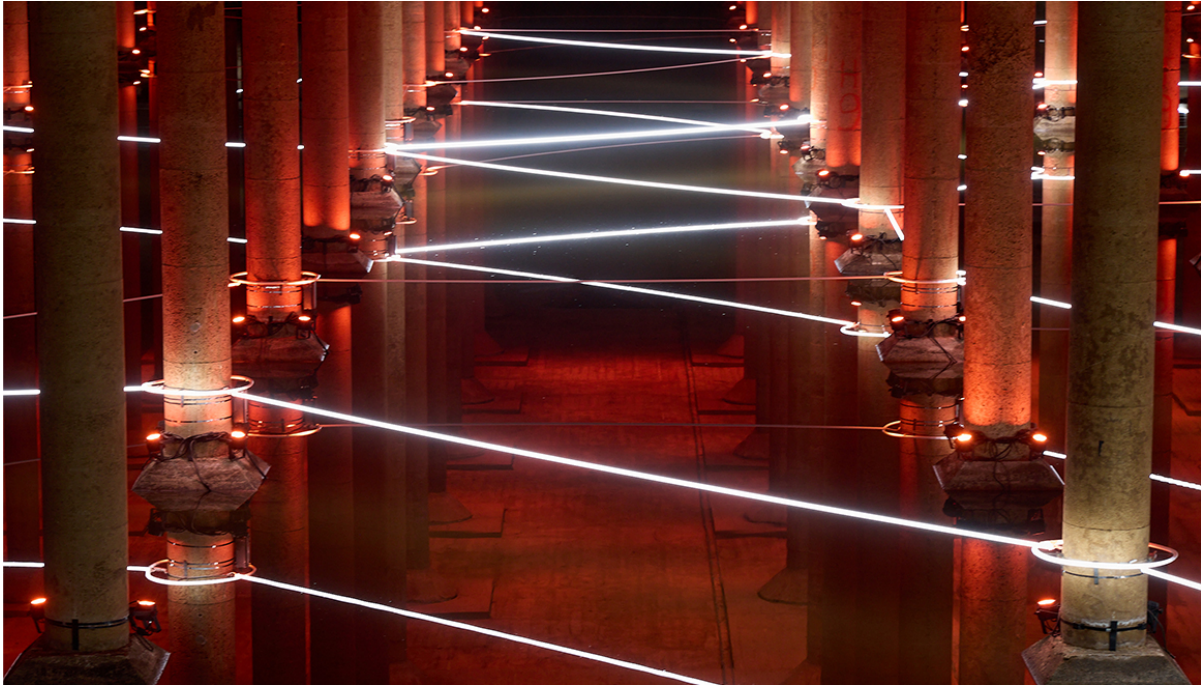


What Flows Beneath: Inside Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "Undercurrents" at Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern, Houston

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"Undercurrents" by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern. Courtesy Buffalo Bayou Partnership. Photo: Nicki Evans

An undercurrent may refer to a counter current that flows beneath the surface of water. Metaphorically, it points to what's hidden such as unspoken emotions, built-up tensions — the things that fester inside the body and mind.

Canadian artist [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#) turns that idea into [*Undercurrents*](#), his multisensory installation at the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern in Houston, Texas. The title functions both literally and figuratively. Beneath the cistern's surface, sound and light travel like water — reflected, refracted, and ever moving. The counter current flows with circulating levels of layered meanings.

The cistern itself is important to the interpretation of Lozano-Hemmer's site-specific work. It's celebrating its 100-year anniversary. Built in 1926, it once stored 15 million gallons of water for the city's water supply. It was decommissioned in 2007 and reopened by Buffalo Bayou Partnership as a historical public space in 2016. The interior was never meant to be seen by

the general public. To make visible what is normally hidden adds an additional layer of context and meaning to the visceral experience.

Water in Texas is becoming more fragile by the day. Extreme heat, drought, rapid population growth, deteriorating infrastructure, and the arrival of data centers and other industries are all [pushing the issue into crisis territory](#).

When I think about that, dystopian eco-sci-fi novels like [The Water Knife](#) by Paolo Bacigalupi and [The Water Wars](#) by Cameron Stracher keep resurfacing, where water shortages, corporate control, and battles over water rights start to look less like fiction and more like an inevitable future. Even when people argue about climate change, many seem to agree on one unsettling possibility, that water may become our most precious, valuable resource.



"Undercurrents" by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern. Courtesy Buffalo Bayou Partnership. Photo: Nicki Evans

Those thoughts keep circling while I move through the installation. A guide leads me into the subterranean, dark, cavernous space. My eyes take a moment to adjust. Then the light show begins. A linear, mile-long network of LEDs activates the expanse, turning the cistern into a visualization of sound waves traveling. The light plays tricks on my eyes as I gaze downward into the lights' reflection mirrored on the water's surface. Visitors are invited to speak into intercoms placed along the walkway. At timed intervals, poems read by Houston authors echo through the space. I speak into the intercom and watch as my words get pulled into that pulsing network. An echo responds, sometimes mimicking me, sometimes turning into

something like a stream-of-consciousness reverberation. I speak in Spanish. My friend speaks in Italian. The archive recognizes both languages and replies. My experience is magical. I want to believe on so many levels.



“Undercurrents” by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern. Courtesy Buffalo Bayou Partnership. Photo: Nicki Evans

The whole system is powered by an AI algorithm, and the archive grows and evolves throughout the nine-month exhibition. If you don’t want to “feed the machine,” you can choose not to press the “record” button on the intercoms. I want AI to use my voice and my words. In my utopic or perhaps myopic world, I imagine my voice replacing the white patriarchy bias inherent in most AI modeling programs.

There’s controversy around AI, it’s part of the *Undercurrents* theme. But it isn’t the most interesting part of the work. In previous pieces, Lozano-Hemmer hasn’t used AI simply as a creative tool. He frames it as a “critical medium” for exploring surveillance, memory, and human connection.” He is quoted as saying, “there is no such thing as a neutral algorithm.” I agree with that. But I also feel that *Undercurrents* uses AI less as critique and more as the technology that builds the database — an evolving archive that feels strangely alive with human and simulated voices.

It’s easy to get caught up in the spectacle of a large-scale, immersive light and sound work. What has stayed with me over the past two months are the poems. While the installation is visually striking, the power comes through inviting visitors to contribute to the oral archive, the

connection to Texas and the importance of water resides within the historic site and the spoken words of Houston and Houston-connected authors. Featuring a resonant soundscape with poems by [Nick Flynn](#), [Aris Kian](#), [Martha Serpas](#), [Jennifer Teets](#) and [Roberto Tejada](#), I noticed overlapping themes of honoring the land and lamenting the neglect and misuse of natural resources, especially water.

Kian's poem, "Genesis," is both a love letter and a eulogy to the gulf (presumably the Gulf of Mexico). It begins with "Dear gulf," ending with "Oh, how we've failed you if we have witnessed the water and do not see ourselves washing away." In the poem, "a body of," Kian writes, "here is where we learn the next war will be of water."

Tejada's writing from *The Afterward* speaks to the extreme weather patterns due to climate change, resulting in storms such as Hurricane Harvey (2017) and Hurricane Beryl (2024): "... at the mercy of a force unleashing... a liquid form colossal... held in motion in downpour sequences over Memorial to Baytown."

An excerpt from Flynn's writing from "march 2026" also evokes the power and awe of hurricanes. "It would start with a house, built too close to the water, teetering. It would start with a storm, the ocean rising up, pulling down the houses around it. It would start with us in a room, the wind lashing the windows, neither of us willing to leave. Where could we go?"

Serpas writes about the sea's resilience and its power in reclaiming the earth:

"Psalm at High Tide

Rain on the river's vinyl surface: water that glitters, water that hardly moves, its branches witness to trees,

to fronds, leaves, crab floats, pilings, shopping carts, appliances—the divine earth takes everything in its wounded side

and gives back wholeness. It bears the huddled profane and endures the soaking venerated in its wild swirls—this river fixed with wooden weirs, radiant in misshapen glory."

from *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (WW Norton, 2006)

The writers' words ask us to reflect on our responsibility as stewards of the land, the water, and its inhabitants, speaking about impermanence, resilience, and reclamation.

As I keep thinking about the irony of participating in an AI driven, human and other-than-human technological encounter, I'm reminded of the power of place, how it holds history and memory. My brief time in a dark, subterranean echo chamber listening and speaking into the

dark void made me wonder how these fleeting moments form threads of connection in an uncertain and troubled world. I ask myself, “Can this archive outlive us? And, if so, what does that say about us and the state of humanity?”

Undercurrents, by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, is on view through January 24, 2027, at the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern in Houston.