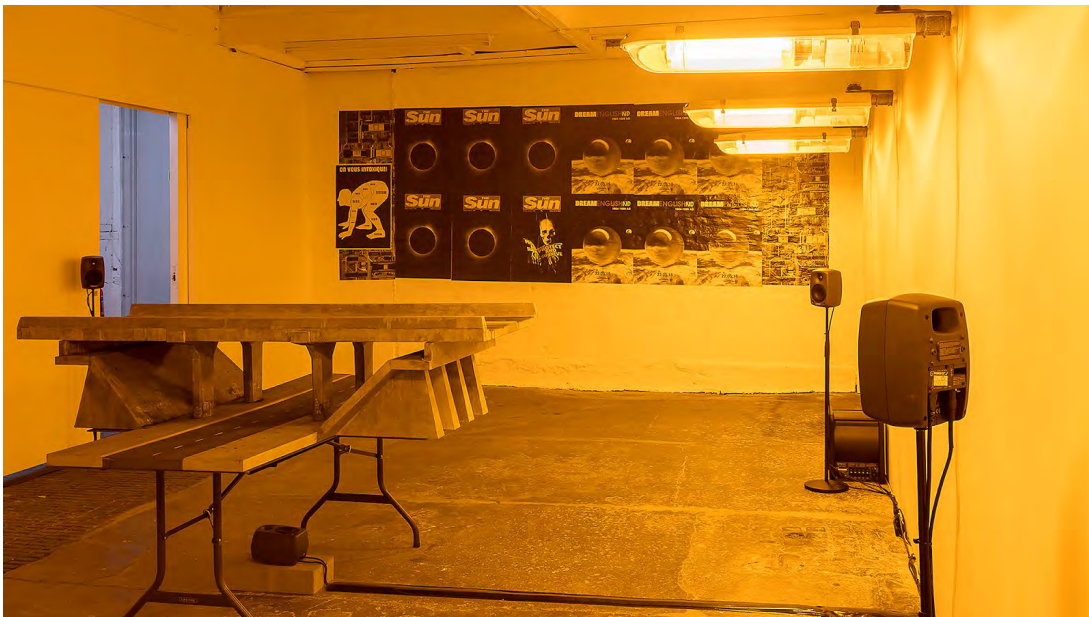
"I thought, 'I will write about the time when I saw a pixie under this motorway bridge'. Because up till that point these were the events in my life. I went to school. I had a sister. I saw a pixie. These are the things I carried around with me as experiences. So I started to write this story. I realised its... I don't know, implausibility. The spell was broken. I remember being very affected by it. It was like when the veil falls from your eyes: 'I've lived my life in a delusion'."

Why, I ask, did that upset him? He might have found it funny.

"I think because I was invested in it," he says. "And see now I'm finding a parallel in that I feel like I've been invested in something that maybe has turned out to be an illusion."

I wonder how big he's going with that statement. He laughs. "Let's start at art, maybe? And then expand outwards. It's questioning your own experience. That it's not as concrete as you thought it was."

The new play, then, is something of an allegory. It is also, like much of Leckey's most celebrated work, semi-autobiographical, or perhaps quasi-autobiographical would be more accurate. "In my head, the idea is that the changeling in the play is, like, me getting taken to fairyland — ie London — and, you know, a career in the art world and all the benefits," he says. "And then there's this crude version of me that stays behind. Under the bridge. Kind of stuck."



Leckey makes art that is about time, and memory, and experience, and also the intangibility — and, increasingly, the untrustworthiness — of all three. His practice is so wide-ranging that it's hard to make any grand generalisations, but here are a few.

His work often borrows from popular culture: his recurring "Felix the Cat" sculpture has seen a 33ft inflatable cartoon Felix wedged into galleries from Nottingham to New York. Sometimes he co-opts other people's artworks: his 2004 video "Made in 'Eaven" featured

GLADSTONE GALLERY

a computer-generated image of Jeff Koons' metallic bunny inside a computer-generated rendering of the flat in Windmill Street, central London, that he lived in at the time.

It is often loud: for his *BigBoxStatueAction* series (2003-'11), he placed sound systems of equivalent physical volume next to British modernist sculptures through which he serenaded them in the hope, he has said, of eliciting a response. He is interested in technology: for *GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction*(2010-'16) he imagined the inner existential turmoil of a Samsung smart-fridge which, for certain live performances, he voiced himself after first inhaling coolant gases. Sometimes it is gently absurd: see all of the above.

