



T H E
W A I T I N G
R O O M

The Waiting Room
Molly Reynolds & Rolf de Heer

“We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn’t want to meet.” — Stephen Hawking

The existence of alien-forms is a quandary that has long preoccupied the human race, to the point that the notion of being invaded by extra-terrestrial beings is woven into our story-telling. In the scenarios conjured in western imagination, these situations often have horrific overtones. But what if Planet Earth has already been invaded—by us? What if it is human beings who are actually the aliens?

The Waiting Room is a work that considers that notion. In it, we encounter Osca, an organic creature born of this Earth with the ability to adapt, blend and become a part of her environments. Osca travels to each of the seven major biomes of her planet: desert, alpine, bush, rainforest, grassland, ocean and lake. Within these otherwise pure environments, artefacts of human invention, design and discovery raise a question of time: is Osca’s planet pre-or post-human—a time before we, the alien life-form, have invaded, or after we have colonised and left? In this ambiguity, *The Waiting Room* points to the complexity of human beings, to our resourcefulness and ingenuity but also our rapaciousness and destructiveness.

The first work made expressly for the gallery context by documentary artist Molly Reynolds and filmmaker Rolf de Heer, *The Waiting Room* redefines the boundaries of Virtual Reality by dispensing with the conventional, solitary experience of VR headsets. Exploring the bodily experience of moving image has been a long-standing interest for Reynolds and de Heer, two of the most highly-regarded contributors to Australian screen culture. Known for the works they have created individually and in collaboration, such as *Ten Canoes* (2006), *Another Country* (2015) and *The Tracker* (2002), their projects have historically foregrounded Indigenous culture and the experience of the Australian landscape. *The Waiting Room*, presented in partnership with the Adelaide Film Festival, is a new narrative-driven approach to considering the impact we have on our environment.



The Waiting Room: Planetary Theatre
by Robert McFarlane

Stepping onto the pale grey wooden platform leading into Molly Reynolds' and Rolf de Heer's art installation at the Samstag Museum of Art, vision and sound swirl around the visitor.

Images of an almost virginal landscape merge with ethereal sound pitched at a level just below discomfort. Before the viewer is Nature seemingly at its most idyllic - a creek flowing diagonally through the foreground in three dimensions, its veracity amplified by two factors - being filmed by a custom designed, multi-lensed digital video camera and then viewed through special 3D glasses. At first glance this panoramic vista appears virginal until at least two incongruous elements emerge - a casually positioned mid-20th century games console and Osca, a key cast member of *The Waiting Room*. Osca, of indeterminate sex, is a bizarre figure draped in coarse fabric with large, stylised eyes.

This figure suggests an origin neither ancient nor futuristic. In this, *The Waiting Room* qualifies as anticipatory expression, creating a new medium embracing all elements of installation art while offering a playful, planetary view of human history - seen forwards and backwards. Osca's enigmatic past and possible future defies conventional analysis just as such visionaries as Vermeer and Caravaggio mastery of 'the moment' in their painting can be seen to have anticipated the coming visual grammar of photography. *The Waiting Room* addresses our deepest mysteries - what virginal landscapes we may have sprang from and where we, or our planetary descendants, may ultimately reside.



Sight seeing
Anna Zagala

What is it about a waiting room, any waiting room, that fills a person with a peculiar sense of anticipation, dread and ennui. Who are we here if not patients or travellers in these spaces?

This is a room that requires nothing but inaction, one in which our relationship with time, literally the minutes ticking by, is drawn sharply into focus.

Inside *The Waiting Room*, a VR installation work by Molly Reynolds and Rolf de Heer, gallery-goers are guided along a timber viewing platform reminiscent of national park infrastructure, a place where visitors are invited to 'sightsee' and experience the spectacle and sublime capacity of nature.

It's warm. Alarmingly warm. The sensation of heat points in one direction: the future.

