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PERCEPTIONS & REPRESENTATIONS  
OF THE NEW WORLD

TOM MÜLLER



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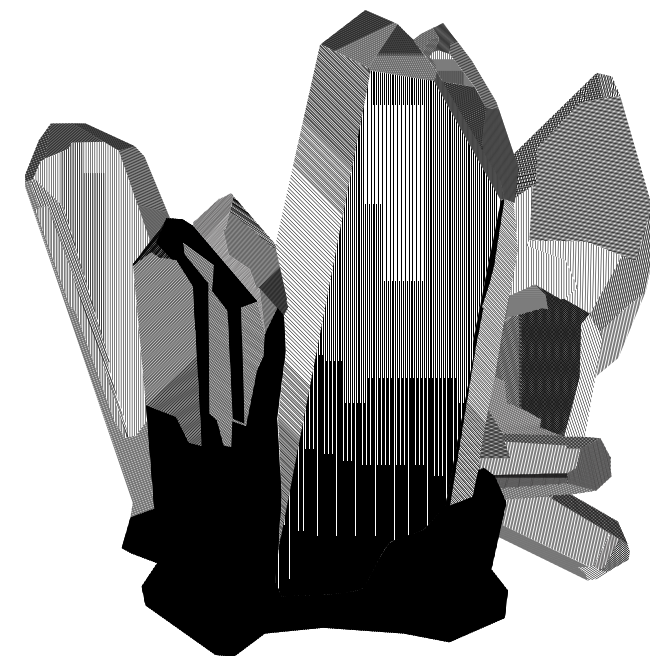
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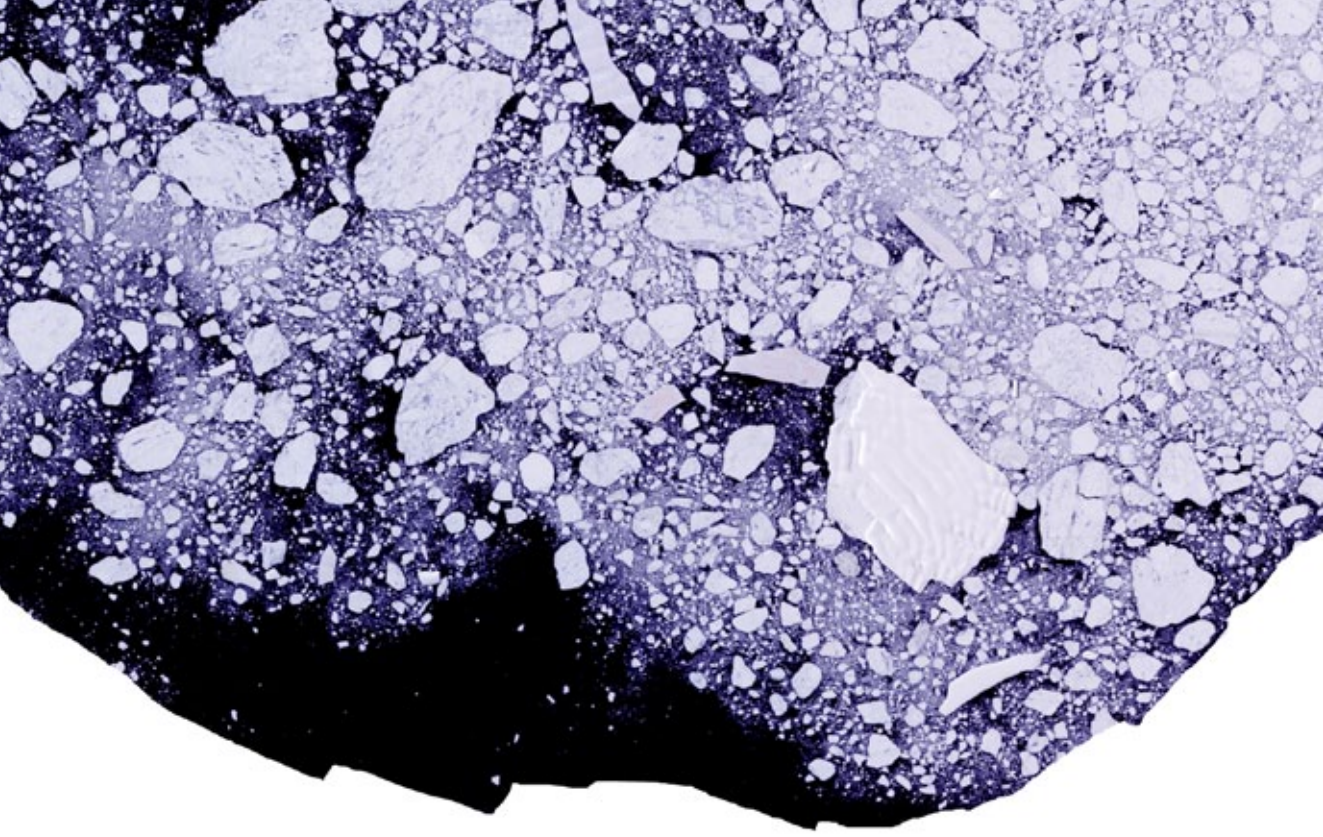
By combining a sense of global scale with the concentration on the minute, *Neo Geo* confounds apparently commonsensical categories and disrupts the orderly ways we construct and understand our world. Presenting counter-intuitive notions such as 'man-made nature', 'artificial landscapes' and 'nostalgic ideas of nature', the nature behind *Neo Geo* is both highly topical and richly poetic. Through cross-weaving our foundational logics and ideas, the works explore the future of humanity and the earth by seeding questions within the fabric and building blocks of our world view. Gentle, and yet disturbing, the work anticipates the growing sense of foreboding that has begun to emerge in the public debate of climate change and the environmental sustainability of our current global system.