When he won the 2008 Turner Prize, a somewhat controversial decision at the time given that on the shortlist of four artists he was the only man, the jury praised "the intelligent, energetic and seductive nature" of his work. Stephen Deuchar, former director of Tate Britain who chaired the jury that year and is now director of Art Fund, says today of the decision: "We saw him as a kind of alchemist, but focussed and sincere — convinced by the centrality of certain bits of popular culture you might easily dismiss as superficial. We liked the breeziness and audacity and lack of pretension."

Leckey, who was 44 and signing on when he won, says the £25,000 prize money made "a massive difference" to the trajectory of his career. "It was really joyous. I went on a two-day bender. I lived in Fitzrovia and I knew everyone, so in the newsagents, people would be like, 'Hey! You're in the papers!' It was lovely."

He has also had his detractors: reviewing Leckey's 2011 show at the Serpentine Gallery in London, *The Guardian's* Jonathan Jones called it "terrible"; Jones pinpointed *GreenScreen*

RefrigeratorAction for specific condemnation, describing it as "one of the worst works of art I have ever seen in a serious gallery. It means nothing; it just makes noise to create the fiction of meaning. It is pompous and clumsy and utterly miserable for no good reason."

But there is one work that almost everybody agrees is a work of genius: Leckey's 1999 film, "Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore". The 15-minute video was also the first proper work Leckey ever made. "It kind of ruined it for me, 'Fiorucci', 'cos it had such an amazing response," he says.



Ruined what? I ask. "Just... life!" He laughs. "Everyone was blown away, and then I put the next one out and everyone went, 'Eh'. And it's been like that ever since."

"Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore" came about more or less by accident. After studying art at Newcastle Polytechnic, Leckey upped sticks for America, eventually winding up in New York, where he crashed on and off for a couple of years with a friend from Newcastle and her then-husband, the gallerist Gavin Brown. It was the mid-Nineties, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's crackdown was starting to kick in but New York was "still kind of a messed-up place, still fun", when Blur and Oasis were huge and Leckey's own Britishness was still a novelty. "It was like being a prince," he says.

Though he was moving with an artsy crowd, hanging out with the drag queens at Florent in the Meatpacking District in the early hours of the morning, he hadn't made any art of note. Or any art at all, to be precise. Meanwhile, the so-called Young British Artists who were the same age as him — Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman et al — were causing a riot in the contemporary art world. Leckey, in New York, was well out of it. "I once saw a lot of them when I was in New York at a party, and I've never seen people having so much fun as that lot. They were quite debauched," he says.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Though he was moving with an artsy crowd, hanging out with the drag queens at Florent in the Meatpacking District in the early hours of the morning, he hadn't made any art of note. Or any art at all, to be precise. Meanwhile, the so-called Young British Artists who were the same age as him — Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman et al — were causing a riot in the contemporary art world. Leckey, in New York, was well out of it. "I once saw a lot of them when I was in New York at a party, and I've never seen people having so much fun as that lot. They were quite debauched," he says.

What he lacked in artistic output, however, he made up for with sartorial verve. "I had a lot of 'looks'. That was my thing," he says. "My favourite look at that time was head-to-toe red. I used to wear a red cape. I was drinking a lot and I had this kind of fantasy about being a kind of crap superhero." (In 2015, Gavin Brown, describing his first impressions of Leckey, told *TheGuardian*: "I'll never forget the way he dressed, the way he walked... It was clear to me that he was an artist.")

In 1996, he moved back to the UK where Brown introduced him to a curator at the ICA in London who was putting together a show about music videos. "We met and she said she liked the cut of my jib or whatever, and she said, 'Right, come up with a proposal for something.'" His first idea was for a film piece called "Moments in Love", made of fragments of clips of musicians in moments of ecstasy on stage.

"And then I started making it, and I thought, 'This has got nothing to do with me,'" he says. "I had come back [from the States] and the Britpop thing was around, and it just seemed to be ignoring dance culture. Everything was about rock and how great rock was; people at that time thought rave was just silly and I thought it was great. I wanted to make this thing that celebrated those things."

He decided to make a new film that spliced together footage that captured the youth cultures that he'd been a part of or had only narrowly missed in the Seventies, Eighties and early Nineties: Northern soul dancers bobbing like marionettes; casuals skulking around city centres with perms and paisley shirts; ravers in baggy T-shirts and Kangol hats, all arms, arms, arms. The soundtrack he devised was spare but evocative: a whistle here, a cowbell there; a snatch of speech, vocals dubbed at frenetic speed, Leckey's own voice slowed to a monastic chant as he recites the pertinent brand names of his youth: "Pringle, Fila, Kappa, Sergio Tacchini, Cerutti, Aquascutum..."

