

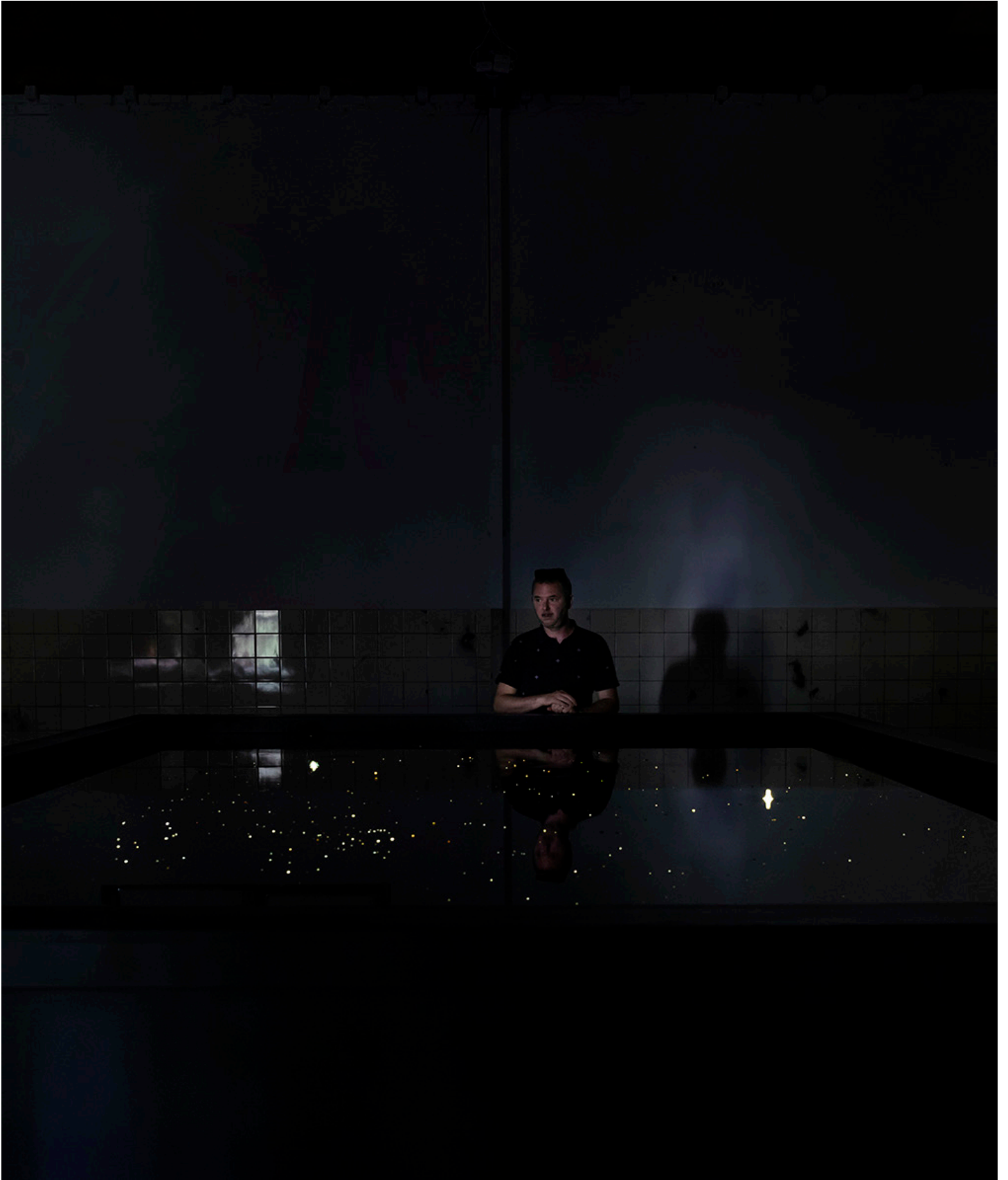
Exhibition Brochure

A photograph of an astronaut in a white space suit floating in space. The astronaut is positioned vertically, with their head at the top and feet at the bottom. The background is a dark, starry space. A bright, horizontal light streak or reflection cuts across the middle of the image, passing behind the text.

GABRIEL LESTER ODEON

Blaffer Art Museum

May 17—August 11, 2024



Startstruck (installation view), 2020. Mixed Media Installation. Courtesy of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York. Photograph: Eva Broekema.

“This is Gabriel Lester’s ode to Houston by way of the stars, the deep, the channels, and the spectacle.”

