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The Sun Rises and Sets at LACMA in John Gerrard's Digital Land Art



John Gerrard, *Solar Reserve* (Tonopah, Nevada), 2014, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Leonardo DiCaprio

Anyone with reason to drive along Sixth Street between Fairfax and Curson between now and Labor Day might notice a strange new object lighting up the plaza on that side of LACMA's campus. Asserting its presence like a cross between a spaceship and a drive-in movie, it's a monumental LED screen the size of a small building. At the center of its constantly shifting image is a beacon of brightest white light. It dims at night but it never turns off.

This is *Solar Reserve*, a freshly site-responsive installation of *Solar Reserve* (Tonopah, Nevada), 2014 by Irish artist John Gerrard. It depicts, or rather simulates, a massive solar array in Nevada, the real-life site of a 10,000-panel solar power array in a remote desert region, recognizable by its central-tower structure and photo-responsive, self-adjusting ocean of panels. The tower, which emits a powerful ray of bright white light most of the time, is itself the source of the radiating glow visible at distance but is also the physical center of the image as it remains in constant motion.

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Unlike a conventional film or video, there is no beginning or end to the piece. It is not based on photography at all but rather has been generated in the manner of a video game, and in fact has been programmed using a video game “engine,” which more seamlessly orchestrates the image’s changes on more than one axis. On the one hand, each 24-hour period, and by extension each 365-day period, manifests atmospheric changes based on real-world conditions — length of day, position of the sun, phases of the moon, etc. At the same time, each 60 minutes, the viewer’s perspective on the scene changes, moving on a vertical axis from half a mile in the air to the flat ground of Earth shared by scene, screen and viewer.



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This double algorithm means that the image never repeats itself exactly, and also that it gets brighter and darker more or less corresponding to the time of day or night. Since the work is never allowed to be turned completely off during its installation, this is good news for the residents of Park La Brea who face it. Even though it's super bright during the day, at night it's subdued. Like any magic hour, being there at sunset is completely charming.

Along with reasons of art history, such as its evocation of Light & Space artists — Gerrard definitely cites both Michael Heizer and James Turrell as influences along with Robert Irwin — as well as more bookish aspects like how the sun has been depicted in fine art through the centuries, in the context of Gerrard's work it is impossible to ignore the more environmentalist, eco-social message behind the project.

A recipient of the LACMA Art + Technology grant in 2016, Gerrard has long sought to investigate both issues of energy consumption and the potential of new image-making technologies in fine art. In "Solar Reserve" we witness the perfect merger of those threads.

Though only on display for the summer, the work was purchased by LACMA for its permanent collection — notably with funds donated by the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation — in 2015. It had been shown in 2014 at New York's Lincoln Center, no doubt to great effect in that fancy and reflective architectural setting. But there's something about



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its placement in the California sun and heat, adjacent to Heizer's "Levitated Mass" and in close proximity to the La Brea Tar Pits, that augments the impact of both the work's medium and its message.

Terry Tamminen, CEO of the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, and Julia Jackson, proprietor and Family Ambassador of eco-conscious Jackson Family Wines — partners in the support and presentation of this work — are enthusiastic about the potential of artwork like this to move the conversation.

"We feel strongly that the arts is a powerful way to reach people, to engage them with these issues in a different way," Jackson said at the work's unveiling. As Tamminen confirms, a project like also this fuses DiCaprio's own long-standing commitment to environmental justice with his love for contemporary art.

"People are so entrenched in their politics, their preconceptions," Tamminen said. "They won't listen to facts or numbers or even science! But when you encounter a major work like this," he continues, gesturing toward the wall of light, "they experience the issue in a new way. They pay attention, they get curious. Maybe they do some research. ... It's a whole new way to engage them in this incredibly important conversation."

<http://www.laweekly.com/arts/the-sun-rises-and-sets-at-lacma-in-john-gerrards-digital-land-art-9655886>

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