

Our rapidly accelerating present has rendered the future obsolete. The wild-eyed prognostications of futurists, all those sci-fi utopias, have been cannibalised by the business plans of new technology start-ups. Right now, in some Silicon Valley incubator, the basic fabric of your daily existence, every tedious chore and minor social interaction, is being ruthlessly reimagined as a smartphone app. We now inhabit a world that is largely indistinguishable from the science-fiction future promised to us in the blockbusters of the 1980s, it's just that incessant update reminders and micro-transactions have worn away the chrome finish.

As the author William Gibson put it, 'the future is already here; it's just not evenly distributed.'¹ With startling prescience, Gibson predicted much of our present day reality. In 1982, he described an online 'cyberspace,' almost a decade before Tim Berners Lee invented the World Wide Web. And yet, in the early 21st century, Gibson abandoned the imagined technologies and near future setting of science fiction for a series of realist novels set in the present day. For him, the 'now' was sufficiently fantastic. A similar attitude to the future can be seen in Baden Pailthorpe's *Pitch Deck* (2017). What appears at first glance to be a sci-fi fantasia, gradually reveals itself to be a realist critique of late-stage capitalism and start-up culture.

That's not to say that Pailthorpe's films aren't percolating with a kind of acid-tab craziness. The artist's CGI renderings offer up hallucinatory visions, in which floating heads in translucent football helmets and surgical masks offer you investment opportunities. Combat sports merchandise, tricked out with Trumpian gaudiness, hovers and rotates as though in a zero-gravity athleisure-wear showroom. A chrome egg spins beneath a sun lamp, held aloft on a mechanism that resembles Marcel Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder* (1914). Pailthorpe's visual aesthetic is characterised by dizzying, intoxicating strangeness.

These surrealist dreamscapes are wholly unique in contemporary Australian art. Globally, Pailthorpe is one of the very few artists working at the cutting edge of computer generated imagery and video. His international peers, including digital art mavericks like John Gerrard and Tokyo studio teamLab, are also his mentors and collaborators. In 2014, he curated an exhibition of Gerrard's work at Screenspace in Melbourne. And in 2016, he undertook two separate residencies with teamLab in Tokyo. Both Gerrard and teamLab have built studios that employ groups of designers who have previously worked, and often still moonlight, in digital animation for cinema and gaming. Pailthorpe works alone, which may account for the utterly idiosyncratic, auteur vision that suffuses his work.

Another point of difference that separates Pailthorpe from his international colleagues is the highly conceptualised framework within which his work sits. While Gerrard's meticulous simulations of industrial processes engage with an environmental discourse and teamLab digitally update the traditions of Japanese decorative arts, Pailthorpe's new body of work is animated by a self-reflexive

¹ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/>

concern with the social and economic conditions that have arisen from the hyper-technologized 21st century. The films included in the *Pitch Deck* exhibition are the first salvo in a grander and far more labyrinthine critique of start-up culture.

In the chillingly off-kilter cadences of computer generated speech, the virtual company spokesperson in the *Pitch Deck* film describes a smart device application that allows users to participate in the art world via a kind of fantasy sports league version of art collecting. The user assembles a virtual collection of top-tier international artists, which are then pitted against rival artist stables to determine aesthetic and economic supremacy. All the hallmarks of a new tech start-up are here: the gamification of aspects of real life; the utilisation and harvesting of data; the repurposing of existing ideas and technologies as a substitute for genuine innovation; and the general sense of a rapacious monetisation and perverse commodification of human activity. What differentiates this idea from mere sci-fi satire is the fact that the ominously named parent company, Petricore, is a genuine corporate entity and the app is currently in development. *Pitch Deck* is your chance to get in at the ground floor on the investment opportunity of a lifetime!

In a recent article for *the Atlantic*, cultural theorist Ian Bogost posited the provocative idea that ‘tech start-ups have become conceptual art.’² Indeed, some recent business ideas are so hare-brained and zany, it is difficult not to view them as parodic. Bogost makes much of *Windhorse Aerospace’s* proposal for an edible humanitarian relief drone.³ Elsewhere, *Bodega* has proposed wiping out neighbourhood corner stores with glorified ‘smart’ vending machines,⁴ while *Juicero* offers a high-tech appliance that finally takes all the effort out of pouring juice from a carton.⁵ These start-up businesses have stolen conceptual art’s primary tactic: the *chutzpah* of locating value primarily or solely in an ‘idea.’ Conversely, Pailthorpe’s *Pitch Deck* is a piece of conceptual art that borrows the aesthetic properties and corporate trappings of the tech start-up in order to critique this cultural model.

It may sound alarmist and pathologically adverse to change, but within every tech start-up’s promise of ‘disruption’ it is difficult not to hear the warning bells of future civilizational collapse. The start-up model seeks to use ubiquitous app-ification to disrupt traditional economic and social models, replacing small businesses and independent service providers with multi-national corporate entities camouflaged as share economy facilitators. One can imagine an all too imminent dystopia in which our descendants scurry through city streets, eyes downcast and faces up-lit, each wearing a cuboid backpack full of restaurant

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/03/tech-startups-conceptual-art/519924/>

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/13/tech-startup-bodega-corner-stores>

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-04-19/silicon-valley-s-400-juicer-may-be-feeling-the-squeeze>

food, while up above, in hermetically sealed, empty white cubes, Pailthorpe's *Pitch Deck* plays on a infinite loop, seductively inviting you to participate in 'the automation and autonomy of art's value through the logic of algorithmic finance.'

Andrew Purvis