

Art in America

PANDEMIC TIME

By Travis Diehl - December 15, 2020

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David Horvitz, *A clock that falls asleep*, 2020, aluminum frame, two way mirror, custom programmed clock, 5 1/2 by 16 1/2 by 2 1/2 inches; at Praz-Delavallade. *Courtesy the artist and Praz-Delavallade*

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A glass ampoule of ash-tinged air hung by a thread in the far corner of “oceanic,” David Horvitz’s second solo show at Praz-Delavallade in Los Angeles. Titled *Air de LA* (all works 2020), the piece is a redux of Marcel Duchamp’s 1919 *Air de Paris*, a sample of Parisian atmosphere; this time, the air inside comes from LA during the 2019 fire season. While the original vessel was a common druggists’ piece of the day, Horvitz’s hand-blown approximation is an arcane copy of an antique. With readymades like *Air de Paris*, Duchamp formalized a particular interwar nihilism; a century later, Horvitz’s twee transposition lands in a time and place in which just driving to a Mid-City art gallery—the smoke from a new round of fires, the virus, the storefronts boarded up—feels like doomscrolling.



David Horvitz, *Air de LA*, 2020, engraved glass ampoule, wildfire ash from 2019 Los Angeles fires, 2 3/8 by 4 3/8 inches; at [Praz-Delavallade](#).
Courtesy Ruinart and Frieze

Horvitz’s exhibition was well-timed in a trough between the second and third waves of the Covid-19 pandemic in Los Angeles. With anxiety ebbing and galleries creaking open, it felt reasonably safe, or at least possible, to indulge in poetic philosophizing about our “condition,” namely the strangeness of lockdown time: circling from day to day, repeating the mistakes of earlier months, refreshing the feed. Accordingly, half of the dozen works on view were clocks: wall-mounted mirrored bars with ice blue digits, placed at different heights. Each clock has been reprogrammed so that time appears to pass differently. On one, the numbers spasm forward; on another, they stop and start. Other clocks go blank or move in two-second bursts. Their titles match their tricks: *A clock that falls asleep*; *A clock whose minutes are synchronized to your heartbeat*; *A clock whose hands are the shape of rivers*. Time is neither meaningless nor plastic, but it is relative, as Horvitz’s timepieces makes plain.

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When I first saw this show, I felt sentimental. I was prepared to embrace its reassuring quirks (such as the drive-in opening “dinner,” a cocktail in a real glass and a piece of salmon sushi served through the open window of guests’ cars). Rather than reinforce the tyranny of this estranged, estranging time, “oceaeon” recited poems about the ways we’re tossed together on its foaming surface. In a 2011–14 series of self-portraits, “Public Access,” Horvitz reprised Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), an iconic image of man facing the Romantic sublime, on various public

beaches in California. In these new works, Horvitz attempts to relocate the sublime for an age of rising shorelines and acidifying seas—placing, as it were, the viewer in the violent spray of pandemic time, the strange and terrifying entity most available to us today. Horvitz states in the epistolary press release that the show’s title, rendered in the innermost gallery as a neon loop of cursive handwriting, nods to Aram Saroyan’s one-word poem “light” (1965). Indeed, the word oceaeon lingers, overwhelms just a touch, urges language onto the tide. Now, a couple weeks of reality later, the deep whimsy of an “oceaeon” mostly recalls what ecologist Bill McKibben called “Eaarth” in his 2010 book of the same title: the planet made so strange beneath our feet, pushed so far beyond repair, that it can no longer bear the old name. On this alien world, marked by oceaeon and light, the familiar tropes of both Romanticism and Dadaism feel overburdened.



David Horvitz, *oceaeon* (after Aram Saroyan), 2020, neon, 5 by 82 inches; at Praz-Delavallade.