When indexing that which comes to identify a city to its inhabitants and those further afield, we often look at environment, art, architecture, and industry. What are the natural resources that shape how settlement develops, and what are the areas of business that economically power a place and effect how its population grows? When various strands of people then gather in said place, how is a culture born, and how does it live? Houston is an unwieldy city to characterize within this model, as it often bucks conventional applications of historicization in favor of a frontier mindset that prizes amorphousness and re-invention. Despite a murky trajectory, many would argue this place was born at the confluence of the White Oak and Buffalo Bayous, and that the life-giving, as well as destructive capacity of water has shaped Houston ever since. But if this place came to be in and on waterways, it’s a liquid buried deeper below that gave Houston its cocksure swagger as one of the most prominent petroleum-cultures in the world. As a monstrously lucrative industry and enduring magnet drawing professionals from around the world, “oil and gas” is a familiar refrain when asking folks what brought them to this neck of the woods. Highways and air conditioning also factor

into what made the city viable (if insufferable at times), but when one wants to look at the fields that appear best on marketing brochures and tourism advertising, Houston regularly hangs its hat on NASA and the Medical Center. If oil is what infused the city with capital and bluster, and one of the largest healthcare enterprises in the world keeps it going, it’s all things “Astro” that light up the aisles, sell jerseys, and afford otherworldly ambitions. And so it came to be that in fertile shadows far below our feet and high above our heads, Houston finds itself in the luminous glimmers that flicker across both; those glistening seductions that embody prosperity, verve, and speculation.

When determining how best to engage his respective exhibition contexts in fruitful dialogue, artist, inventor, filmmaker and former musician Gabriel Lester often considers the cinematic countenance of a place. That is to say, how would Houston appear on a movie poster? What would its glossy visage include if the city were selling itself as both a character and experience; as both hero and villain; as a problem to solve and a triumph to savor? Lester has been the director of numerous films (most recently of feature-length), and

a cinematic lens consistently informs the way he conceives his works, as well as their delivery and framework. His project is not one of verisimilitude or truth-telling, but rather one of conjecture fundamentally shaped by seeing and learning the world through screens – whether that be television, movies, tablets or phones. This is an arena where stages, simulations, and sets are built in provisional ways to pose outsized, and often existential questions for us to ponder. And thus, in his first exhibition in the United States, in a show entitled *Odeon* (and all the eras-long history of theatre and entertainment this name carries), does Lester choose to present *Starstruck* as the marquee installation.

He speaks often of cinema as a totalizing art form which incorporates many of its sister disciplines, and thus are we met with an immersive experience that sets the stage for all to follow. Primed by the sound of dripping water and the faint aroma of oil, this encounter feels like something akin to a movie theatre; the “screen” here has, however, been turned horizontal as we peer out over a dark, glossy pool set within a raised structure. What follows is less sequential and more sensorial, as we witness brilliant flares of light escape from the ebony surface, only to be quickly swallowed up, over and over again. And while we can analyze the architecture of what is happening, seeing the mechanisms that Lester has deployed to orchestrate this fleeting constellation, the metaphorical potency does not subside. These lights could be stars in an endless night sky, missile strikes on a city that sleeps, volcanic eruptions, flickers of life in a primordial stew, or none of them at all. When located in a city like Houston, this confluence of water, oil, and “starlight” feels all the more provocative though, if not particular. And yet *Starstruck* is Lester at his most suggestive and equivocal best, arranging a heightened framework to feel and imagine without dictating what, or how it is to mean. This is a city, not as a destination or fixed address, but rather a tapestry of associations, ever-changing.

Within this evolving *Odeon*, stars struck beget star-gazing as our field of vision widens and the artist pulls us deeper into his celluloid cosmology. The universe is an enduring muse for Lester, as much for the awe and wonder it inspires in human consciousness, as for how much of its enormity escapes our understanding. *Cosmic Call* is a video sculpture aptly located in the space adjacent to *Starstruck* as it further articulates this subject, as well as Lester’s captivating take on technologies of seeing. When the modern desire is to chase ever higher definition within the televisual and telescopic fields (i.e. the euphorically acclaimed James Webb telescope), he finds more richness and nuance in mining pixelation, blurs, and the nebulous suggestion that lurks in low-resolution imagery. In *Cosmic Call* Lester fashions a rudimentary screen which leans on the museum wall and plays video of an astrological voyage. The ensuing journey is as full of undulating light and color as it is devoid of focus or conclusion. Speaking to this purposefully contrarian perspective, Lester explains, “I see an interesting paradox between high resolution images, and the subjects that they depict when it is the universe surrounding us. In fact, we have a rather low-resolution knowledge of the universe, although we produce high resolution images of it. This work reverses it; we have a low-resolution images of the universe that might just create a high resolution understanding of the subject.” Much like *Starstruck*, the openness and economy with which Lester constructs his framework creates a catalyst to imagine more intently. Responding to this gentle, if not less shrewd invitation, artist and professor Graham Gussin observes, “This transparency doesn’t lead to a lack of depth, on the contrary, it leads to a kind of infinite perspective.” Like a magic trick revealed – one whose charm lingers beyond the means of its making – Lester’s confluence of mechanics and the sublime churn restlessly, and generatively, within the mind’s eye.



Cosmic Call (installation view), 2015/2024. LED Light Installation. Courtesy of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.
Photograph: Ernst van Deursen.





