

House of Dust, Exhibition Text:

Over four thousand years ago, The Epic of Gilgamesh was pressed into clay in ancient Mesopotamia. It is extolled as the earliest work of literature, despite its alienation to a narrative's usual tricks.

Its hero is not rewarded with transcendence. He does not defeat death. He does not even learn a particularly comforting lesson. Gilgamesh – King of Uruk – builds walls and kills monsters. He behaves as though he could intimidate history. He is more monument than man; civilisation given a body. His companion Enkidu is offered as an antithesis: wild and hair covered. Enkidu learns language, friendship, pleasure, shame. And so, he becomes human. When his punishment arrives in the form of premature demise, Gilgamesh becomes both conscious and horrified by the body's betrayal, and thus begins his search for immortality.

The epic is strange because it denies heroic gratification. Gilgamesh does not conquer death; his quest is mocked and botched. The repeated refusal to convert endurance into salvation or grief into triumph is deeply unsatisfying at best. Our hero is returned to the walls of Uruk where the only consolation is found in the work of civilisation itself. Here, readers are made to realise that while the body may not remain, the things built around it just might. Civilisation begins to look like a very elaborate coping mechanism.

This exhibition proposes we recognise the unnerving contemporaneity in all this drama precisely because it tells of the dawning of historical consciousness: the moment the human-animal understands it will disappear and begins manufacturing things that might not. Enkidu gains culture and loses innocence. Gilgamesh gains knowledge and loses the fantasy of exception. The epic's central bargain is a brutal one: the monument for the mortal body.

Interestingly, the afterlife imagined in the epic offers no consolidation for its bleak revelation on mortality. No paradise awaits us. No final judgment, nor radiant elsewhere. The dead enter the "house of dust": a dim, crowded chamber of accumulation without transcendence. Here, dust covers the crown and the corpse with the same indifference. Fate has carried the inhabitants of earth only to an impasse, a thick present where the coordinates of onwards have been revoked.

House of Dust begins inside of this image, asking how the ancient desire to survive oneself persists today. Max Athans, Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer and Travis Ficarra offer three propositions on how artists are using new media practice to realise their personal mythologies and thus take stock of the horizonless present. If Gilgamesh returns from his failed quest to inspect the walls of his city, these artists return to the ruins of the present, but not in any escapist sense. They imagine continuity from within exhaustion to make images capable of surviving our static condition that repeatedly forecloses its own future.

- Holly Eddington, curator

[He bound] my arms like the wings of a bird,
to lead me captive to the house of darkness, seat of Irkalla:
to the house which none who enters ever leaves,
on the path that allows no journey back
'to the house whose residents are deprived of light,
where soil is their sustenance and clay their food,
where they are clad like birds in coats of feathers,
and see no light, but dwell in darkness.
'On door [and bolt the dust lay thick,]
on the House [of Dust was poured a deathly quiet.]
In the House of Dust that I entered,
'I looked around me, saw the "crowns" in a throng,
there were the crowned [heads] who'd ruled the land since days of yore,
who'd served the roast [at the] tables of Anu and Enlil,
who'd proffered baked bread, and poured them cool water from skins.

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer

Should my heart not be wretched, my features not haggard?, 2026
jacquard woven tapestry, 170 x 120cm each

In The Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh and Enkidu dream of one another before they meet. Their first encounter is a brutal wrestling match in which neither can force the other to submit. Exhausted by stalemate, they kiss. And so, they become friends. A bond develops that is described in language approaching the nuptial. Enkidu, existing to temper Gilgamesh's tyranny, occupies a narrative role more often reserved for the female beloved. It is Enkidu's brute through which Gilgamesh is softened and made tender.

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer is interested in the cultural functions of imaging technologies, examining how networked cultures make use of the history of representation. In *Should my heart not be wretched, my features not haggard?* he considers contemporary masculinity and incel culture through the ancient models of bromance that shape the epic, seeking alternative homosocial relations.

Reddit incel threads, bodybuilding forum posts, ero-guro manga, and fantasy illustrations are metabolised through Midjourney's dataset to produce the contaminated imagery within Aloisio-Shearer's tapestries. Treating Generative AI as a non-human collaborator, the artist asks the platform dream of its own homo-erotic fantasies out of the plagiarised content streams it pulls from. He then delegates further interpretation to a pen plotter machine, which physically traces the vectors of the generated output, its janky engineering introducing organic glitches and hesitations. The resulting drawings are finally made permanent as they are materialised by a jacquard loom - the original computer – into woven bits of information, radically estranged from its initial form. The tapestries' quadrants may be read as either comic panels or stone petroglyphs, as though the the oldest forms of communication has been dragged through the accelerated story telling machinery of our present. The sequence is populated by figures that

recall the mass monsters of 90s bodybuilding: burly, swollen and hair covered limbs compress and ripple with a non-human plasticity. An implied homo-eroticism blurs vulnerability and suffering into objects of desire.

Where Gilgamesh turns to his city walls, we might now turn to our digital archives as our unintended monuments. In an act of cunningly deliberate anachronism, