

Lands End

By [Constance Lewallen](#)



Gülnur Özdağlar, *The Last Reef*, 2021. Plastic bottles, fishing line, and steel. Courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

Lands End is the name of a park overlooking the Pacific Ocean at the mouth of the Golden Gate and also the apt title of an exhibition addressing environmental degradation currently on view in the Cliff House, a former restaurant located in the park. The setting couldn't be more spectacular, the message conveyed by the assembled artworks more dire.

The Cliff House has a storied past intimately linked to the city of San Francisco's own. It was built in 1863 and thrice destroyed by fire (although it survived the 1906 earthquake). Local philanthropist Adolph Sutro bought it in 1896 after the initial fire and turned it into an eight-story Victorian confection that offered dining and dancing, a photo gallery, and a museum for Sutro's eclectic collection. Eventually, the structure was joined by Sutro Baths, a massive public swimming pool, which burned to the ground in 1966, and Playland at the Beach, an amusement park that closed in 1972. In its heyday, Cliff House drew national luminaries and locals alike. The current building was modernized when it became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, but the restaurant is now shuttered, a casualty of COVID-19.

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In *Lands End*, artists have taken over all sections of the former restaurant, even those not normally seen by diners, such as the kitchen and trash areas. The exhibition is presented by the FOR-SITE Foundation and curated by its executive director, Cheryl Haines, who invited 27 international artists and collectives to address the perils of climate change. They contributed works in a variety of mediums, and, I should say, with varying success. Twelve made new or reconfigured works while the others are represented by extant works that accord with the overall theme. The following are those that have stayed with me.

The exhibition starts in the vestibule with *The Last Reef*, made for the occasion by Turkish artist Gülnur Özdağlar, who has re-figured omnipresent and environmentally destructive plastic bottles into a luminescent blue hanging sculpture that suggests underwater sea creatures. Viewers' aesthetic appreciation of the work is soon shattered when they become aware of the materials of its making.

Caribbean American artist Andrea Chung also created a subaquatic world in *Sea Change* (2017), a two-dimensional, floor-to-ceiling wall installation of cyanotypes and watercolors that depict the underwater life around Jamaica. Again, visual pleasure is short-lived when one learns from the label that the beautiful, glowing lionfish were introduced into these waters from their native habitat. With no natural predators, they have come to dominate the reef ecosystem, an example of what can occur when humans intervene in such fragile environments.

These works depend on double takes—seeking pleasure, one's initial response is upended upon closer inspection. In the same vein, Mark Dion and Dana Sherwood's *Confectionery Marvels and Curious Collections* (2021) are a set of exquisite small sculptures that at first look like fancy desserts until one peers closely and notices insects and other signs of decay. The installation purports to remind us that while the world's privileged consume such delights, millions go hungry, although without the label text I am not sure this comes across.

One of the exhibition's most effective works is Doug Aitkin's 2008 video *migration (empire)*. For its current presentation in the Cliff House's former banquet room, the large-scale video has been newly designed as a two-sided billboard—those ubiquitous markers along U.S. highways, here symbols of human expansion into former animal habitats that results in the diminishment of animal populations. In the video, generic motel rooms are



Mark Dion and Dana Sherwood, *Confectionery Marvels and Curious Collections*, 2021. Resin, insects, porcelain, plaster, glass, various dry and wet specimens. Courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

the sites for unsettling scenes featuring animals interacting with their unfamiliar environment. In one vignette, a beaver is swimming in a bathtub. In another, a horse occupies a room while other horses run free on the TV screen. You don't know whether to laugh or cry.



Andy Goldsworthy, *Geophagia*, 2021. Lone kaolin clay and wooden tables. Courtesy FOR-SITE. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

A powerful and disturbing installation by One Beach Plastic (Richard Lang and Judith Selby Lang) occupies the large kitchen. Since 1999 the couple has been combing Kehoe Beach in Inverness, California, for plastic detritus. They isolated exclusively white examples for this presentation, titled *for here or to go*, that includes hundreds (perhaps thousands) of utensils, lighters, bottle caps, toys, badminton birdies, and other objects difficult to identify. The effect is at once beautiful and macabre. However, one cannot help but be appalled by those who are seemingly unaware or, worse, uncaring of the damage they are doing to the ocean and its sea creatures. If One Beach Plastic addresses the damage wrought by humans on a microscale, Shumon Ahmed's 2015 photographs document the harm to wildlife and destruction of wetlands that results from the dismantling of oil tankers in his native Bangladesh, a leader in the ship breaking industry.

Andy Goldsworthy's *Geophagia* (2021) refers directly to California, which is in the midst of a drought. While dry spells are not unusual in this part of the country, the warming planet has made them more frequent and longer lasting. Goldsworthy's subtle intervention illustrates this condition by covering dining table surfaces with a layer of white clay that will continue to crack over time as it gradually dries.

There are too many works to address each individually, but in aggregate they tell a disturbing story, one that will probably not reach those who refuse to acknowledge, let alone take steps to mitigate, the worst effects of climate change. The beauty of the exhibition's site only serves to amplify the severity of the crisis.

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