In *The Waiting Room* the landscape - or series of biomes - is inscribed using VR technology. Even viewing it in 2D is immersive, a seamless surround image that encompasses the walls and floor. During its seven-minute duration it cycles through a range of majestic environments: the cosmos, desert, alpine, bush, rainforest, grassland, ocean and lake - presented much like a museum diorama - are accompanied by a soundscape of ethereal voices, bird calls, ticking clocks, wind and insects.

But this is not an uninhabited landscape. Staring implacably at us is a primordial figure, a squat biomorphic form with wide-set eyes, part-sea creature, part-rock. What does this ghillie-suited alien wish to convey?

It seems to have a proprietorial relationship with some objects associated with human civilisation. Against different backdrops the alien, referred to as Osca in the gallery wall text, stands beside a telescope in the desert, atop a grassy knoll with an artwork, behind a bucket of native flowers in a rainforest, holds two books under each 'arm', displays a steering wheel perched on an ocean rock, and, in the final moments, holds an extinguished sparkler. At various moments objects from civilisation - a TV screen, poker machines, a telephone, a small burning fire - draw our attention to other points in the space itself. The detritus of a fallen civilisation carries a talismanic force in these pristine settings.

The encounter between alien and humankind is a recurrent trope in science fiction. In *The Waiting Room*, the meeting occurs at the end of the work. In this tableau, ('sequence' is too strong a word), a young woman moves a lit sparkler through the air on a beach, while nearby Osca holds what appears to be an extinguished sparkler in its hands.

Again, the experience of time remains elusive. These two do not appear to register the other's presence. While they share space, it doesn't appear they share time. This oddly affecting moment sparks its own rich associations. If we are on Earth, then this speculative future posits Osca as an adaptive survivor of a global warming catastrophe. But could this be another planet altogether? Are humans the vanquished colonisers?

It's not surprising that *The Waiting Room* raises these prescient questions. Between them, Molly Reynolds and Rolf de Heer have made (often collaborating with actor David Gulpilil) a large and significant body of fiction and documentary films - *Another Country* and *Still Our Country* (both 2015), *Twelve Canoes* (2009), *Charlie's Country* (2013), *The Tracker* (2002) - which celebrate the resilience and strength of Aboriginal culture alongside showing the devastating effects of colonisation.



In its evocation of time, *The Waiting Room* shares something of the distinctive temporality of these films which combine circularity with a spaciousness that places landscape and country at their centre. In the instance of *The Waiting Room*, circularity is fully embedded into the work in two ways: the eight biome tableaux were created by stitching 14 shots into a 360-degree view. The finished work is also presented in the gallery space looped.

While it's a work that draws on a deeply felt experience and understanding of place and time, *The Waiting Room's* pleasures lie also in its lively and bold assimilation of schlock and popular culture: the alien family pet (*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Mork & Mindy*, *Gremlins*), the OMG! of National Geographic IMAX documentary films and the alarming scenarios played out in science fiction itself. It's a pleasure laced with anticipatory concern. If SF anticipated VR technology over 50 years ago,¹ what does time and human progress have in store for us on planet Earth?

1 Dubbed 'Experience Theatre', Morton Heilig's multi-sensory 'Sensorama' machine was first created in 1962 along with five short films for display.





Image: **Molly REYNOLDS, Rold DE HEER and Mark ELAND,**
The Waiting Room, 2018.