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*NEO GEO Perceptions and Representations of the New World*

Ryan Renshaw Gallery, 9 – 26 June 2010





Heavy machinery loud in the Outback  
The Dreamtime developers  
They make all the sound  
Where will we be when  
They leave us a quarry

If Ned Kelly was King  
Midnight Oil

I'm sitting in a well-heeled Melbourne suburb considering Tom Müller's latest body of work. I first met Müller in Perth, Western Australia, the city we both call home. That I had been in Perth for a few years before our paths crossed is quite extraordinary: to say Perth is a small place is an understatement beyond euphemism. The Western Australian state capital is as small as the state is big; a pebble on a gigantic slagheap.

I notice the irony as I sit across the continent, biding my time before attending an art sale of significant photographs: the subject of the lot I wait to bid on is a nickel mine in Coolgardie, WA, depicting a bulldozer, its tray full of base iron ore. A glorious photograph, saturated with that 70s colour: the dozer, schoolbus yellow; the dirt, rich red ochre. All that colour, willing the viewer to a time long ago, when the term 'primary industry' wasn't anachronistic but wholesome in its potential for the common wealth of this country and also the world at large, with the small scale mining industries underscoring the wholesome cornucopia of gross export products of merino wool and Sunraysia oranges.

But not now - this antiquated view has been scraped away, like the crust of ore carted away in the nickel mine photograph. There's been a shift, the sobering thought of current issues of climate change and global environmental crisis stripping from me the sing-song resonance of Tonka Toy providence of four decades past. Müller's is a serious investigation; there's a lot at stake here.

Enter *Neo Geo*, crouching carefully and entering through the mouth of *Phantom Galaxy*, mindful of your head on the stalactite-like jaws as you travel toward the corporeal lavender haze within. Its *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Jules Verne, 1862), and Swiss-born Müller leads us with his Old-World sensibility, directing us to explore, and discover. Immerse yourself in the artist's perceptions: the artist statement has it, "combining a sense of global scale with a concentration on the minute". One glimpse of this impressive artist's next installment of his even more impressive oeuvre; we're consumed, encouraged, not chastened; these aren't



preachy works where the artist takes the high moral ground, rather a heartfelt telling, sensitive inspiration and inspired application, yet the works evoke in us a pretty prickling of our conscience, a continuation of the searing search of previous exhibitions, most notably *Elemental Worlds* (Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2008–09).

Müller is an artist who cares, offering heartfelt renderings, not glib platitudes and shallow pontifications. He's clever, that's evident; custodial not crusading; doing more to highlight the diabolical state of the natural world than pointing a camera at a piece of mining machinery and snapping off pics. Müller bases his work on the conviction that the beauty of nature needs to be upheld, and upheld through art of the spiritually moving kind that challenges the viewer to search what truly moves them and why.

