

SAM LEACH

AVIAN INTERPLANETARY



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NEW/
ART/ **30** YEARS

When I first learnt that Sam Leach's exhibition *Avian Interplanetary* was to act as a proposal for a future habitat that references the aesthetic preferences of birds, insects and rocks based upon the research of a cognitive neuroscientist, my immediate thought was to outsource any writing as I simply was not qualified to afford the work – the concept – an educated perspective. However, that would have belied the very intent of the exhibition itself, which contains a series of works that demand a certain line of enquiry from us all. One that is hinged upon our perception of and position within the world we inhabit.

THE THEORY OF THINGS

By and large, Leach's practice is concerned with connections between art and science. He recently completed a PhD at RMIT

focusing on the genre of science imagery in visual art in both historical and contemporary contexts. His recent interests lie in the similarities between the way that humans perceive and comprehend the world and the way that other *things* – non-human creatures, a plant or rock, for instance – observe or sense the world around them.

Leach's work has long drawn on the canons of art history through the likes of the 17th Century Dutch Italianate School and European landscape painting of the same period, yet his works are inextricably futuristic. They are not merely representative of a subject or place. They tend to throw out more questions than answers. That is not to say they don't solve problems, for in their making the artist is continually unravelling an understanding of our position within the world we live, but with each of these solutions emerges a new series of questions that beckon further inquiry.

In *Avian Interplanetary* there is a painting of a hard edged, gleaming steel apparatus that appears to hover over a geometric shape in the background, strangely out of focus. A sculptural instrument rests atop a photographic print of an asteroid surface. These mysterious objects, spotlessly clean and clinical in appearance, have a silence about them that adds to their being, as if some great miracle or misfortune is about to unfold. A budgerigar in full flight seems to flee a scene that we have not witnessed. Again, with no identifiable reference point – no inherent narrative – we are left in unacquainted suspense. Our only sign of Earth (and even then that could be an assumption) is through the two larger paintings that feature



Sam Leach, *Polyphemos* (installation view), 2017, oil on steel, laser cut aluminium, parabolic plexiglass mirrors, 65 x 65 x 65 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney. Photograph: David Marks Photography.

distorted landscapes of geometric mapping and computer-like glitches.

However, these experimental apparatus, used in the research of neuroscientist Dr Mandyam Srinivasan, help us to understand the visual strategies employed by animals to negotiate their environment.ⁱ In this case it is through studies of how birds and bees negotiate particular spaces during flight that inform the autonomous navigation of biomimetic robots (drones). This is mimicking of grand proportions. These robots learn to see the landscape on earth, an asteroid or another planet using the aesthetic strategies of animals and humans.ⁱⁱ

Yet as much as this exhibition removes the human as visual subject, it is built for and encourages personal interaction. In Leach's alternate world we reflect upon our own being – our presence within space and our relationships with *things*, both direct and indirect. It is a two-pronged attack. On one hand we are thrust into Leach's application of how this could exist through the installation itself: the positioning of the audience as participant to his line of visualisation. Here we, as viewer, become a foreign entity to a foreign land and must imagine a new way for all things to harmoniously negotiate space. On the other hand the works elicit a line of enquiry as to how we have come to be where we are.

If we look deeper into its making, the hypothesis of *Avian Interplanetary* – a future habitat for humans and non-humans – we see that Leach is dismantling the structure of modern day society. Splayed out over this large-scaled, otherworldly asteroid surface, the displacement of object and animal charges them with an altered set of characteristics. Is this part science experiment, part space exploration or part sci-fi story telling?

Nonetheless, these works are not so cold as to be inaccessible or off-putting. There is truth in the way he has skilfully rendered them, offering unquestionable life. Meticulous and intricate, they clearly demonstrate Leach as a painter of indisputable talent (as does the fact that he has amassed over 20 solo exhibitions across the country and internationally, in addition to a handful of the nation's leading prizes in his relatively short career). His glossy resin surfaces have gone for now, but in their place are deep boxed frames that play with our reading of the paintings in a number of ways; by separating us from the subject through a glass window frame, but also by allowing us to enter the picture plane itself as our reflection

looks back at us.

