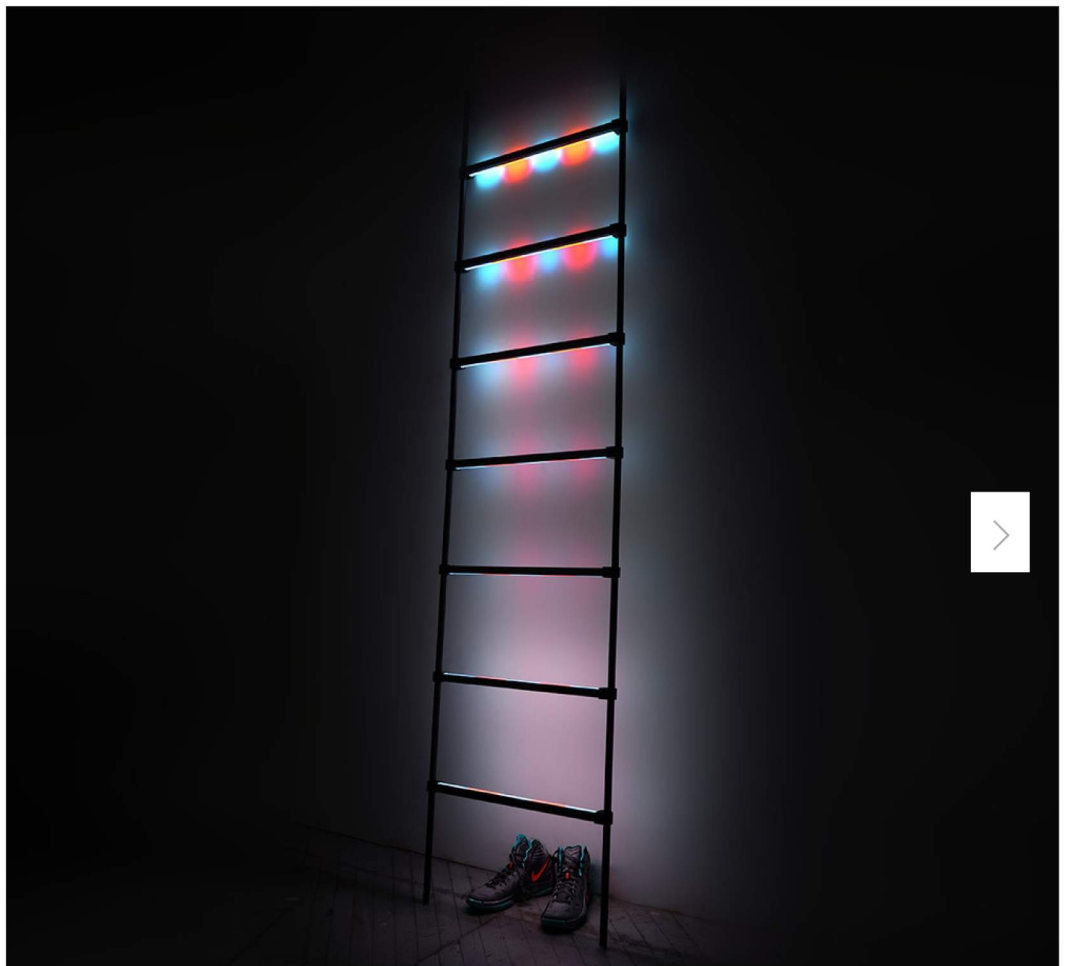




alternative escape

## JAMES CLAR

James Clar is a new media, film, and all around tech artist based in Brooklyn. He may also be a magician. His works pose self-reflecting questions of how we interact with digital media and the internet. Manipulating lights to make beautiful images and immersive installations, his digital ghosts make you wonder of the balance between real life and the one behind the screen. He will have upcoming exhibitions at MoCA Jacksonville in fall 2017 and a collaborative work with Rana Begum in Dubai. We spoke with James about light as a medium, uploading our consciousness online, and parallel universes.



Teleported, Pixelated, Digitized (The Vanishing)



## **What is your background?**

I went to NYU for film and animation, focusing on directing because I was interested in telling stories. However, I learned film production is a huge in scope with collaboration and lots of people. There are a lot of unknowns that you cannot control such as weather, actors or screenwriters – they will always take your idea and filter it in their ways. I thought if I really wanted to control an idea I'd have to move to animation, because then everything is on the screen because you put it there. And from there I got into 3D animation where you can simulate natural environments.

## **How would you characterize your work?**

After undergrad I went into ITP and started reading a lot of media theory like Marshall McLuhan. One central idea is that screen-based work and animation is not three dimensional, but rather two dimensional since the screen is a flat 2D surface, and not only that, it's also a light system. I was watching a film in a movie theater and I was thinking how bizarre it was that light bouncing off a screen can lead to characters and ideas. Film and video has its own set system, it is a certain framerate and aspect ratio. So I thought of instead of using that system I would come up with my own systems to control light itself. These visual systems could then relate conceptually back to their idea. In a sense a lot of my works are trying to create new technological visual systems and also critique the aspects of those systems. I was living in Tokyo and Dubai and since moving back my work has been about how technology alters our perception of reality. I find it interesting how you can stare at a screen for more than 8 hours a day, more than anywhere else, and through that your visual reality is transmitted.