All the works in *Neo Geo* function on several planes: *Vanishing Shelf*, a manipulated 'found' photograph looks at first like a cursory snap of the earth, as though the artist is saying, 'look, we've hit rock bottom'. But, on closer inspection, we see dissipating icebergs: little clusters, dirty, broken. It's a sad statement; courageous on the artist's behalf to offer something of such sorrow, and of such pertinence. The manner of Müller's manipulation of the photograph reminds us of what is at stake: note the way in which he's cropped the work - jagged, imprecise, unsettling. Euphemism is the key here: 'dissipating' is really just another word for 'melting'; and *Vanishing Shelf* acts as a compendium piece to the timber and acrylic work, *Façade for Iceberg* (2008). Only a few years on, yet we are so so much

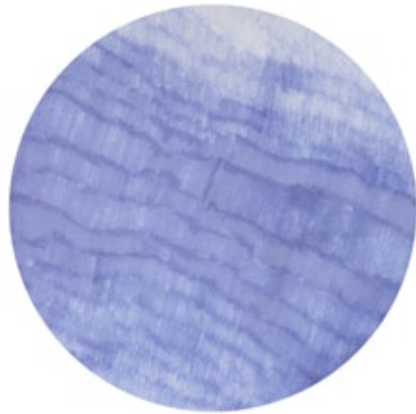
closer to the abyss. If it's a forebodingness the artist wants us to understand - to feel - it is underscored by the achingly beautiful *Neo Archipelago*. The premise of the exhibition is punctuated by this work: as I write this catalogue essay, a television is on behind me, a fisherman in his 50s weeps before a news camera; 15 million litres of crude oil leaks into the Mexican Gulf. Whole eco-systems of sea life are wiped out. It is the end of this man's lifework, his industry is dead; the majority of fish wont survive. Closer to home, similar eco-destroying toxic fuel laps against the Ryan Renshaw Gallery doors; a tanker captain with his eye on the dollar signs and not the naval charts attempts a Barrier Reef shortcut with disastrous results. *Neo Archipelago* is a heartfelt work of spraypaint on scratched acrylic: 'scratch the surface' is no longer just a device of vernacular speech. Müller's ordering and rendering is exquisite; pockets of hope bubble up, filled with esters of French philosopher Pascal,

"Not withstanding the sight of all our miseries, which press upon us and take us by the throat, we have an instinct which we cannot suppress, and which lifts us up."

*Nocturnal Migrations* informs us further, with such bleak beauty that comes from an unnamed burgeoning of our response to the world, and our relationship to it. The deft darkening; scale and scope; bleakly harmonious. Müller targets humankind's deliberate existence; the artist should be applauded for capturing, this, oblique logic of man's position in the world, and his overriding agenda to conquer and tame. Yet, the artist's handling is not desperate. It's uplifting, that's the theme here, a lilting paean not pessimistic but certainly in part precautionary.

But, we're not off the hook yet: *Astral Projections* offers us a glimpse of what may be yet to come. And it's unnerving in its portent, with its floating background beyond the stark geometry in relief; the suggestion of silt, of shifting sands, of natrons, those mineral forms of hydrated sodium salts found in dry lake beds. This work presents a certain lifelessness, without movement other than the dynamic geometrical shapes at the forefront of the work. Yet Müller continues to lift us up, *Assimilative Hierarchies* is presented with the flow of flight, of movement. Viewing, I read a flock of birds descending, but confused, vexed, unaccustomed to this new harsh dichotomy of a bereft world: they have flown from the stately gracefulness of the artist's earlier *Mineral Range* (2008), to this, an alien world with nothing but sharp geometry, nowhere to land, nothing to get purchase on, perspective disregarded, and I clamber for more rock lyrics to underpin this particular work: the stars, the moon, they have all been blown out, you've left me in the dark...