Then, of course, there are the Pop-inspired high key colours and reductive geometry that cleverly binds the series together. He cites the Swiss wunderkind John Armleder as an influential contemporary artist (which can be understood through Leach's capacity to present bodies of works as installations in their own right), but there's also a nod to the non-objective abstractionists. These are symbiotic works of stark modernism and striking realism.

One other way to approach this scene is through scepticism (although I believe Leach to be an optimist on the outcomes that advancements in technology will continue to have on the living world). Is it not plausible to question whether science could push so far that a great unsettling of Earth results in a new planetary existence? Is Leach's presentation a portent of what lies ahead? He has, after all, said of his own work 'you can see the forms; you can see they are doing something but it's not clear exactly what it is. There is curiosity about what it might be, enjoyment just in the aesthetics, but there is also a sinister component to it.'ⁱⁱⁱ

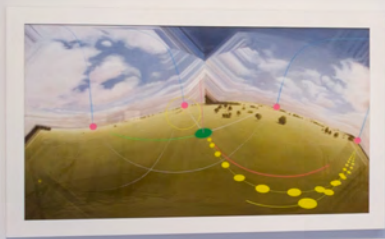
As sinister as the cold metal surfaces or the strange landscape may seem, *Avian Interplanetary* acts as a gentle awakening of sorts. What surrounds us informs our measure of and movement through space. The more cognisant we are of this *theory of things* and considerate of its application to our worldview, the greater the potential for establishing harmonious future habitats, such as the one Sam Leach proposes here.

David Hagger
Melbourne, 2017

ⁱ Sam Leach, artist statement, February, 2017

ⁱⁱ Interview with the artist, 27 February 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ Morelli, Naima. "Sam Leach: Art And Science In Venice". *RAVEN Contemporary*. N.p., 2015. Web. 22 Feb. 2017.



