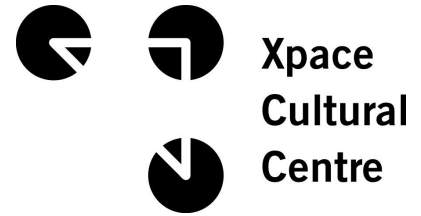


PROJECT SPACE



Lamprey

Jason Mendiola

September 13 – October 25, 2025

Sea lampreys, of which Jason Mendiola's installation is named after, are jawless fish with skeletons made of cartilage. They attach to rocks on the bottom of the ocean—blending into the surrounding algae—waiting for trout to latch onto. Sea lampreys do not register as overt predators upon first glance, but are vicious in their approach. According to the Great Lakes Fisheries Commission, “sea lampreys feed on the fish's body fluids by secreting an enzyme that prevents blood from clotting,”¹ ensuring that once they have latched on, the trout has no chance of surviving.

Mendiola's site-specific kinetic installation, *Lamprey*, first confronts the viewer with a choice: follow a path to the left or right of a centrally placed installation that extends 7 feet tall. As one wanders around they are made aware of a dichotomy between the walls and the central structure. The walls are clad in sharply pointed pieces of wood, but the mounts are hidden so as to give the illusion that they are floating. Upon closer inspection, the sharp pieces are the jagged off-cuts of the wood used in the rest of the

¹ Ted Lawrence, “Sea Lamprey,” Great Lakes Fisheries Commission, accessed on September 5, 2025, <https://www.glfc.org/sea-lamprey.php>.

exhibition. The inverse of the softer curved modular pieces is a more severe and abrasive shape—with teeth.

The central installation is a skeletal structure, made up of uniform pieces of curved plywood with three slots in each for fastening hardware. Each piece has been dipped in an iron-acetate dye, altering the bright tan plywood to a muddied brown—while some of the pieces produced an ochre colour from oxidation. Wheat stalks are arranged in a fan shape and connected to spinning motors set at random intervals in the centre of the curved wooden pieces. The wheat is treated with the same dye as the wood pieces, transforming the materials into a shadowed version of their former selves. The wood and wheat feel worn, with irregular dyeing—suggesting a shared history. The entire structure is modular with the ability of adjusting to other shapes and sizes—suggesting a future. The wood pieces are affixed to each other by steel bolts and fasteners while the vertical and horizontal planes are connected with black steel brackets.

The interior of the structure is exposed and reveals the means by which it was fabricated. The structure's assembly is intentionally vulnerable to the viewer, and because one can identify the power supply at the centre, it can be recognized as an architecture of exteriority. The structure is designed to perform for the viewer—confronting them. The wheat affixed to the installation is familiar, but removed from any context it causes a “Verfremdungseffekt (V-effekt),” often translated as “distancing effect” or “alienation effect.”² Bertolt Brecht describes that a representation producing the V-effekt, “allows us to recognize an object, but at the same time makes it appear strange.”³ One can identify the elements in Mendiola’s installation—wood, steel, electronics, and wheat—but the presentation subverts our expectations of these materials. The viewer is placed within a performance that alienates one from themselves, but simultaneously demands them to be painfully present. One can witness the

² Bertolt Brecht, “Short Organon,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

performance, but may be disillusioned by its exposed organs. Brecht explains that to produce V-effect, the viewer should be reminded of the fact that they are witnessing a play performed by actors that has been rehearsed many times.⁴ The construction of *Lamprey* exposes itself to remind the viewer of the very process by which the effect is being delivered. Everything is laid bare: the illusion and the way in which the illusion is achieved.

The walls at the front and back of the space utilize the same construction as the structure at the centre to alter the shape of the room. The assembly of the walls—with static wheat sheaves and a more sparse construction—resembles a deconstructed cyclorama. In theatre, cycloramas utilize a seamless curved construction to perform an illusion for the viewer of an infinite landscape. *Lamprey's* walls, however, are laid bare without finishings and one gets a look behind an infinite space to somewhere unknown. *Lamprey* thrives in the unknown and keeps the viewer guessing as to what they are presented with. One is both alienated and placed within oneself to dwell in the installation and wrestle with their own experiences. One grasps onto what is familiar, while being pushed away by that which they cannot identify.

The physicality of the wheat is knismetic, producing a light-tickling sensation. Knismesis contains both a sensual and disturbing quality. Lauren Berlant explains that “cruel optimism” can produce a similar duality; defining it as, “a relation, when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”⁵ She explains that our attachment to an object may not be immediately cruel, but becomes cruel when “the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.”⁶ There is an inherent ambivalence, where the relationship can be both satisfying and obstructive. The wheat, in *Lamprey*, can act as a buffer space between

⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵ Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

⁶ Ibid., 1.

the viewer and the structure, producing an effective margin before the object of desire. It is the most confronting material in the work, but it is also forgiving and fragile.

Lamprey is contained within one room, but the viewer feels as if they are placed on the outside of something. As one moves about the space their proprioception—or, the method one uses to determine their physical self-awareness—is heightened. Whether they brush against the spinning wheat or not, one may be inclined to back up so as to not disturb the installation. If one is not acutely aware of their surroundings they might be touched by the wheat affixed to the sharp off-cuts mounted onto the side walls. The intervention is stealth-like in its persuasion and gently guides the viewer towards the outer walls. The subtle suggestion almost evades recognition, and one only realizes it once they have already moved. The red lights emanating from the motors seem to take on a new, more sinister meaning and they become the source of the persuasion.

Mendiola's *Lamprey* continues to spin and hum as the viewer exits the room—wading on the rock as if it is algae drifting in the current, waiting for the next trout to swim by. Mendiola utilizes adumbration—or, vague representations and faint foreshadowing—in his installation, to intentionally open the possibilities of interpretation. *Lamprey* is subtle in its execution, forcing one to grapple with their own individual existence and the loneliness that comes with it. What might feel unresolved, is only one's desire for more.

– Bailey Bornyk