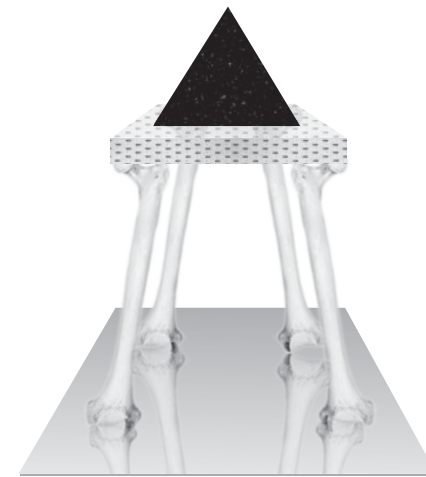




*Gravity Streams* restores the balance, with its myriad of influence; Clarice Beckett; Howard Taylor; the latter who surrendered in his artistic sensibility to the wooded zen calm of Western Australia's south-west. *Gravity Streams'* purple-pink missives create movement in its continued lines within its circular framework: like an emotive disco-ball spinning above the crass dig, dig, dig discotheque, and worse, that the modern world seems to be jitterbugging to. The unsettlingness of such a prospect of climate change and diabolical environmental damage is quelled by the quiet beauty of this work; one to return to time and time again; a touchstone, a salve.

Take a few further steps toward the centre of the earth. Spy through an eyeglass the breathtaking *Amethyst Cave*, and witness the treasures hinted at in *Phantom Galaxy*. The treasure's found; catch your breath and understand the symbiosis between nature and art. It's the pay-off, this work, an extension of Müller's masterful *Vector Worlds* series (2007). The conical viewpoint, the detail in the work sparkles: its mystic, uncatchable, and its impossible not to be uplifted by it; the work resounds in its comparable celebration to some of the other, 'harder' works.

*Four Kingdoms* is *Neo Geo's* bedrock moment: its centrepiece, certainly; the most ambitious work, and most assured at that. Müller's work stacks up against the work of philosopher, demographer, and historian. He is confident in his practice, but more than that: the 'funny distopia' (Müller's phrase) challenges the emotive states we plump upon viewing this work that investigates the inversion of the hierarchy of the natural world.



Robbie Rowland's *Disintegration* (Place Gallery, Richmond, 2008) show had lightpoles and telegraph lines curled foetally upon themselves on the floor, bulbs blown and wires atangle, heralding the apocalypse: Müller outstrips this, taking us further back. The poignancy of *Four Kingdoms* is breathtaking and exceptional, as is its execution. It is achingly precise and, well, acutely saddening. We have been left with a quarry but - fuck - worse, regressing to the point where mankind's been slapped to the upside of the head, the moment has passed, ours is no longer an interaction, but rather only a nascent reflection. That's the kicker, this, another level of engagement: ignore the master narrative at our own peril.

Tom Müller offers here a challenging look at what peers, looming up at humankind. He takes earlier investigations and, not surprisingly, comes up with a greater sense of poignancy. Sifting through the artist's observation, inspiration, and – ultimately – application, this viewer has been moved, and, glad to say it, have had a change of heart about the bulldozer photograph. Collecting Müller's work sounds a much better idea altogether.

Braydon Harriss  
Western Australia, May 2010







## BIOGRAPHIES

**Tom Müller** was born in Basel (1975), trained in Italy and Australia, and mentored by the illustrious Ilya Kabakov in New York. His practice to date has combined a sophisticated understanding of visual languages and utopian vision with a focused investigation into universally adopted processes and protocols. To this end, Müller has issued worldwide passports online (*World Passport*, 2000 -), posed as the concierge of a hotel, released a limited edition of 24 carat cards complete with instructions for melting (*Gold Card*, 2006), and opened a supermarket for limited edition works (*Supermart*, 2004). Politically provocative, these projects each reflect an interest in the circulation of value and meaning through global systems of exchange. His work has been exhibited in the prestigious *Primavera* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, *The Australian Biennial* at the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Melbourne Art Fair and at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Müller has also been the recipient of numerous residencies and awards including the Australian Contemporary Art Award from the Qantas Foundation.

**Braydon Harriss** is a playwright, short story writer and essayist. His plays, *Smoke* and *The Last of the Urban Guerrillas* have been a mainstay on the Australian fringe festival circuit. His short story collection, *Fibreglass Sharks are an Urban Phenomenon* is published by Full of Ink. His essays have been published in *Coach! Inspiration and Perspiration*, *Tales from the Inner Sanctum*, *Crime Factory*, *Tamba* and *The Olympic Story*.

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