THE CLASSICAL LIMIT

You find yourself in a Pioneer Village.

There are many of these villages found in the semi-rural outskirts of cities, each identically named in generic emulation of a colonial past. You visited one before, years ago, driving out from the city, leaving your car at the gate, and stepping into a recreation of the historical frontier. You ate damper and honey, seeing the blacksmith and his tools, the farrier and his horse, the weaver and her loom. Each were in their place, practicing their antiquated trades in pseudo-historical structures built with treated pine and pneumatic nail guns.

History was something to be experienced at a theme park that afternoon, and perhaps returned to the next month. It didn’t matter when: the historical frontier was recreated every day at the outskirts of the village, to be returned to and experienced again in a suspended moment of discovery.

The village is a site which is always liminal, located at the periphery of a frontier which it calls into being. It is an extension of the familiar, a staging point for expeditions into unexplored terrain. This frontier was once geographical, but it is always shifting. The void continents on the map have since been filled, the great empty expanses of land long since looked at and understood, leaving the anachronistic pioneer village in a bubble of simulated, placeless wilderness.

Eventually, you came to a different village, a community of disparate materials inhabiting a gallery, brought together into a forced conviviality. Plate glass and wood are tethered, chained and strapped together, refugred into articulations of counter-tension and balance. Copper tubing scrapes against the floor in a ponderous rotation, like some kind of industrial orrery, or coils above a gas lamp, puffing vapour into a jar of water. This village is located at the periphery of a newer frontier, where the border is defined by the limits of human perception. Situated at the edge of a microscopic wilderness, subtle and minute phenomena occur here in a series of constructed sculptural propositions; they are products of movement, tension, sound and light. At this frontier outcome and observation are conflated, stressing against the limits of visibility and cognition.

The contemporary frontier has contracted in scale, but not in scope or in consequence. The terrain to be explored is vast. In 1803, using no more than a piece of slotted card and a lamp, Thomas Young demonstrated that light is a duality. It possesses the simultaneous properties of both a particle, a discrete unit, and a wave, a movement of energy through discrete units. This property of light is not intuitively understood, and explanation is still contested. It can only be demonstrated and accepted as fact through a process of observation performed with simple materials.

The further the frontier shrinks, as phenomena are studied in finer and finer detail, the more the observer becomes complicit in the result. Observation of any event is reliant upon photons of light hitting the observed object and transmitting the information from that collision to the sensors within an eye or camera. When observation is performed at the quantum level, where the objects of study are the size of photons themselves, then the required collision between observed particle and photon is significant enough to influence the outcome of the observed result. It is only possible to see the aftermath of the object-photon interaction, the wilderness through the proximity of the village, rather than how it could have possibly looked without the existence of the frontier site.

Just as light behaves as wave-particles until a particular material interaction forces it to behave as wave or as particle for a period of time, observation at the quantum level is not a measure of an objective reality, but only the realisation of one of a number of subjective possibilities. The act of observation at this frontier causes an immediate collapse of possible outcomes: Schrödinger’s cat is both alive and dead until the box is opened. At the quantum level, it is impossible to observe a system without impacting upon it, and you must be considered a part of the system you are observing.

This same consideration of subjective reality is also present at a macro level, in the optical qualities of your eye, the fog of your breath clouding a pane of glass, the churning of dust motes in your passage. The village is a fragile conglomerate, materials balanced against each other in a mutual dependency, and held together by gravity and unseen tensile stress. Everything to be observed here seems incredibly tenuous, every experience bracketed by subjectivity and risk. Seen at the right time, or from the right place, the wilderness is in the imperfect transparency of soda-lime glass, pale green with iron oxide impurities; the bubble of siphoned vapour magnified by the refraction of light in a jar of water; the lenticular inversion of an image; the chiming of copper against a lifted nail, the roar of a silk mantle turning to ash in a plume of burning gas.

You find yourself in a Pioneer Village. It is a site which inhabits rather than expands the frontier, seeking the periphery of the wilderness rather than claiming to solve or to end it. When the contemporary frontier inevitably moves on, shifting once more to less familiar terrain, it will still be called into being here, recreated at the outskirts of the village, to be returned to and experienced again in a suspended moment of discovery.

Dale Buckley

ALISTAIR ROWE lives and works in Perth, he is a graduate from Central Tafe (2008) and Curtin University (2009). Recent exhibitions include In Memory of a Once Fluid Man (2013), a group show at OK Gallery, Perth, and his first solo exhibition, Unfounded Findings, at Free Range Gallery, Perth (2012). He has undertaken studio residencies at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, for his project Both Sides Now (2011) and at the Fremantle Arts Centre (2010). His artwork has been acquired by the John Curtin Gallery collection as well as various private collections.

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