

AGAINST NATURE

In Metahaven's catalogue *PSYOP: An Anthology* co-editor Karen Archey writes that the landscapes in *Eurasia* (2018) speak of 'connections between humans of the present and past, and also between nature and humanity'. These landscapes extend beyond the illuminated screens, expanding the virtual into the physical.

Metahaven provide for us somewhere to sit, and protection from the cold, hard floor. Beneath us rests a gathered carpet – hand-tufted, soft, brilliantly coloured with saturated threads – this carpet is a separate work exhibited alongside *Eurasia*. We can feel that the piles under our hands are set to varied heights; a soft uneven surface which is pleasant to the touch. We idle upon it and gaze forth, bathed in artificial light.

During my interaction with *Eurasia*, I began reflecting on how my own ways of reading the world sit in relation to the provocations that arise from Metahaven's work. One particular moment from a literary novel stood out to me and I wanted to share something about it by way of an allegory.

In Joris-Karl Huysmans decadent late nineteenth century novel *Against Nature* we are introduced to Des Essenties, the reclusive, neurotic, sickly protagonist of this story. Ever the aesthete, Des Essenties is in a perpetual pursuit of sublime artificiality. At a notable point in the story, he acquires what is described as an oriental rug, that is aglow with saturated colours. The carpet's palette is made up of plum purples and yellow golds.

Always looking to further enhance and amplify any artificiality present in his acquisitions, Des Essenties resolves to place something natural on the carpet that would move around. Something that would be dark enough to offset the brilliance of the textile's hues. He settles on an enormous living tortoise. He purchases this ancient reptile, and sets it loose in his domestic setting, studying closely the tints of the shell and its effects on the artificial surroundings. The tortoise, being a member of the Testudines family, are a partially aquatic species of reptile. Although of course, in this setting, Des Essenties's dwelling does not accommodate the required thalassic habitat. The tortoise is poised merely to amble around, atop these woollen threads, constrained by the four plaster-clad walls which enclose it.

He invites in a representation of nature. The intention is for this to coincide with his artificial world. Des Essenties is immediately disappointed with the impact once he realises the natural sienna tints of the shell have an adverse effect. They dull the synthetic colours of the carpet. He resolves to invert his initial idea, by gilding the living creature with gold, and encrusting its shell in precious gems. The tortoise, upon returning to Des Essenties's house, in its new and improved form, is set free to roam again onto the same carpet. It suffocates almost immediately from its enhancement, and dies on the woven surface.

If we were to use Des Essenties ill-fated attempt at enhancing and constraining nature as a provocation, we might be left to wonder whether we, as the reader of the work, play the tortoise here? And if so, which version? The natural trapped in a synthetic world, or the gilded, so enhanced and effected and slowly running out of breath? Or if we might wonder whether our post-human condition is, perhaps, a convergence of these two positions?

The author of the novel, Huysmans, writes that 'Artifice seems the distinctive mark of human genius'. Des Essenties himself proclaims that 'Nature has had her day'. Immersed in Metahaven's world, sitting on this padded wool, perhaps no inside, perhaps no outside. Propped up on timber pallets, assembled on this mount, we are installed on this soft ground. We move around like the tortoise, we are engaging with the work.

As the title of Huysmans' book suggests, this is against nature. Yet again, another break from the natural. Metahaven's work allows us to consider all of the positions that we might occupy. Are we the unaffected, unadorned tortoise in a synthetic world? The human as innocent, neutral and natural? Or, most probably, are we eternally the gilded tortoise – artificially enhanced, polished, glossy and synthetic – which continues to make itself anew?

In saying this, we might also acknowledge that we are probably not only one of these things but all of them, as well as being the perpetrator. Des Essenties seeing what effect we have on the world when we move things around. By assembling Des Essenties's failed attempt to use nature to further enhance his self-made world, I am ultimately gesturing towards Metahaven's continual transmutation of what is around us. Their recapitulation and reinterpretation of our contemporary condition.

Ella Egidy, 2020

Written as a response to Metahaven: Field Report (7 March – 9 May, 2020), exclusively developed for RMIT Design Hub Gallery, RMIT University and presented in collaboration with the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV).

Field Report was conceived and designed by Metahaven, Netherlands.

Guest exhibition curators: Brad Haylock (RMIT) and Megan Patty (NGV).