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FIRST ECO, THEN EGO – A LESSON FROM THE LIGHT ART MUSEUM'S LATEST EXHIBITION

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Light Art Museum's latest exhibition, *More than Human*, explores humanity's relationship with nature, but rather than presenting a guilt-trip narrative, it opens up new perspectives on collaboration. Immersive installations, including rain falling upwards and a cyanobacteria laboratory, show us how to move beyond our egos and see what lies 'on the other side of the wall': the importance of a partnership with nature. The only question now is whether we are capable of learning from the intelligences that surround us.

By Dalma Takács



It's one o'clock in the afternoon and I jump off the tram in a rush. Although I always promise myself that I'll plan my day carefully and leave nothing to the last minute, today I've shot myself in the foot again: with my phone pressed to my ear and clutching what was left of my lunch, I dash across Szabadság Square doing my all to get to the LAM on time. This makes it pretty obvious that I've been struggling with mindfulness lately – the screeching tram, the crowd, the glaring sunlight all totally distract me. Yet, the moment I step through the door, it's as if a sharp pair of pruning shears had cut me off from the outside world. It's dark and quiet inside but not the threatening kind. Within minutes, I reach a state of focussed awareness and mindfulness that I hadn't experienced for weeks.



Tony Oursler: *Talking Light*, 2014, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

I visited the Light Art Museum to see its latest temporary exhibition, *More than Human*, but before I write more about it, I'd like to say a few words about the institution itself. The LAM opened three years ago on Hold Street in what used to be Budapest's Downtown Market. News of it spread rapidly through the press with many articles dubbing it the most Instagram-friendly exhibition space. For months, I couldn't scroll through my social-media feed without being inundated by selfies shot in interiors bathed in light. While many people might be drawn to this, I must admit that my first reaction was one of mild aversion.

While I understand perfectly that sustaining the interest of visitors is an enormous challenge and I myself find the unique spatial experience of immersivity extremely exciting, I couldn't help worrying that this might be just another selfie museum built solely on visual aesthetics.

That's why I kept putting off my first visit for quite some time. Then, last summer, after several coincidences, I finally found myself in the LAM and realised that up to then I had only seen the tip of the iceberg. Or perhaps not even that, just a small snow-covered crag. But let me express what I mean more clearly, this time in relation to *More than Human*.

If we want to save the environment, the first step would be to note its presence

The museum's artistic director, Szabolcs Vida, greets me on the lower level of the old indoor market, and as we set off for a walk along the 'streets', I feel as if I've been magically transported to Narnia. We encounter mythical creatures and artificially generated organic formations on our path, flashes and dizzying light effects reminding me of rave parties in Berlin. At first, I'm careful to watch my step in the darkness but after a while I relax and blend into the surroundings. I acclimatise faster than I'd expected – the outside world already feels like some distant, unknown galaxy in just a few minutes. And although the environment is artificial, the experience is familiar: it's the same feeling as when I'm in the countryside and, unhurried, I get lost in thought at the lookout points.



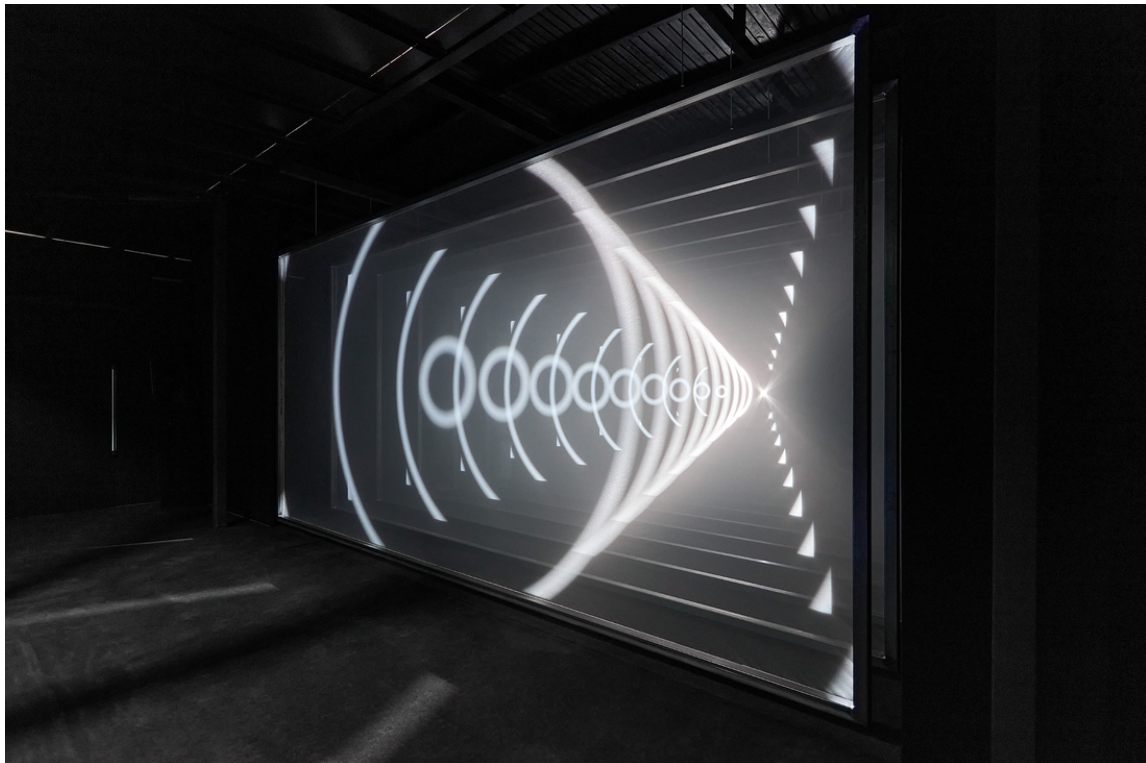
Ólafur Elíasson: *Your welcome reflected*, 2003, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

