

# VARIABLE WEST

## Artists Fill San Francisco's Cliff House with Warnings of Environmental Disaster: "Lands End" Reviewed

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Ana Teresa Fernández, *On the Horizon*, 2021. Acrylic resin cylinders filled with seawater. 72 inches. high each. Part of the exhibition *Lands End*, organized by FOR-SITE. Image courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

Jutting out from the rugged coastline at Lands End, near barbed Seal Rock and the remains of the Sutro Baths, sits the Cliff House, a building that has perched here (in various forms) overlooking the Pacific for nearly 160 years. In that time, our climate has warmed by a little more than one degree Celsius, and we are well on our way to another one to two degrees of warming by 2100. This stalwart San Francisco landmark has essentially witnessed humankind's impact on the planet from the Industrial Revolution onward.

The restaurant that occupied the historic building flailed through the pandemic before closing at the end of 2020 after a long-term lease renewal with the National Park Service couldn't be agreed upon. Open during this liminal period of the building's existence, *Lands End*, is an immersive, site-responsive installation curated by Cheryl Haines for the For-Site Foundation. Here, this mostly California-based group of artists invite us to meditate on humanity's impact on our planet. The exhibition's position at the Cliff House, a now hollow relic of an age of progress defined by development, amplifies an underlying theme coursing throughout the exhibition: what's left after humanity's self-inflicted demise due to climate change? And how will nature reclaim it?



Andy Goldsworthy, *Geophagia*, 2021. Lone kaolin clay and wooden tables. Dimensions variable. Part of the exhibition *Lands End*, organized by FOR-SITE. Image courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

Haines's installation spans the entire 75,000 square foot building, occupying the public dining areas, and the lesser-trafficked back hallways and staircases, private dining rooms, and prep kitchens where the air is still tinged with smoke and spent grease. Moving through the labyrinthine space to each artwork is disorienting, but this underscores the exhibition's immersive aim: the building stops existing solely as the Cliff House, and becomes a metaphor for humanity's excess, and our impact on the landscape.

Placed prominently in the main public dining room, with waves crashing against Seal Rock as its dramatic background, Ana Teresa Fernández's, *On the Horizon* (2021), is a group of clear pillars measuring six feet high and filled with seawater collected from Ocean Beach. *On the Horizon* is a tangible, visual representation of the amount that sea levels are expected to rise over the next century if climate change continues unabated. The added detail that the water was carried by a makeshift bucket brigade of volunteers from the ocean into the Cliff House, underscores Fernández's message: our actions on this planet literally move water.



Mark Dion and Dana Sherwood, *Confectionery*

*Marvels and Curious Collections*, 2021. Resin, insects, porcelain, plaster, glass, and various dry and wet specimens. Dimensions variable. Part of the exhibition *Lands End*, organized by FOR-SITE. Image courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

In the bar directly across from here is *Confectionery Marvels and Curious Collections* (2021), a group of cast resin sculptures of different decadent-seeming desserts, that on closer look are teeming with insects. A collaboration between Mark Dion and Dana Sherwood, these sculptures draw the viewer in with their shiny surfaces and appealing pastel palette. On closer inspection, they are dimensional manifestations of Dutch still life paintings that show fruit and meats at the edge of rot—a pointed critique of largess.

The artworks installed in the behind-the-scenes spaces are some of the most impactful. In one of the kitchens off the main floor is *for here or to go* (2021), a commission by the Point Reyes-based artist couple, One Beach Plastic. Here a collection of white plastic detritus, all gathered at nearby Kehoe Beach, is presented as a buffet, with different types of plastic grouped together in steel chafing dishes or on ceramic plates. Lit only by the dingy old prep kitchen lighting at the center of the buffet, the piles of plastic utensils, Styrofoam packaging flotsam, and other unidentifiable bits of waste have an unappetizing white glow. It's easy to casually stroll by a bottle cap or two while at the beach, but the sheer volume of material on the table is nauseating. Around the corner in another area of the prep kitchen, Tuula Närhinen's installation *Baltic Sea Plastique* (2013–14) echoes similar themes. Featuring a collection of eerily organism-like tangles of plastic waste presented in clear specimen jars, alongside a video of those agglomerations bobbing in the waves near the shore by the artist's studio, Närhinen's artwork, like One Beach Plastic's installation, underscores the terrible durability of our plastic built world.



One Beach

Plastic, *Unaccountable Proclivities*, 2021. Plastic collected at Kehoe Beach and ceramic dishware. Dimensions variable. Part of the exhibition *Lands End*, organized by FOR-SITE. Image courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.



Doug Aitken, *migration (empire)*,

2008. Video installation with single-channel video (color, sound, 24:28-min. loop), one projection, steel, and PVC screen billboard sculpture. Installation dimensions variable; billboard sculpture: 128 x 180 x 54 in. Part of the exhibition *Lands End*, organized by FOR-SITE. Image courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

Off the main dining room on the lower level of the building is a long, formal private dining room with windows that, if opened, would reveal the roaring Pacific Ocean, but are in fact draped with heavy, dowdy curtains. Installed here is Doug Aitken's 2008 film, *migration (empire)*, an entrancing and beguiling finale to the exhibition. To make this work, the artist relocated North American migratory animals to largely anonymous, vacant roadside motel rooms. In each short vignette, a different animal inhabits a space in a motel: a beaver swims in a drab white bathtub; an owl destroys a down pillow, sending feathers flying through the frame; a mountain lion tramples a neatly made bed. The animals seem on the whole perplexed by the physical objects that occupy each room: what is all this stuff for anyway? This work for me called to mind the closing scenes of the [Forests](#) episode of the docuseries, *Our Planet*. Here the film crew visits the remains of Chernobyl, showing us panoramas of buildings choked with plants and populated by the deer, rabbits, horses, and wolves that have slowly reinhabited the area. These frames reveal the real fragility of our constructed environment in comparison to the forces of nature, one that is echoed throughout Aitken's film and *Lands End* as a whole. We humans have pushed Earth's climate to the brink, and unleashed a wild set of forces that will likely crumble the built world as we know it.

### [Lands End](#)

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