In the days before YouTube, sourcing the footage was an achievement in itself. "I'd write a letter to someone saying, 'I've heard that you've got a tape of Wigan Casino; if so, could I get a copy?'" says Leckey. "I'd have to send them a postal order and they'd send me back a VHS tape. I'd take it down to Stanley's, do you remember Stanley's [a tape and disc sales and duplication service then on Wardour Street in London's Soho]? They'd digitise it for me. So yeah, it was like this long process."

It's hard to explain the effect of "Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore". Really, you should just watch it, and you can, easily enough: Leckey has uploaded it on YouTube. Certainly it has an uncanny ability to illicit strong feelings among those who remember those sub-cultures, and also those who don't; Jamie xx sampled various sound clips from "Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore" for his 2014 track "All Under One Roof Raving". (He was born in 1988.)

"Nostalgia" is a word that crops up again and again when people describe Leckey's autobiographical video work. It is a difficult word to pin down, though Milan Kundera's version, in *Ignorance*, is this: "The Greek word for 'return' is *nostos*. *Algos* means 'suffering'. So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return." Leckey's other major video piece, "Dream English Kid 1964–1999 AD" (2015), a 23-minute film in which he tried to piece together key cultural events from his life through found footage (it also uses the Eastham motorway bridge as a visual motif) has a similar effect. Pain, but also pleasure.

'I get entranced by things. Fixated or whatever. These things call to me and then I invest in them wholly'

It's an emotion Leckey has been happy to connect with his work in the past, though today he uses it with caution. "I think that nostalgia now is politically framed. Brexit is nostalgic, and I think now it's a question of whose nostalgia, and what you are nostalgic for. It becomes very loaded," he says. "There's a childish element to it, isn't there. That you want to reclaim that uncomplicated part of your life experience because you can't

GLADSTONE GALLERY

bear the complexity of being alive, right? So it's a kind of retreat and it's irresponsible." He laughs. "You can be quite harsh on nostalgia. You can really beat it up if you want to."

"Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore" and "Dream English Kid" will be shown in succession at Tate Britain on the screens under the bridge, after the changeling play. They will form a triptych of sorts, or a trilogy (though Leckey says he's showing the two older works "in case this new one is shit!"). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that there is a connection between them: a sense of trying to pin down an experience, only for it to dissolve in the act of capturing.

"I get entranced by things. Fixated or whatever. These things call to me, and then I invest in them wholly. Even just to go back to "Fiorucci" and that whole idea of being lost in dance, part of "Fiorucci", for me, is you look back and they're just spectres. There's no substance there. And was there ever? 'Cos I want it to be this magical thing, the same way with the pixies, I want that to have happened. It's when something that you held dear... is just smoke. It's that feeling. I think all three are to do with memories, ghosts, I guess. They're all to do with being slightly haunted. And that's what the bridge is. It's a haunted space."

And who is the ghost?

He laughs. "I'm always the ghost."



A couple of weeks after we met, I emailed Leckey to tell him I was thinking of going to the Wirral to visit his bridge. Did he think that was a good idea?

"The bridge — or 'The Bridge' — is just a device," he replied. "It's fantastical and supernatural but also grounded in (some kind of) reality."

Yes, yes, I thought. But I wanted to go there anyway, the next day in fact. Just to see if I felt anything. And I might get a paragraph out of it. Could he tell me where exactly it is? By the next morning he hadn't written back.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

So I went to Eastham, and while I was poking around under that bridge, which looked a bit like the model I'd seen in Leckey's studio, I noticed another concrete ramp, although this one was on the far side of a railway track which Leckey hadn't mentioned, along which local trains hurtled at regular intervals. Was this even the right bridge?

I followed the small road back out and round to what looked, on my phone, to be the other side of the tracks, taking a long, tunnelled footpath from a quiet residential cul-de-sac, and following the noise of the M53 somewhere overhead into a meadow of chest-high grasses and bullrushes and ox-eye daisies. There was no proper track, only an almost imperceptible line of crushed grass indicating that someone had walked that way before. I followed it as far as I could. I could hear the trains close by, but the brambles got too thick and a metal fence blocked my way. I turned back.

Later, on the train back to London, inspecting the scratches on my ankles, I sat down to write my paragraph, which turned into a few. I hadn't seen any pixies, though I had felt I was intruding on something, that I'd made a mis-step: trying to turn something chimerical into something literal, invading some kind of psychogeographical field that I had been politely requested not to enter. Or it may just have been the signs on the side of the road announcing the presence of CCTV. And I didn't see any pixies at the time, but as I started typing on the train there he was, under the bridge and, would you believe it, he was laughing.