

We Live in an Ocean of Air: Every breath you take

I only recently heard about *We Live in an Ocean of Air* currently on at the Saatchi Gallery in Chelsea. I'm incredibly glad I did though because the show is an awe-inspiring fusion of technology, art and science developed by the splendidly named collective, Marshmallow Laser Feast.

This 20-minute virtual reality installation is about breathing, a superficially simple act but one that connects us inextricably with all other life forms on the planet. The air we breathe out, the plants breathe in, and what they exhale becomes our next breath. We might know about this existential cycle but we rarely reflect on it. Even less often do we act on this fact, and the installation's aim is to repair our broken connection with nature by allowing us to interact with the ecosystem surrounding a giant sequoia tree, the largest living organism on the planet.



We Live in An Ocean of Air, 2018. Photo Credit - Barnaby Steel - Marshmallow Laser Feast

The installation is located in a dark space beneath the Saatchi gallery, and once you're inside, you realise this will be something special. Silhouetted against immense two-dimensional images of the digital forest that awaits you, you get to watch the people already in the installation as they reach out, kneel down, and gaze open-mouthed at the immersive version of the experience. When it's your turn, you're kitted out in an array of gadgets. A small computer is strapped to your back that connects to the virtual reality headset that covers your eyes and ears. Wristbands are fitted that will allow you to see your hands and a heart monitor is clipped to your ear. "Immersion is everything when it comes to virtual reality", explains Barnaby Steel the collective's Creative Director. "The aim is to trick the brain into thinking that the simulation is real, and to do this, we use the most cutting-edge technology available".



We Live in An Ocean of Air, 2018. Photo Credit - Barnaby Steel - Marshmallow Laser Feast

After a short briefing, you step into the installation. Your body disappears and it takes a few seconds to become accustomed to the experience. Then you see your breath for the first time as it leaves your body, small red dots that become blue in the exchange between you and the tree. Next you notice how the red pixels of oxygenated blood in your hands pulse with your heart beat. Then the visual splendour of the art envelopes you. You find yourself in a forest. Insects fly around, birds sing, and then the giant sequoia rises up in front of you.

Gradually the scale becomes larger – you can walk round the tree, even step inside it – and larger still until the intricate processes of life of which we are part become visible. Other senses are engaged too; the temperature falls as you travel into the tree's canopy while scent dispersal systems give off smells of pine and leaf litter. A gentle soundtrack heightens the otherworldly nature of the experience.

You soon lose all sense of self as you move around the space and become embraced by the processes of life that surround the tree. This sense of becoming one again with nature can be so emotionally charged, I was told people have been moved to tears.



We Live in An Ocean of Air, 2018. Photo Credit - Barnaby Steel - Marshmallow Laser Feast

But it's over too soon. This is such an absorbing and humbling experience that there's a real feeling of loss when normality reasserts itself. "The hope is" Barnaby Steel comments again "that the work inspires a sense of wonder for other beings we share the planet with". This is not an escape from reality though; rather the technology engages us with a deeper reality as the processes of life that exist beyond the limits of our senses are made visible. It's an awe-inspiring experience, combining technology, art and science to impart a renewed appreciation of the natural order we are inextricably part of. It inspires new thoughts and feelings about how disconnected from nature our consumerist lives have become. Hopefully too it will inspire us to change our ways.

I can't recommend this show highly enough. It succeeds on so many levels. Tickets aren't cheap at £20, £15 for concessions, and you'll have to make the trip to Chelsea. But the show's run has now been extended to 5th May, so take the chance to go. Believe me, it will be worth it. This is art that makes you think and feel.

We Live in an Ocean of Air by Marshmallow Laser Feast is on at the Saatchi Gallery, Sloane Square, SW3 4RY until 5th May

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