This kind of association of ideas might just have been a coincidence, but it expresses a great deal. The notion at the heart of *More than Human* is one of today's most pressing issues: humanity's relationship with nature. But instead of adopting a guilt-arousing, catastrophising perspective, the emphasis here is on partnership and empathy. And this evokes a sense of relief I hadn't expected.

“With *More than Human*, we explore systems of collaboration that describe a positive vision of the future and offer potential solutions to the environmental crises threatening our world today, ranging from climate change to the loss of biodiversity.

People have been preoccupied with these issues for a long time, but we need to understand this: merely presenting problems is not always the answer. We wanted to create an exhibition with a positive tone,” says Szabolcs Vida. He also reveals that the artworks can be divided into three

categories. Some engender practical approaches with specific solutions, others are experience-based, visceral works that jolt us out of our comfort zones, and there is a historical thread, represented by artworks that illustrate the path light art has taken since 1966.



NONOTAK (Noemi Schipfer & Takami Nakamoto): DAYDREAM V.6, 2021, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

And all the while, regardless of where we are on the timeline, the ethical values expressed by the artists run through the entire fabric of the exhibition like the roots of a tree spreading underground: invisible from above, yet everywhere, even though they take on different forms. But what are these values exactly?

Well, actually they are nothing more than what lies “beyond the human,” what breaks free from the individual and the egocentric worldview: nature itself, which is all around us.

Sometimes it’s something physically close, such as a spider’s web scanned by a laser, and at other times it exists only in the future, at an experimental stage. It’s as if all these experts are calling for a moment of silence, simply asking us to be quiet for just a little while and look around. Can you see how much there still is here, or the incredibly complex worlds functioning just two metres away from you in your everyday lives? You are part of this, and this equation cannot be reversed. Humanity must adapt to nature, not the other way around.

Immersivity: 60 years ago and now

The *More than Human* exhibition goes on and on – if I were to pause too long at every installation, I would end up spending a whole day here. While some works are more or less easy to grasp, others take half an hour to assume their final form. The exhibition is an experiment on the fringes of art, but also an experiment on a societal level: it reminded me

that I usually spend no more than two hours at most cultural events, as progress and efficiency somehow always take precedence over immersion. And although my time was limited today, as usual, I didn't want quantity to come at the expense of quality, so I asked Szabolcs to show me the works he finds most exciting, and I focused on those. There and then, I made a promise to myself: I would return soon, take another deep breath and immerse myself in what I missed out this time.



Otto Piene: *The Proliferation of the Sun*, 1966–1967, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

Our first stop is a flickering room, where six projectors trace hand-painted elements on the walls that resemble natural molecules. There seems to be nothing out of the ordinary at first, and everything is all pretty similar to any other immersive exhibition, but I get goose bumps when the artistic director reveals the year it was made and the underlying concept. The work, titled *The Expansion of the Sun*, is in fact one of the very first immersive installations (assembled in 1966!), and the artist, Otto Piene, saw it as a way to process his wartime traumas.

During the Cold War, the threat and veritable darkness of nuclear obliteration weighed heavily on the minds of soldiers, so this pulsating, light-producing projection was made to counter all that.

Although there are a few elements that might feel particularly unsettling to today's ears and eyes, we are still surrounded by a celebration of life, beauty and nature. Not to mention that you are bound to realise how context- and individual-dependent the word *comfort* is.