## **Your work stays clear of appearing too cynical though.**

I don't try to be too heavy-handed about negative aspects of technology. A lot of times I just try to make observations. To back up I was living in Dubai from 2006 – 2012 and I started making works that blended technology and social politics because in the Middle East politics are prevalent social subject. A lot of the works I was making there were observing these sorts of systems.

## **What was your experience in Dubai like?**

First year I was there I was having a hard time adjusting. I am an Asian American making these works in the Middle East, and in 2007 the art scene was as developed as it is now. After a year I started networking with the galleries there and they became supportive as I integrated and also helped with the development with the art scene. I was helping run an art and studio space (set up by Rami Farook) called Satellite in Alserkal Avenue. I was running the space as my studio and also inviting artists to do installations there. The warehouse was an artist space where we could discuss ideas and hang out, and this helped fill a different area of the arts as the scene was developing at that time.

In terms of my artwork, I became interested in perception and where information comes from in the media. One of the first questions you get asked in Dubai is "Where are you from?" and it's a way for people to place their perception of you in their head. When I was first in Dubai we were still in the Iraq war and I would get some negative reactions if I said I was American. These cultural perceptions were just based off news media and information systems. For the most part, I think nationalism is largely wrong and an incorrect way to judge anyone from anywhere.

## **What work did you make while there?**

An example is this piece called "The difference between me & you." Two screens face each other and one is playing Fox News and the other Al Jazeera. It's taking this cultural information and the media system that disseminates it, and creates an abstract light piece out of it.

## **So you were making more heavily political work?**

Yes because it was based mainly off the conversations I was having there. Dubai is an example of extreme globalism and rapid development. Most people had been there maybe 5 years, and come from all over the world. So we would have interesting conversations about culture, politics, language,

and arts. When I was there I started experimenting with different media. I hadn't developed my current style at that point, the kind with linear lights and filters.

### **How has your work changed when you moved back to the States?**

When I came back to the States I didn't know if I should, or even wanted to, keep pursuing the harder socio-political aspects of my work. So I started thinking of ways to evolve to the next step. One thing I did was to get an EEG brainwave reader and record my brain while sleeping. I zoomed into the moment I reached REM state and mapped my EEG reading at that moment onto a large light piece. This became a conceptual prism through which a lot of other works have come about. If you are looking at a CRT monitor it is kind of like looking through a prism that your reality comes through. So I did an exhibition about constructing the basic elements of this fictional virtual / subconscious computer world. Another thing I am interested in is the area between computer simulation and reality (the uncanny valley) and I think we are closing this gap, or at least becoming more open towards the computer world.

### **Is nature important to you?**

Yes, I think so. Especially now that I'm seeing how our view of the world is altered through technology so a lot of times I'm taking technology or pixel sculpture aesthetic to create a reduced version of nature as a way to comment about this transition. We watch so many Hollywood blockbuster movies (and even lots of tv shows) that are in a large part computer animations, but they're never categorized as such. So in a way we have become acceptant of this computer reality.

### **So where's the future heading?**

I think we are in a slow slide towards these virtual realms like Holodex and Oculus rifts, but the blurring of these boundaries are how we become accepting of these new environments. Augmentation of information helps with this.

### **What is an appropriate balance for technology mimicking life?**

Honestly I do not like a lot of technology, it's so frustrating and the marketing terms make my eyes roll. And from an artistic standpoint it's such a hassle to deal with. But it's a medium that's worth investigating if contemporary art is supposed to deal with contemporary issues. If someone could have perfect memory if it gave them an advantage over a job or knowledge, people are going to do it. It's going to change the function of humans, how we communicate and function with each other. Artists have to speculate and think about these things.

Now let me ask you, if you had a time machine would you rather go forward or backwards?

