

The Guardian



Rain Room offers art lovers – and Instagrammers – the perfect storm

It is, quite literally, an immersive experience. Just don't expect to get wet

Brigid Delaney

Mon 12 Aug 2019 19.00 BST

Along Fitzroy Street in St Kilda, the palm trees bend in winds of 60km/h. The sky is white, the temperature a brisk 8C and everyone is hurrying to get out of the rain.

Yet around the corner in Acland Street, in a purpose-built pavilion on top of a car park, people are paying \$30 a pop to stand in a storm.

Inside Rain Room patrons can experience a heavy downpour – largely without getting wet. The work by the London-based art collective Random International was bought by the Jackalope hotelier Louis Li for an undisclosed sum, and opened in Melbourne on Friday in a collaboration with Acmi.



People move through the 100 sq m field of continuous rainfall. It's a responsive environment that engages all the senses. Photograph: Daniel Pockett/Getty Images

It's already one of the hottest shows in town, with more than 20,000 tickets sold before the work even opened.

Rain Room is, quite literally, an immersive experience. In the middle of a black room, it is raining. The rain falls in a perfect square, illuminated by a single spotlight - until you walk into it. Sensors track your movements when you enter the space, activating a mechanism that stops the rain falling on you. You only get wet if you run, as the drops will have already started falling before you arrive under them.

For the viewer, there is the initial strangeness - and pleasure - of walking into a storm: the beauty of seeing the backlit rain fall, as if coming from a dark sky on to a lamp-lit street, but without the discomfort of getting soaked.

This is the first time the work has been shown in Australia. There have been Rain Rooms at the Barbican in London (2012); the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2013); the YUZ Foundation in Shanghai (2015); Lacma in Los Angeles (2017); and at the Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates (2017).

There are several rooms in existence (plus many clones in China) but the version bought by Jackalope is the first to be exhibited by a private buyer.

When Guardian Australia visited on Friday, the first guests were filing through in groups of 18. Only nine people at a time are allowed into the rain.

Jennifer Barnes, senior projects commissioner and producer at Random International, is in Australia for the Melbourne launch. "Rain Room is an art work in an immersive environment but it's also a machine," she told Guardian Australia. "And there's a really intuitive relationship between the human and the machine in the space.

"It gives you a sense of control of what's happening around you, and a sense of control over nature."



A man is fully immersed in the rain while simultaneously protected from it. Photograph: Daniel Pockett/Getty Images

Coders, architects, designers and artists were involved in Rain Room's construction. After an initial seven-week run in St Kilda, the work will find a permanent home in a yet-to-be-opened Flinders Lane hotel, Li's second hotel in Melbourne.

The 30-year-old owns the super-luxe Jackalope Hotel on the Mornington Peninsula. He has also bought the Sydney bakery Black Star Pastry, home of a very Instagrammable watermelon cake.

When Guardian Australia visited Rain Room, Li himself was working at the box office, incognito in Rain Room merchandise. A hotel spokesman, Josh Ogilvie, declined to say how much Li had paid for the artwork.

“When Louis was conceiving the narrative of this second hotel in Flinders Lane he was thinking what is the luxury in this context? And he thought the biggest luxury in an urban context was nature. How do we give people in the centre of Melbourne exposure to nature? This piece came home to him. Thus began a process of Louis acquiring an edition to bring it out here.”



Water droplets cease to fall wherever movement is detected. Photograph: Daniel Pockett/Getty Images

The work was created before Instagram exploded in popularity, but its creators have found that it has “become very popular on social media. Everyone comes in and takes a picture of it. For us it's been a bit of an unwitting zeitgeist.”

Barnes sees the irony. “We spent four years creating this incredible immersive environment that people can experience – and the first thing people want to do is take a 2D image,” she says. “So a lot of people have experienced the work through that medium.”

But does the instinct to whip out a phone ruin the physical experience of the work?

“People do take their phones out but its not necessarily their first instinct,” she says. “The first few minutes of people walking through it are really pure and people are really taking in everything that’s around them and looking at the water. It’s not until just before they leave that they start bringing their phones out.”

. Rain Room is showing at Jackalope pavilion in St Kilda. Tickets are on sale now

Since you're here...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading and supporting The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism than ever before. And unlike many news organisations, we have chosen an approach that allows us to keep our journalism accessible to all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford. But we need your ongoing support to keep working as we do.

The Guardian will engage with the most critical issues of our time - from the escalating climate catastrophe to widespread inequality to the influence of big tech on our lives. At a time when factual information is a necessity, we believe that each of us, around the world, deserves access to accurate reporting with integrity at its heart.

Our editorial independence means we set our own agenda and voice our own opinions. Guardian journalism is free from commercial and political bias and not influenced by billionaire owners or shareholders. This means we can give a voice to those less heard, explore where others turn away, and rigorously challenge those in power.

We need your support to keep delivering quality journalism, to maintain our openness and to protect our precious independence. Every reader contribution, big or small, is so valuable. **Support The Guardian from as little as £1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Art and design
- Installation
- Melbourne
- features