Jonny Niesche and Mark Pritchard: *Mercy, mercy, me*, 2025, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

As we continue along the right-hand corridor, one spatial experience follows the next. We get to Jonny Niesche and Mark Pritchard's taut mirror glowing red, vibrating and distorting under a soundscape, followed by a work from the fuse* collective, who also contributed an installation to *Phantom Vision*, the LAM's previous exhibition. Their earlier piece, based on dream research, had firmly won me over, so I was positively biased towards their new work, *Mimicry*. Their projection makes me feel like I've entered a biological laboratory: new species emerge through the hybridisation of insects and plants, presenting a possible new evolutionary route. I was unable to avert my gaze from these bizarre and breathtakingly beautiful formations.



fuse*: *Mimicry*, 2025, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

“*Mimicry* was based on research: biologists examined how nature might respond to the dangers threatening biodiversity. They played with the idea of what extraordinary species could emerge in the future, what survival strategies they might adopt, which parts of the planet they could inhabit, and what challenges they would face,” says Szabolcs Vida, pointing out that the display also shows the current year and when they estimate new species will appear. No matter how complex the process may seem, it can be traced and understood. And, by the way, it is breathtakingly beautiful.

We are sometimes deceived by our perception and sometimes by our egos

One of the most exciting works in the exhibition is clearly Yasuhiro Chida’s *Space of Moment*, the depth of which is hinted at by the year it was made: the artist started working on it in 2002 and only finalised the installation in 2025. It is not incidental that it took so many years. Extensive experimentation led to the point where the artist was able to produce the ‘upward-falling rain’ – or to be more exact, to discover the technology that creates the illusion of it.

“In this work, Chida is actually playing with our perception of time, using the stroboscopic illumination of the water to distort our temporal experience.

The structure you see gently vibrates and its movement is synchronised with the lights. This creates the sensation that the direction of motion is changing,” Szabolcs explains, adding that works like this require specialised equipment as well as expertise from the hosting institutions. Moreover, it is not always easy to reach the artists themselves, and the LAM wanted to take on both of these tasks – a first in Hungary. Well, it must be said, the effort was worth it: while bordering on the spiritual the result is a perfect mindful experience. Despite the fact that the

flickering lights wouldn't be out of place at a rave party, it's nevertheless strangely calming to be here. Is it the presence of water, the patter of rain, or the strange movement? Maybe it's all of these combined.

