

‘Point Cloud Daddy’ by Cameron Hurst

The first few months after I moved to Brunswick were extremely lonely. I would traipse back and forth from my cold house to Supa IGA and Russel’s Fruit and Veg to buy food I barely knew how to cook. In Fremantle, it was impossible to walk down the street without running into my dad’s yoga teacher, or her son that I’d mashed tongues with, or an Auntie, or at the very least one of my primary school teachers. I knew nobody on Sydney Road; nobody knew me.

Then, I became Ousman’s daughter. He was always chain smoking outside Bar Oussou, sitting on a busted red leather stool or leaning in the sliding door. We started chatting. Sometimes we would just shout “Hey!” to each other across the bar. Other times our conversations would extend to asking how each other were. “Good, mate! And you?” “Good, good!” I turned twenty. “Jesus Christ!” he said. “You could be my daughter!” Now every time another of Ousman’s many acquaintances would stroll by as we spoke, he would shout out “Guess what! This is my daughter.” Invariably, respondents were confused. I nodded somberly. “It’s true. He’s my father.” We’d snicker together, then I’d go and buy my veggies.

‘There Are Terrestrial Landscapes on my Bed’ is a publication that collects Naveed Farro’s recent artwork created using a LiDAR scanner. Formally, the works coagulate into a kind of kitsch cyborg-Impressionism. Interpret that as a compliment. Instead of interrogating the nature of paint, we encounter questions on the nature of the aesthetic languages and (im)materiality of the LiDAR process. The scanner is a device that renders our human meatspace into three-dimensional scans comprised of millions of accurate points. With a laser, it measures the distance between objects in a delineated spatial zone. It’s extremely accurate—within three millimetres. Once an area has been scanned, it is possible to view the scenario from any vantage point in the space.

When looking at ‘Terrestrial Landscapes’, I was reminded of a recent interview with the Cameroonian philosopher Achilles Mbembe. Mbembe identifies an accelerating cultural tendency towards “active confusion between knowledge and data... the reduction of knowledge to information.”¹ The thesis of James Bridle’s ‘New Dark Age’² is much the same. Bridle details how it is increasingly possible for us to extract massive amounts of precisely detailed data from the world, but that this technically accurate collection process is rendered meaningless unless the result is translated into a comprehensible narrative. Farro’s work bypasses the utilitarian, data-extracting modality of the LiDAR scanner in search of something more.

LiDAR scanners are used in diffuse contexts. It’s the technology that drives autonomous vehicles, and cultural institutions use them to scan spaces for digital displays. They are increasingly considered an industry-standard technology by

workers engaging with the built environment. Architects and builders use the technology for precise and efficient modelling. A technical blog informs me ecstatically that “LiDAR data, in the form of a point cloud, can be used to map entire cities... Features and objects can be classified and extracted.” Data, yes. Knowledge, I’m not so sure.

One of the most prominent applications of LiDAR scanning, CyArk, proffers sweeping transhistorical knowledge. A Google partnered project, CyArk’s introductory video describes a race to capture “the most precious sites left by our ancestors” before they are lost to the inexorably rising tide of “terrorism, looting and natural disasters” (or pilgrimage-halting pandemics). Contingency scanning: the Phoenician Temple of Echmoun, the Eastern Qing Tombs and Scottish Neolithic stone formations are all available to lumber through via your laptop.

Farro scanned his life. At the time, this consisted of the Vice office in Collingwood and a few key Brunswick sites: Bar Oussou, A1 Bakery, Studio 434d Lygon Hair-dressing for Men and the residential building that housed both the artist’s bedroom and the short-lived but influential Errol Entertainment screening collective.

Whenever I walk around Brunswick with Naveed, he magnanimously receives and delivers respect. In A1, the hot guy with the glasses and fade smiles vacantly at me when I place my order. Fair enough. I’m just another sloping white girl who only just heard about za’atar. To Naveed, he beams and says “Hey, brother!” Naveed nods from the chin in reply. “Enjoy, brother!” a different, softer guy (the biological brother of the hot one?) says as he places down our wooden platters of tahini and pita.

The summer Naveed is LiDARing everything around him, I get a second job at a shambolic pasta bar. It’s the manager Sean’s second job too; his first is at Vice with Naveed. Sean works from 10 am to 6 pm as a video editor, then from 7 pm ‘til 4 am serving puttanesca and watery negronis. When Nav comes in for dinner, the boys slap each other on the back. “What’s up, bro?” “How are you, man?” “Brooooo, don’t worry about the bill.” Labouring as the serfs of content creatorhood engenders a particular form of solidarity. *Precarity, Spaghetti, Fraternité*, as the French say.

I bring up these pseudo-kin networks between Naveed and his boys, and Ousman and me, because I think they’re demonstrative of the kind of interpersonal language and relations that constitute a real community. That’s the form of intimate knowledge that Farro scans in ‘Terrestrial Landscapes’. The work is mostly at eye level, with the bodies in motion as a central focus. Block colour passages in ‘Terrestrial Landscapes’—the corporate neutrals of Viceland and a recurrent Brunswick maroon—appear only as static sets for point-cloud wraiths to flit through. Throughout the video component of the collection, the figures dissolve through the gentle glide of the camera’s vantage point, as the ambient sounds of site-recordings echo in loop.

The works are a perversion of the LiDAR scanner’s primary purpose—to replicate the exact spatial dimensions of an area. The stills mutate against precision. Only

the aerial vantage point images of the Vice warehouse and Errol Avenue seem halfway accurate, and voided patches blotch every zone. Farro could remove the glitched figures with a tool designed exactly for that; he doesn't. He could smooth over the warped negative spaces; he doesn't. By fucking it up, or rather refusing to enact the illusory process of unfucking it up, Farro refutes the idea of technology as a tool of objective capture. Questions of accuracy are superseded by questions of epistemology.

Roland Barthes writes that “the nature of a photograph is not to represent but to memorialize.”³ What is the nature of a LiDAR scan? Multitudes, probably. We can only vaguely speculate on future uses of this technology. Farro's scans of Vice and Brunswick offer one vision. His practice is a memorialisation of peripheral suburban mundanity, one that runs in opposition to point-clouding a building site, “an entire city!”, or a ruin of Great Historical Significance. In those scans, human presence is rendered important only in absence, in the service of the towering, depersonalised achievements of built longevity. In ‘Terrestrial Landscapes’, human presence is centered.

Call me a technosceptic sentimentalist, but I think Farro's scans of my community in motion are infinitely more interesting than scans of Ancient Corinth or the possibility of speeding up building plans for condo development. They're amorphous. Intimate. ‘Terrestrial Landscapes’ is a memorial to the vague and informal extended networks of fake daughters and fake brothers that circulate through a suburb, an office, a bakery, a bar. That's knowledge, not data.

- 1 Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, *Thoughts on the planetary: An interview with Achille Mbembe*, New Planet, published 5 September, 2019, <https://www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/>.
- 2 James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso Books, 2018).
- 3 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 181.