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Adrian Searle, "The road to everywhere- Mark Leckey: O' Magic Power of Bleakness review," *The Guardian*, September 24, 2019

The Guardian

The road to everywhere - Mark Leckey: O' Magic Power of Bleakness review

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★★★★☆



▲ 'Leckey experienced something here and it hasn't gone away' ... Mark Leckey: O' Magic Power of Bleakness. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Tate Britain, London

In this astonishing show, the artist has built a life-sized mock-up of a motorway underpass. The result is a supernatural riot that whisks you back to his Wirral youth, with help from music, adverts and old film footage

It's dark in here and distant traffic can be heard thundering overhead. Mark Leckey has turned some of the ground floor galleries at Tate Britain into a single open space, transforming it into a life-sized mock-up of a motorway underpass in the Wirral, over which thrams the M53 traffic. There's a concrete ramp and pillars – and the skylights have partially obscured by the supposed underside of the motorway bridge. This is Leckey's O' Magic Power of Bleakness, which presents this new work, called *Under Under In*, alongside two earlier videos: 1999's *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*, and *Dream English Kid 1964-1999 AD*, from 2015.

The motorway bridge, which appeared in *Dream English Kid*, is more than just a stage setting. Growing up close by, Leckey remembers it as a place of mystery as well as escape for neighbourhood kids, a feral no man's land – and a portal to another world. A familiar trope in children's literature – from CS Lewis to Alan Garner, JK Rowling and Philip Pullman – the prosaic entrance to an unseen world, a flaw in the fabric of reality, is an enduring fantasy. Leckey experienced something here, and it hasn't gone away.

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▲ Far away in space and time ... O' Magic Power of Bleakness.
Photograph: Nils Jorgensen/Rex/Shutterstock



The kids in Leckey's M53 Plato's Cave are first spotted high on the ramp, far above us and just beneath the road above. Distant, and shot in black and white, they are far away both in space and time. On a number of smaller screens, at ground level, we see them in their hoodies and balaclavas, their spookiness undercut by Adidas logos. The kids are all right, scaring each other as kids always do. "You're away with the fairies, Mark!" someone shouts, in this 50-minute melange of new work and old, all folded together into something that is both haunted house and house music rave, journey into the past and premonition of the future. Leckey is having fun in this captivating and strange world.

The motorway bridge, another kid tells us, was built on an old straight track, and we are plunged, onscreen, into successive undercrofts, filled with monoliths and neolithic chambers. It is a supernatural riot down here. The lights go on and off, spotlights sheer the gloom, and a dull sodium pallor casts the concrete, and us, a sickly yellow.

Leckey's work is like a time machine. I hear the grinding of the Tardis's gears, and see shadows on the wall, and a little boy playing alone in a winter garden. Maybe it is Leckey himself. Maybe we are meant to think so. I hear, too, the echo of old advertising jingles. The smiling face of Tony the Tiger from the Kellogg's Frosties ad ("They're grrreat!!!") floats by. Carry On star Liz Fraser is doing her makeup and the carpet's all swirly. These and other product placements pitch us back to the 1960s in Leckey's mix of old TV and movie footage, amateur film shot at dancehalls, raves and northern soul gigs. Flares are flapping, fags are lit, the dancefloor's heaving.

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▲ Weird lighting ... O' Magic Power of Bleakness. Photograph: Nils Jorgensen/Rex/Shutterstock



O' Magic Power of Bleakness is an invocation of childhood and youth, but also a picture of a period, of the modernity of motorways and 60s shopping precincts, of three-day weeks and Liverpool under Thatcherism, of the Mersey beat and Madchester, Joy Division gigs and leaden pianos accompanying muffled Sunday choirs. The four-to-the-floor beats, Ian Curtis's on-stage manic gyrations and ravers dancing on E carry us along down our own rivers of memory.

Leckey is in there somewhere, reliving his past. Although he never planned it this way, the two earlier works projected large on a plain wall fit seamlessly. Childhood wonders and terrors (what lurks beneath the underpass? Did something die here?) and the possibility of escape through a youth culture that hadn't entirely been monetised even in the 1980s, make a potent mix.

O' Magic Power of Bleakness is all about escape routes, real and imaginary, and their impossibility. If the show is a kind of Bildungsroman, and a homage to the music he loves, it is also a sideways nod to the fact that Leckey made his own escape, in the days before student loans and the capitalisation of higher education, into art. Romanticism runs through Leckey's work, but it is leavened by a strong, prickly, necessary streak of realism.