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Finitude  
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Screen Space

All images of works courtesy of the artists  
Image (left) photographed by Julian Bowron

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Screen Space  
[www.screenspace.com](http://www.screenspace.com)  
+613 9012 5351

Ground Floor / 30 Guildford Lane Melbourne Australia 3000

SCREEN SPACE

# Finitude

Embodiedmedia

Keith Armstrong (Director) | Roger Dean | Stuart Lawson | Darren Pack



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## Aerial for Finitude

*Finitude* asks us to be touched. Contradicting the alienation supposed to come with the digital, it offers a digital prosthesis, enabling us to stir and be stirred by landscapes. The visionary and the tactile are reintroduced to each other through the device of the aquarium-deep screen. I suppose that, historically, reading practices have imitated the stereotype of human evolution: our pre-hominid ancestors dragged their knuckles through the dirt; much later *Homo erectus* stood up to read and developed a rigid orthography (upright writing). Armstrong's *Finitude* invites a speluncar regression. The haptic haruspex of these environmental envelopes lies on her back; she could be about to spit stars onto the screen, like the old cave artists.

In my book *Ground Truthing* the phrase of the title was rehabilitated. Instead of referring to aerial images whose pixels are examined for remnant obstacles to total possession, it was redefined darkly as the double surface of dwelling – sky above and ground below, between whose lenticular horizons we stir, scratching the surface with our tracks (below) and our intellectual constellations (above). Touching was extended to incorporate the other senses (a reversal of vision's hegemony): the poet's breath, the tracker's track, were classified as forms of friction, producing subtle alterations in the regional atmosphere. Channeling the poet John Shaw Neilson, I thought of Mercury in Botticelli's *La Primavera*, nonchalantly shepherding the clouds with his antenna-like wand. Touch: proprioceptive, self-doubling, self-through-other, a useful device for joining human and non-human interests. After all, the red gum's warm marble trunk feels alive. But reclining, a writing desk is needed, something to lean across the stars; otherwise, even though you can draw your finger through them, they do not scatter and swarm like their reflections in the water.

The philosophical value of the touch is that it writes darkness back into the scene; it blots out, insisting, like Indigenous cultures, on the significance, say, of the Coalsack Nebula. Pointing where it cannot go, the digitised finger overcomes the limitations of the body by abandoning unreachable visions, settling instead for the pleasures of the plasma touchscreen. It is strange to think that the physics of the fingertip should link us directly to the ordinary matter of the universe.

The broader invitation of this and other works by Keith Armstrong is to build multisensory information ecologies that encourage what Gregory Bateson

referred to as deutero-learning – learning, that is, about learning. The inescapable feedback loops that bind perception to doing and both to the reality of a self-organising nature make any device for the structuring of knowledge an instrument of intention. Something is stirring somewhere and we are part of it. In this regard I talked in *Ground Truthing* of an environmental unconscious, a largely hidden or immanent script of arrangements that we might stumble across, rather as an untutored hand might strum a guitar, inevitably releasing something pleasing to the senses.

The psychic equivalent of this environmental awareness is the phenomenon of lucid dreaming, a kind of hypnagogic dreaming in which one is not only aware of dreaming but to a degree able to direct what happens. Perhaps *Finitude* is also a machine for intelligent dreaming. The lucid dreamer is said to make contact with the *preconscious* rather than unconscious activities of the mind – 'In a hypnagogic state of mind the preconscious thoughts are active in forming images, fully participating in their development and stimulating the dreamer's neural system.'

This sounds like a wildly technical distinction in the context of an interactive artwork. But perhaps not: the distinction between the preconscious and the unconscious was critical to the development of Sigmund Freud's dream theory. Other psychiatrists were content with locating what is out of consciousness in the preconscious. Instead of burying it underground, they imagined it more like a labyrinthine landscape. As I suggested in *Ground Truthing*, the seemingly unpretentious word 'Mallee' contains within it a heart of darkness. In that place name surfaces an essentially unknowable world, between cultures, between waking and sleeping. In this context, Armstrong's intriguing work gives back to the expression 'screen memory' its heuristic value. The screen is a veil because nothing is concealed: like Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, the mystery of the evidence lies in full view. The innovation is to make us responsible for what we conjure up and read there.

Paul Carter

