



# Jess Johnson & Simon Ward

**Terminus is a fascinating mix of built environments, real and virtual, and the result of a long collaborative process that starts with your drawing, Jess. Can you tell us a little about that and what inspired the work?**

**Jess:** My interests lie in world-building and the construction of new realities. My drawings of recent years have documented an arcane realm continually increasing in complexity. The images I create are holographic mesh-works of grids, brickwork, architectural monuments, humanoid clones and Messianic figures.

My desire to give flesh to this world has driven my more current interests in animation and virtual reality (VR). The unique experiential nature of VR lends itself to the investigation of areas such as infinite space, altered states, new physical perspectives and world-building. It's a slow emergence of imagery and ideas. Time and labour is a really important part of the work. The long hours spent staring at paper and making hundreds of repetitive marks allows my mind to reach a place where the elements of the world begin to morph and fit together in new arrangements. Drawing lulls me into a pleasurable lucid state.

The inspiration simply comes from the world of previous drawings. My practice is self-generating and now has its own internal language. The imagery within just mutates and reconfigures and grows new limbs.

**The imagery in Terminus is a contrast of older style computer graphics and elements that are quite slick. It's a world populated by humanoid clones—multiplying, cavorting, performing yoga—across tessellated architectural spaces. What's behind these specific and repeating elements?**

**Jess:** One reason for the repetition is that it expedites production. I draw a body or element, then photocopy it multiple times, enlarging or reducing the scale. I then cut these out by hand and rearrange them in different configurations over the background of my drawing. When I'm happy with a composition, I trace it into the drawing. It's very analogue. Simon is terrified of me learning Photoshop, because he thinks, if I start down that path, it will destroy something in the process. He thinks it's my limitations that make the work interesting.

Beyond that, I see the repetition of elements as integral to the laws of the world itself, the world I've created. They're part of its generative code. I'm not concerned with individual consciousness in the world of my drawings. Instead, everything is part of a self-generating system. Patterns and elements are repeated at different scales in a sort of fractal cosmology.

**How central to your work is science fiction?**

**Simon:** I had a formative experience with science fiction growing up, particularly in film. With the idea of the *Terminus* floor map being an initial building block for the work, Jess and I quickly started talking about the repetitive quests, the archetypes and the monomyth that

fill fantasy and sci-fi films—those paths have been tread by audiences so many times that it seems we're stuck in a seamless loop, like Jess's patterns or characters.

**Jess:** Growing up, science fiction in books and movies was incredibly formative in who I became as a person, both in terms of expanding my imagination and in how I viewed reality. As far back as I can remember, I've always viewed reality as slippery. I picture it as something malleable. There are soft spots in reality that can be aggravated. My works are full of portals and wormholes and stargates, which reflect humanity's exploratory longing to discover what lies beyond the world we can see.

**How does Terminus differ from your previous work? What challenges has it posed for you both, and what is the most exciting aspect of this opportunity?**

**Simon:** In our previous VR and video works, we've attempted to recreate the look and feel of bringing Jess's drawings to life. Now we're hoping to build on the form of the journey within that world and the unique constraints that that world might have, or lack, as opposed to real-world parameters.

**Jess:** It's the most ambitious work that we've ever undertaken. We've never had the space or resources to create this sort of guided, sequential journey with multiple VR experiences. We've had to think a lot more about how the audience will move through the space, how they'll interact with the VR technology and how we can guide them on a journey while allowing them autonomy to explore for themselves.

What we've attempted to build is a 'transformative' journey for the audience to undertake, which was quite a heady quest for us to embark on as artists. Being able to physically immerse and emotionally capture contemporary audiences is a massive undertaking, and it is something we could never have achieved on this scale without the resources provided by the NGA and The Balnaves Foundation.

**The titles for the five Terminus portals are enigmatic. Can you describe one or two of the concepts you are investigating?**

**Jess:** Each VR station has its own title and represents one of five stages in a longer journey of transformation for the viewer. The names reflect the core experience of any given stage: *Fleshhold Crossing*, *Known Unknown*, *Scumm Engine*, *Gog & Magog* and *Tumblewych*. Considered archetypally, they are 'The crossing', 'The respite', 'The lost', 'The tower' and 'The psychedelic' respectively.

The VR station titled *Scumm Engine* (The lost) refers to a game engine developed in 1987 by Lucasfilm Games (now LucasArts). In this stage, viewers find themselves in a mechanical, boiler room-like planetary engine. The experience references a common stage in a heroic journey where the universal hero has to navigate a maze, puzzle or some other kind of trial to find what they are seeking.

Another station is called *Gog & Magog* (The tower). In Judeo-Christian texts, Gog and Magog are harbingers of the end of days. The *Gog & Magog* stage of *Terminus* is the most foreboding, because the protagonist, the viewer, is closest to the lair in which the malevolent force resides. This showdown between the competing forces of good and evil often takes place in a tower (*The lord of the rings*, *The neverending story*, *Labyrinth* and *The dark crystal*). In our world, *Gog & Magog* are the names of the spiders that guard the sphere at the top of a great tower, which symbolises the nucleus of our journey.

**How do you see VR developing as more artists begin to work with the technology?**

**Jess:** As an artist, I'm really excited by the psychological implications of being able to position an audience essentially within my work. I think VR is the most effective conduit from one brain to another that's ever existed. With VR you can seduce someone into accepting an entirely new reality.

VR technology has just started to be adopted by artists and has the potential to explode into new genres and art forms. The experience of VR can be really disorientating. You experience reality slippage. You can lose sense of where your body is and find yourself physically and mentally jostled by the different messages from your brain. Utilising this to push against people's accustomed perceptions and comfort levels is appealing to us. It's a much more challenging and visceral experience for both artist and audience.

It will be artists who will harness the technology and use it in ways we can't even imagine yet, opening up new genres in storytelling, communication, expression and exploration.

**Jess Johnson** New Zealand born 1979

**Simon Ward** New Zealand born 1977

**Andrew Clarke** soundtrack

**Kenny Smith** development

*Terminus* 2017–18

virtual reality experience in five parts: colour, sound.

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Jess Johnson is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney; Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland; Jack Hanley Gallery, New York.

(Image) **Jess Johnson** *Psy Zetta Terra* 2018, Image courtesy of the artist; Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney; Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland; Jack Hanley Gallery, New York.

# Balnaves CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTION

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Launched in 2018, the Balnaves Contemporary Intervention Series is a multi-year commissioning platform that provides leading artists with the opportunity to present innovative works not previously deemed possible. Delivered in partnership with The Balnaves Foundation, this ambitious program challenges artists to reinterpret familiar locations and reimagine the concept of what a gallery can be. A central aspect of the NGA's renewed focus on contemporary art practice, these interventions will engage and excite, as art experiences transform spaces throughout the gallery.



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