An Audio Guide through the Hyperborean Weeds and Termite Mounds of Mars; Isaac Clarke, Oliver Hull, Woody Mellor, Andrew Wood, David Wood.

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Hyperborea – a mythical civilisation of the Ancient Greeks. Located somewhere north of the North Wind, beyond the mountains in a land of perennial daylight, where everyone lived a thousand years in complete happiness. Homer placed it north of Thrace. Pindar, near the Danube. Herodotus thought that it was in Central Asia, on the far side of the mountains that mask China from Kazakhstan. Others put it beyond the Alps. Or north of Scythia, in the then unknown land north and east of the Black Sea.

As the terra incognita faded from the borders of maps so did the mythical Hyperborea. But it left its traces in the real world. In the scientific name of Habenaria hyperborea, a leafy green orchid with small, pale-green flowers native to wintry wetlands. And Festuca hyperborea, a tufty sedge that occurs on cliff tops, slopes, ridges, and river terraces. An arctic bird bears its name, as does a ground-dwelling spider and almost 200 other species of plants, animals, and fungi, all natives of this no-place.

Oliver Hull's delicate watercolour illustrations depict some of these species. Like a medieval herbal encyclopedia, they show the plants and fungi soberly, clearly, with fine detail. They recall the Voynich manuscript, one of the most famous and mysterious of these herbals, but as sort of reversal. That work depicted imaginary or mythical species, whereas here the species are real, but refer to a fantastical place. Hull's drawings introduce the mythical in the form of the ordinary, bringing the myth at the edges of the everyday world into the forefront. Pewter coins, cast by the artist in cuttlefish, accompany the drawings. Reproducing coinage from the possible locations of Hyperborea, they connect the plants to its speculative geography, giving it historical life.

The work repudiates a recurring idea that there is an opposition between myth and reality. That myth is a sort of distracting or antiquated fancy, a disturbance of the real to be cleaned away, disregarded, or debunked. Here it shown that such ideas can manifest themselves tangibly in the real physical world. The ancient Hyperborea pervaded reality, leaving rich and remote myth embedded in the everyday. In Hull's work these fragile eccentricities and coincidences of the path of history can bring us into contact with the otherwise unreachable.

In Andrew and David Wood's work, myth is the persistent and often inappropriate interloper of the Australian desert landscape. Their work shows that our views of the landscape are heavily coloured by ancient and more recent myths which fail to understand its reality. They focus particularly on the myth of Lasseter's Reef, and the story of its namesake Lewis Harold Lasseter. Lasseter was an eccentric prospector who claimed to have discovered a vast gold reef while lost somewhere in Australia's central deserts. He died in an expedition trying to rediscover the deposit, which has never been found. The story became one of the great white myths of the bush, and a sort of Australian search for El Dorado.

Here Lasseter is represented in video, where a carved wooden bust is placed in an arch-shaped alcove cut into a termite mound. His likeness also appears as a gold-covered section of the honeycomb-like mound placed on a rammed earth plinth. Behind the plinth, drawings and diagrams from his original diary appear as a large gilded map in the shape of a pointed arch.

The Woods' work is rich in a sort of early Christian imagery, in the alcove and its primitive gothic arch and the gilded icon of the time-worn bust. The dusty auburn of the termite mound takes on the quality of the earthen walls of some ancient crypt. The map recalls the naivety and cloistered outlook of an old-world map.

It is imagery that draws on western cultural history to produce an aura of the sacred which we recognise almost precognitively. In the ease with which we recognise these features, and draw (Biblical) associations from them, the Woods' show the way in which we are burdened with a system of myths completely foreign to the landscape. It is a system that we bring to the view of this desert landscape which is as inappropriate and insufficient in understanding the landscape as Lasseter's preposterous map.

This is emphasised by the action of termites in the Woods' video. The repair of the hole in the mound seals Lasseter in and allows the landscape to devour

his image. This repeats the way in which the desert swallowed the real Lasseter up, but also shows the great disinterest of the landscape to such mythmaking. The termites provide a visceral contrast to the sacred iconography of the alcove arch and the bust. The profane scuttling of insects, relentless, eternal, hugely complex but gloriously dumb to the cool European 'ancient' shapes which the Wood brothers bring to them. The video then pans across the landscape to show dozens of mounds across a wide horizon, suggesting how indifferent this timeless landscape is to the interloper, and how hostile it is to the trivialities of mythmaking.

Isaac Clarke's work approaches myth as something that has the power to transform or supplant the actual landscape. In Clarke's work, the iconic place-namesof the American Southwest appear on an inflatable vinyl model of Mars. Las Vegas, Bakersfield, Los Angeles, Independence, Bullhead City, and others are transplanted from their geographic context and into a foreign fantastical one.

For Clarke, these are places we have come to know primarily through the medium of film. The representation of these landscapes is so frequent and so rich that they have become the fabric of contemporary myth. Their position in film can be strange, though. In some they are the narrative setting but not the filming location. In others, they are the filming location and not the setting. Sometimes, as in sci-fi, the landscape stands in for a completely fictionalised setting. Often even in the films most intimately associated with the familiar landscapes of the American Southwest there is some displacement of this kind. We are left in the hyperreal situation of being familiar with a real place, that is an every-place, or a no-place.

One of the main reasons that Los Angeles became home to Hollywood was the geographic diversity of its surrounds. It could stand in for any place. It is also no coincidence that, as in the Woods' work, much of the land Clarke is interested in is desert, which has a tendency to be colonised by the cultural. The ability in film for the desert to stand for no-place or any-place is literal, helped by the persistent fallacy that all deserts are alike.

In Clarke's work place names like Los Angeles and Vegas seem to survive their transplantation to this poppy, plastic Mars. Las Vegas is still Vegas on Mars, even when dislocated from its geographic context. In fact, these places may as well be on Mars, as the real location has become empty. Their myth has supplanted their reality. They still hold their evocative power, and the rich field of associations that they immediately create in us. Here they even have iconic pictorial form, appearing in their branded writing, Los Angeles in Dodgers style, Las Vegas in its thank-you- for-visiting style. Like Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles text paintings, they seem to suggest the totemic and almost utopic power of the proper-name to keep its referent contained and whole.

Woody Mellor has produced an audio guide for the exhibition which weaves together the myths of Hull, Clarke, and the Woods' work into a fictionalised narrative. Its narrator is Olegas Truchanas, the conservationist, adventurer, and photographer who documented the vanishing world of the pre-dam Lake Pedder, Tasmania. He later drowned trying photograph the wilderness of the Gordon and Franklin River. The guide melds a sort of pulpy adventure story with a Borgesian geography, of shimmering high-ceilinged rooms and dusty forgotten corridors, illusions and indistinct figures. The prose has a grasping, searching quality, as it tries to hold onto a landscape that keeps shifting, fading and reappearing.

Mellor mythologises the show itself, introducing the audio guide's narrative into the gallery space through the installation of a set of stairs that descend into the earth and towards his spectral museum.
The work draws inspiration from Mellor's research into the Cairo's Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, which after the Arab Spring closed to the public. Behind closed doors, however, it continued to function, and among the bustle of admin and docents it hosted unseen exhibitions and retrospectives, an invisible museum.

Mellor's work is interested in the possibilities of a museum of the invisible and intangible, and with the life of objects that disappear. His subterranean gallery enters the real objects of the exhibition into this overarching tendency of objects to shift from the visible into memory and into the historical entropy of myth.

Guy Louden