

Cotter, Holland
"Charles Atlas: The Waning of Justice"
The New York Times
Vol. CLXIV, No. 56,804. March 13, 2015. C24.

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LAST CHANCE

Charles Atlas

'The Waning of Justice'

Luhring Augustine
531 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Saturday

The career of the American filmmaker Charles Atlas has been a steady but slow-burning fire for more than 40 years, beginning in the 1970s, when he initiated a series of video collaborations with Merce Cunningham. Those videos went well beyond being documents of Cunningham's dance — though they were certainly that — to become acts of filmic choreography in themselves. Over time, the network of Mr. Atlas's collaborators expanded to include other choreographers (Douglas Dunn, Yvonne Rainer, Michael Clark) and the transgender performer Leigh Bowery, with whom he did extraordinary work.

A few years ago, in an experimental move, Mr. Atlas made videos that left out people and instead created environments of geometric patterns and repeated numerical sequences. In a way, this felt choreographic, too, like animated dance notation, but with a dark, silent, end-of-time chill.

In his current show, "The Waning of Justice," the chill is still there, but the human presence is back. In the first gallery, numbers spin on, but within the context of wraparound images of an evening sun sinking into the sea. As the light fades, pairs of words flash by on the wall. Some — psyche/glacier, quinoa/voodoo — seem random; others, like glitter/utopia and history/shadow, feel more purposely dystopian. Eventually, words and numbers all disappear, as the lights go down to the sound of a mournful bagpipe drone.

In an adjoining gallery, another video, bright and loud, is playing, this one recording a stand-up turn by the veteran New York City drag performer Lady Bunny. Wearing a colossal blond wig, she sings a little



CHARLES ATLAS AND FARZAD OWRANG/
LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK

A video installation from
"The Waning of Justice."

but mostly talks politics: the plight of the American poor, corporate corruption, environmental degradation, failed leaders. Some people might consider her marginal, but smart, sharp, thoughtful civic commentary flows when she speaks — at least until that screen, in its turn, grows dark.

All together, it's complex stuff and catches a major artist in the process of synthesizing different aspects of his work, old and new. To get a sense of the old, dive into an excellent book-length survey of Mr. Atlas's career published this year by Prestel. It has a sterling lineup of writers — Stuart Comer, Douglas Crimp, Douglas Dunn, Johanna Fateman and Lia Gangitano — and the artist's contributions are eloquent. As for the new, by all means start with this show.

HOLLAND COTTER