### **If we went backwards can we stay there? There is the potential of altering the stream of time.**

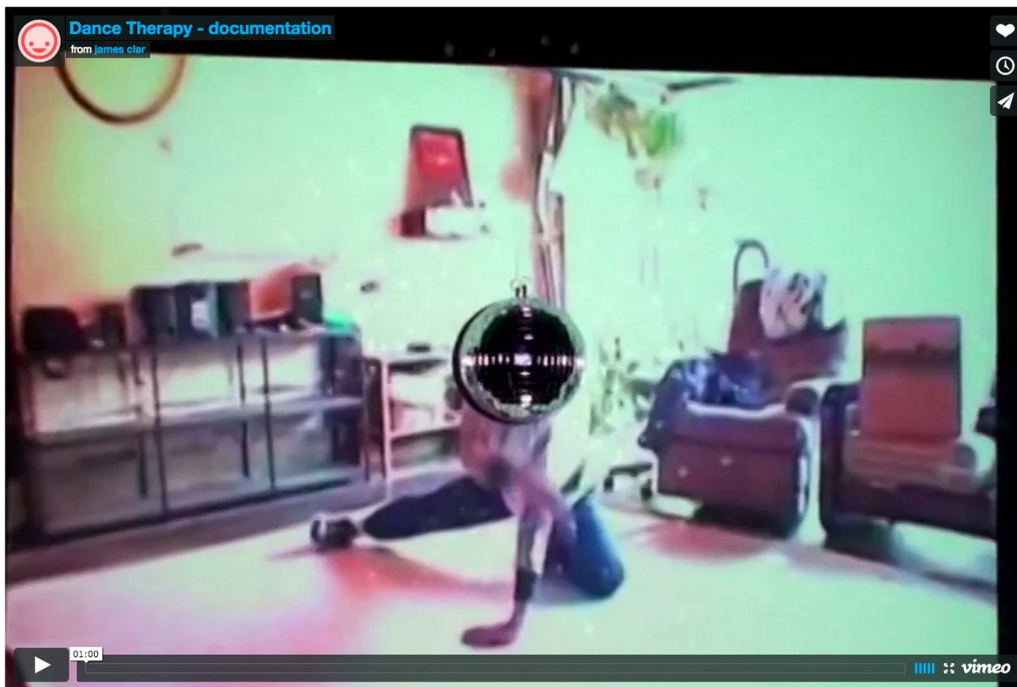
I think it'd be interesting to go forwards. Might be scary but think about the flying cars!

### **Yeah, still hoping for those hover boards.**

And Holodex. The future could also be really perverse or twisted.

### **What if in the future people become inept and devolved and can't even plant things.**

That's why you need technological augmentation and always have a schedule running.



**Was “False Awakening” your most recent show? What was that about?**

There was this work called “Nobody Home” - a door with an LED strip placed behind it. I recorded myself walking around in the studio. When you are looking at the door you see what looks like a person walking behind it. The idea is taking the information of a person and reducing it to a sliver of light.

**That piece feel so spiritual.**

It does feel like someone is on the other side. It’s a bit haunting. People tried to open the door in the exhibition. This other piece is “This Fire Won’t Stop”, it’s an LED screen submerged in a tank of a non-conductive liquid so it looks like it’s playing underwater and it’s a video of a stuntman running around on fire edited into a loop. He’s really engulfed in flames but looks like he’s dancing and twirling. It doesn’t consume him he just exists in this state.

**Digital work can be very disengaging but you manage to bring a human element to it.**

Yeah, it’s my own personal views and it’s about technology but it’s about how it affects us. Sometimes media art is so technological it’s almost for computers and you have to really appreciate programming in order to like it. I’m trying to bring human elements to it. Humanism within media art. One thing I’m into is thinking that we are in a computer simulation. I made a piece called “Seek” that’s a basic version of a self-run computer simulation. I took a contact microphone and put it on the hard drive so you hear the spinning and clicking as it’s trying to seek information. That sound is routed to the speakers and then back into the computer and into sound interactive software, so the computer is analyzing it’s own function. It’s a self-generative sound and visual piece.

**Your sci-fi movie references are great.**

Thanks! I did a piece based on “Lawnmower Man”. It’s a videotape of my light switch in my studio and I’m flipping it on and off and projecting it at the same size. This digital version controls the real physical light through a computer. The idea is that the virtual is controlling the real. Once we get to the point when we can upload our consciousness to the network that’s when the virtual or the AI consciousness starts controlling the physical world.

**That definitely was an X files episode.**

Even in the 90's when it was so bizarre it could get there.

### **What shows do you have coming up?**

I might do a show in Barcelona next spring. I'm doing an installation for MOCA Jacksonville next fall. Then I'm going to Dubai in December, doing a collaborative work with Rana Begum. I'm trying to do more video work as well.

### **How do you source your material?**

My lights manufacturer is in China. It was hard to find these really streamlined LED lights, at first I was using fluorescent lights around 2010 and I was getting these photography light gels, cutting them and applying them. It was super raw. Now it's all LED. I view these light works as pixels outside of screen, so I'm trying to manipulate them physically and use them sculpturally.

### **We really love your piece "Teleported, Pixelated, Digitized." Can you tell us about that work?**

It's a ladder is made from LED lights with shoes on the bottom. Colors are sampled from shoes and because of angles from lights it goes from diffused to more pixelated. The shoes are standing there so it looks like someone is getting scanned and digitized, so they diffuse.

### **This work is one of the more haunting ones.**

I feel like one area of thought that we are going to is that the physical is not as important as the digital, so I'm thinking about digital ghosts. If you like that one, you'll like "The Other You". It's a black mirror and mounted on it is a  $10^{10^{28}}$  meters sign. This is the distance you would travel in meters to go outside our universe and into another one that would potentially have the same configurations as our universe. That's the minimum amount of distance you would have to travel to find another you. Another work, created for Parasol Unit in London, is a big light explosion based off the Big Bang – the universe at its smallest. It's composed of rods and each of these rods has an etched timeline of the universe's history from inception to the creation of humans, spiralling out in each direction. Each rod represents a multiverse and the idea is that maybe you did something different in each one. The piece is called "All everything" and it means every single option and every possibility.