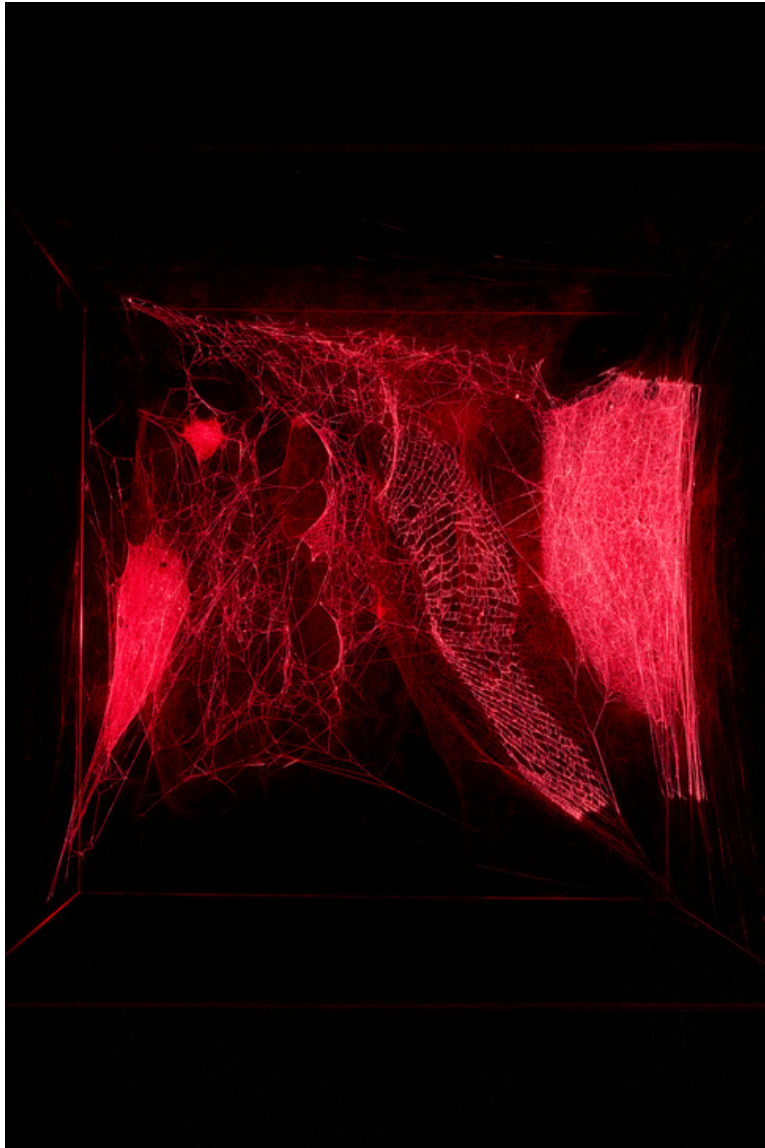


Yasuhiro Chida: *Space of Moment*, 2002–2025, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

After the space of the moment, we head upstairs, into the projection room where I have a similar experience to the one I had in the very first exhibition space. At first glance, this might not seem like the most unusual work, but as Szabolcs puts it, *The Great Silence* essentially encapsulates the entire conceptual thread of the exhibition, making it one of its central pieces. The footage takes us to Puerto Rico, near the Arecibo radio telescope, which was built so that astronomers could try to make contact with extraterrestrials. However, while focusing entirely on the unknown universe, they forget one crucial thing: the living creatures that lost their habitats as a result of the deforestation required to construct the structure. In the video, the thoughts of a local, endangered parrot are voiced as it draws attention to the fact that other forms of intelligence exist beyond human understanding, but we often take them for granted or dismiss them as merely dull.

“The voice of the parrot underlines that it is vital to understand our environment and pay attention to the living beings around us, since it is in them that we can discover the same complexity as when we attempt to extend our own sphere of influence to infinity.

There’s nothing wrong with searching for extra-terrestrial life. But while doing so, we mustn’t forget what is right down here, right next to us. And if we disrupt these systems of collaboration, we are limiting ourselves at the same time,” adds Szabolcs Vida.



Tomás Saraceno: How to entangle the universe in a spider/web?, 2018, Photo: Dávid Bíró /Light Art Museum Budapest

Although many of the installations are enchanting, it is this one that is probably the hardest to leave. The video lasts a total of 17 minutes and mostly consists of static images, yet its message somehow profoundly resonates with the visitor. There are no elaborate puzzles or complex thought experiments here; only plain reality: the fact that we so often seek the extreme that we forget what is right within our grasp. For me, the spider’s web installation just a few metres away engages with the same issue. Tomás Saraceno’s *How to entangle the universe in a spider/web?* is like moving meditation. The work was made by a spider, or to be

precise, by a *Cyrtophora citricola*, and Saraceno's role was simply to highlight its astonishing intricacy using carbon fibre and lasers.

Where the Earth is healing

Walking around the top floor, I again end up in what resembles a laboratory: this time it's stacked with terrariums, each containing unusual formations. At first glance, they look like models of strange landscapes but Szabolcs explains that these are actually living organisms, or to be more exact, structures containing ancient microorganisms known as cyanobacteria. Although my last biology lesson was quite a while ago, the term still sounds familiar. About 2.4 billion years ago, cyanobacteria took on the onerous task of producing the Earth's oxygen – and this is happening now in these terrariums, where, by using light, moisture and warmth, the bacteria consume atmospheric carbon dioxide to produce one of the essential conditions for survival. Szabolcs explains that what I was looking at was still in the experimental phase. Researchers are continuously studying which forms, structures and environmental factors best support the functioning of the construction, and that this is a snapshot of our current knowledge. Where it will ultimately lead is still unknown, but its message pretty much encapsulates the entire vision of *More than Human*:

“Rather than exploiting the living beings of our planet, it's crucial that we cultivate a partnership with them since the latter benefits everyone in the long run.

The time has come to break away from an anthropocentric mindset, the presumption that we can exploit the entire world just for our own advancement. This strategy has clearly failed, necessitating a new approach. And working in harmony with nature could be the very approach we now need.”



Mat Collishaw: *AQ*, 2016, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest

This idea shared with me by Szabolcs Vida, the artistic director of LAM, stays with me long after I come out of the exhibition. After leaving the building, it takes a few minutes to readjust, but somehow the noise and all the stimuli I'm suddenly enveloped by seem softer and more bearable. I remember what a friend once said about urban trees being invisible: according to a survey, most people don't even know whether there's a tree on their street or not. That will be my job for today: to count exactly how many I encounter on my way home. Perhaps it's not a bad start.

Dalma Takács

Lead image: Xenorama – Studio for Audiovisual Art: DIOPTRICON, 2024, Photo: Dávid Bíró / Light Art Museum Budapest