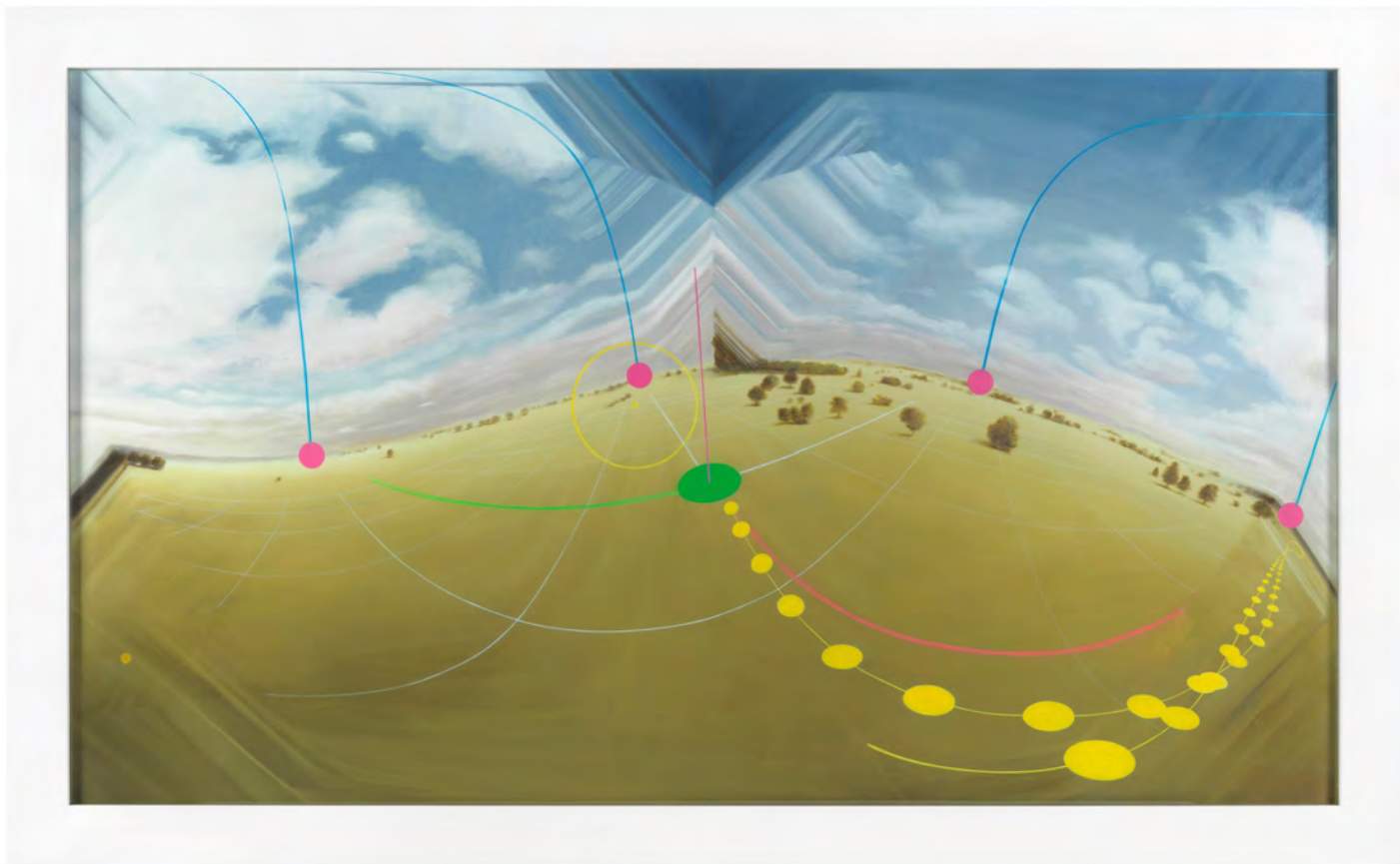


Sam Leach, *Avian Interplanetary*, 2017, installation view, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney.

Photograph: David Marks Photography.



Sam Leach, *Avian Interplanetary*, 2017, installation view, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney.
Photograph: David Marks Photography.



Sam Leach, *103 Landscape*, 2017, oil on linen, 72 x 122 cm (82 x 130 cm framed). Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney.
Photograph: David Marks Photography.



Sam Leach, *103*, 2017, oil on linen, 60 x 60 cm (70 x 70 cm framed). Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney.

Photograph: David Marks Photography.



Sam Leach, *Budgerigar in Forest*, 2017, oil on linen, 60 x 60 cm (70 x 70 cm framed). Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney.

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SAM LEACH

Sam Leach's works are informed by art history, science, and philosophy. He combines the poles of the metaphorical and the empirical, the analogous and the objective, in an ongoing investigation of the relationship between humans and animals. With a distanced, scientific approach, the artist draws connections between data visualisation techniques, semiotics, and formalist abstraction that results in a kind of reductive aesthetics. While the delicate interplay between formalist figuration and modernist abstraction in his paintings operates on one level to distance the viewer – to encourage them to look objectively at the subjects – on another level each animal depicted has a symbolic currency that resonates with the audience on a personal level. The paintings extend their focus from animal life to the spectrum of all life itself, encouraging the viewer to contemplate their role as living creatures on this shared earth.

In 2015 Sam Leach featured in *Time Space Existence*, a collateral event of the Venice Biennale, and a major monograph with essays by Andrew Frost and esteemed fiction writer Tim Winton. In the same year he completed an Art OMI Australia Committee Fellowship Residency in New York. In 2010 Leach won both Wynne and Archibald Prizes at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and he was a finalist for the Royal Bank of Scotland Emerging Artist Award in 2009. His work has been extensively exhibited nationally and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions include *Sam Leach, Future Perfect*, Singapore (2013); *The Ecstasy of Infrastructure*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Victoria (2012) and *Cosmists*, 24HR ART, Northern Territory of Contemporary Art, Darwin (2010). Leach was recently included in the group shows *Melbourne Now*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2013); *SkyLab*, La Trobe Regional Gallery, Victoria (2013); *Haunts and Follies*, Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2012) and *First Life Residency in Landscape* at Xin Dong Cheng Space for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2011).



Sam Leach. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

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LIST OF WORKS

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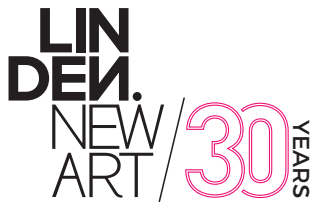
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Photograph: David Marks Photography.

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