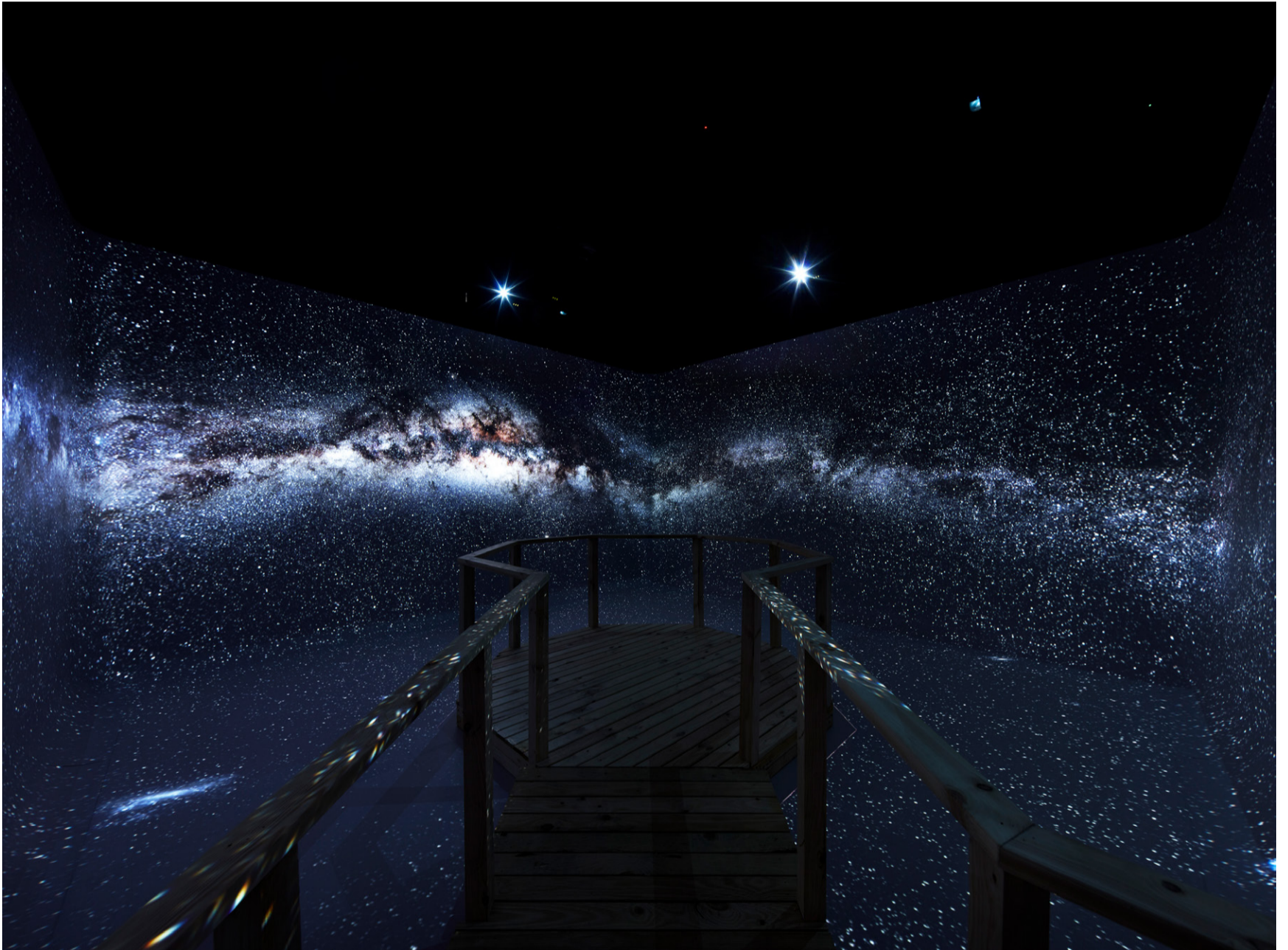


Image: **Molly REYNOLDS, Rold DE HEER and Mark ELAND,**
The Waiting Room, installation view, Anne & Gordon Samstag
Museum of Art, University of South Australia, September 2018.
Photograph by Sam Noonan.



Image: **Molly REYNOLDS, Rold DE HEER and Mark ELAND,**
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Molly Reynolds & Rolf de Heer: *The Waiting Room*

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Molly REYNOLDS, Rolf DE HEER, Mark ELAND, *The Waiting Room*, 2018, 7 minutes

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