Lester finds that the turning point between technologies also produces a brief, but fecund space of reflexivity; a heightened intersection where vehicles of vision act as illuminating foils upon one another. We see this in *Cosmic Call* and the numerous eras of screen resolution the artist conjures to contrast technical definition with cognitive literacy. Like trying to decode every strand of human DNA or peer into every corner of the universe, the armada of absolute knowledge produces as many blindspots as it purports to conquer. In much the same way that Lester mines the richness of lo-res imagery, he often references (or rebuilds) antique technologies once used in early cinema. Such is the case in *Jump Cut*, where he marries contemporary CNC milling and lasercut wood with proto-cinematic phantasmagoria. By locating lightweight replicas of figurines within slotted boxes, spun quickly and rhythmically atop gallery pedestals, Lester creates the illusion of animation. Our eye weaves together the partial glimpses, creating “movement” in much the same way that early celluloid film functioned. The familiar movie trope of the “flashback” is also evoked here, flashing fragments of history and/or memory to supposedly clarify the present. Yet for Lester, “They are images that always seem,” in his words, “to be evasive, unable to be caught.” We experience a similar phenomenon in the adjacent installation *Alarm in the Universe*, which represents the latest edition of Lester’s ongoing, very aptly titled series *How to Act* (begun in 1999). But rather than fragments of figures deployed to spark reminiscence, the artist now turns to short sequences of synchronized light, color, and sound drawn from popular movies and television. As such, we enter an otherwise “empty” architectural chamber – a personal “blank canvas” if you will – and are barraged with pop culture nostalgia spoken expressly without images or words. How many moments any one audience member can identify in the ensuing sequence feels less crucial than Lester’s prescient excavation of how the movie industry makes us act; makes us feel; makes us remember.

It may be true that there are cinematic formulae that can trigger the same emotion or response from audience members the world over – time-tested televisual recipes to make a large majority of us feel happy, sad, etc. – but Lester’s project is not a psychological audit nor an Adorno-esque condemnation. This is a reflexive, stripped down *Odeon* that replaces narrativity with open-ended suggestion, metaphor, and possibility. Lester collects and deploys cinematic devices not to advance a script or steer us to a predetermined conclusion, but rather to prompt a pursuit of meaning through the lenses we learn the world through. This is his ode/on to Houston by way of the stars, the deep, the channels, and the spectacle. What do you see?



Jump Cut (image sequence), 2014/2024. Kinetic sculpture. Courtesy of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

Gabriel Lester: Odeon

May 17—August 11, 2024

The Blaffer Art Museum is proud to present **Gabriel Lester: Odeon** the first solo museum exhibition in the United States of preeminent European artist Gabriel Lester, who has gained an international standing for his art, performance, and film as well as his dynamic public art installations. Across the span of his decades-long career, Lester has developed a cinematic lens through which to see and imagine the world. For this exhibition, Lester is most interested in the interplay between light and shadow, as well as the seen and unseen, as he responds to Houston, its fossil fuel industry, and its incubation of NASA as elements intertwined. Through a series of experiential installations and kinetic sculptures this exhibition pierces heavy, weighted geometries with the delightful, if perplexing magic of discovery.

Gabriel Lester (b. 1972), is an inventor, visual artist and filmmaker. His works consist of spatial installations, video installations, sculptures, performances, and short films. Other activities include commissioned art in public space, designing physical structures, mentoring and teaching. Lester's creations originate from a desire to tell stories and establish contexts and situations that support these stories or propose their own narrative interpretation. His vocabulary is characterized as cinematographic, without necessarily employing film or video as a medium. However, like moviemaking,

Lester's practice has come to embrace and utilize all imaginable media and talent. With emphasis on human existence and its experience, Lester's projects aim to sharpen and flex the mind. Open ended, sustaining mystery and without over explicit messages or singular ideas, Lester proposes ways to relate to the world, how it is represented and what mechanisms and components constitute our perception and understanding of it.

This exhibition is organized by former Jane Dale Owen Director and Chief Curator, Steven Matijcio and runs until August 11, 2024. Major funding for Gabriel Lester: Odeon is provided by the John R. Eckel Jr. Foundation, the John P. McGovern Foundation, and the Stolbun Family Foundation. Generous support is provided by the Blaffer Art Museum Advisory Board members and the Ryan Lee Gallery. This program is supported as part of the Dutch Culture USA program by the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York.

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Admission is always free

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Gabriel Lester: Odeon is funded in part by the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance

Front Cover: *Startstruck III*, 2020. Technical development: Tom Jaspers/Artvark Projects. Digital Photograph: Gabriel Lester.

Centerfold: *How to Act-1999 : 2014*. Halogen lights, light filters, mdf, wooden beams, MIDI controller, audio sequence program.

Photograph: Justin Li.

Back Cover: *Cosmic Call* (installation view), 2015/2024. LED Light Installation. Courtesy of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

Photograph: Ernst van Deursen.

