

# G A S W O R K S

**Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen:**

**Buoyancy**

**14 April – 19 June 2022**



Gasworks presents *Buoyancy*, the first UK institutional solo exhibition by Helsinki-based artist Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen. With a focus on process and experience, Laakkonen's work uses nature as a raw material to reflect on the impact of human interactions with the environment, while also tackling wider existential questions around time, death and the limits of scientific knowledge.

At Gasworks, Laakkonen presents a durational performance where he recreates the skeleton of giant sea cow, killed on 12 July 1742 in the Bering Sea. To guide him in this colossal task, the artist will rely solely on a written account of this creature's bones, taken from the zoological notes of the German explorer Georg Wilhelm Steller, who first described the species. Shortly after his 'discovery', the sea cow's entire population was wiped out by sailors and fur traders. Weighing

up to ten tones, this gigantic relative of today's manatees disappeared by 1768, when the last recorded sea cow was hunted, thus making it the first historical extinction of a marine mammal at human hands.

Laakkonen's major new commission, *Framed Sea Cow*, is a time-consuming effort to bring this extinct creature back into existence. Over an undetermined number of weeks, the artist will be in the gallery crafting a large-scale wooden replica of the beast's skeleton as audiences wander in and out of the space. Working without preparatory drawings, the artist relies on a basic set of hand tools and his own understanding of the imprecise notes left by Steller in the 18th century, where the sea cow's skull is described as being "like that of a horse". The only given parameters informing Laakkonen's work are the skeleton's total length and width, determined by the gallery's dimensions. Everything else is uncertain.

The exhibition opens with one of Gasworks' galleries blocked by timber planks, all leaning against a large beam cutting across the space, which serves as the spine of a yet-to-emerge sea creature. Forming a pitched roof or a steeply sloping floor, a wall of timber divides the space in two halves. Sheltered inside this rudimentary structure, the artist is working throughout the exhibition period to craft each of the planks into the sea cow's vertebrae, one board at a time. As work progresses, viewers start to gain access to the gallery, while the shelter gradually turns into a skeleton—one's ultimate dwelling place. By the end of the show, the giant sea cow will remain suspended in the gallery like a ship in a bottle.

This sculpture is presented in dialogue with *See Through Golden Eye* (2019), a miniature work created by meticulously deconstructing and reconstructing a dead goldeneye duck, which in Finnish mythology is said to have laid the egg that created the world. Delicately weaving together its myriad bones with a single thread of fishing line, Laakkonen obtained an intimate understanding of this animal's body and its way of inhabiting the world. The resulting work is an uncanny marionette displayed in precarious balance—an amalgam at once organic and artificial. Adjacent to the bird, a pair of stilts made from driftwood lean against a wall, suggesting the ghostly presence of a human puppeteer.

As daily work in the gallery progresses and Laakkonen's sea cow emerges from within the shadows, both animals (one recently dead, the other extinct centuries ago) will appear to float at the same water level, creating an imaginary encounter between two worlds apart.

Expanding on his durational and process-based approach, Laakkonen will present his first ever musical performance at the Montgomery Hall Community Centre, located a five-minute walk from Gasworks, on 28 May. Entitled *Flock of Birds*, this consists of a short, repetitive composition written for an ensemble of non-professional wind instrument players. Conducted by musician Hannah Catherine Jones, the performance is divided into simple steps so that each musician plays a single note in sequential order, therefore drifting in and out of sync like a flock of birds—a movement evoked in its title.

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**Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen** is an artist based in Helsinki, Finland. Recent solo exhibitions include Kunstverein München, Munich (2019); Kohta, Helsinki (2017); Corvi-Mora, London (2017 and 2015). He has exhibited internationally at organisations including Kiasma, Helsinki; Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius; Ystads Konstmuseum, Ystad; Lofoten International Art Festival, Svolvær; MHKA Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp; and KHM Gallery, Malmö.





## Related Events

### ***Breakfast Exhibition Tour***

**Wednesday 27 April, 9-11am**

Join us for coffee, tea and pastries at The Foundry (a social justice hub based across the road from Gasworks) at 9am, followed by a tour of Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen's exhibition at 10am.

### ***Between the Deep Blue***

**Wednesday 18 to Sunday 22 May, 12-6pm**

The graduating students of MA Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art present a series of workshops and an immersive space in response to Laakkonen's exhibition. Looking at the extinct sea cow as a symbol of the ocean's witnessing of colonial violence, this programme explores how we can transform traumatic histories into new ways of living and healing together.

Featuring work by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Ambrose Rhapsody Murray, Ella Frost, Kathryn Attril, Lateisha Davine Lovelace-Hanson, Robertina Šebjanič, Soha Salem, Aisha Mirza and Veronica Amon.

### ***Flock of Birds***

**Saturday 28 May, 4-6pm**

Laakkonen presents his first ever musical performance at the Montgomery Hall Community Centre, located a five-minute walk from Gasworks. It consists of a short, repetitive composition written for an ensemble of non-professional musicians, each of whom plays a single note in sequential order, therefore drifting in and out of sync like a flock of birds. Conducted by musician Hannah Catherine Jones.

Meet at Gasworks at 4pm to see the exhibition, with a guided tour at 4.30pm, and walk to Montgomery Hall for the performance at 5pm.

### ***Open Studios***

**Saturday 18 June, 12-6pm. Artist talks at 4pm**

Meet our artists in residence: Chigozie Obi (Nigeria), Kent Chan (Singapore), Renata Molinari (Argentina) and Bronwyn Katz (South Africa).

*Gasworks events are free to attend, visit [gasworks.org.uk](http://gasworks.org.uk) for more information.*



## Exhibition Credits

Juha Pekka Matias Lakkonen's exhibition *Buoyancy* is commissioned and produced by Gasworks with generous support from the Finnish Institute of the UK and Ireland and Covi-Mora.

Gasworks commissions are supported by Catherine Petitgas and Gasworks Exhibitions Supporters.

## Commissioning partners and exhibition supporters

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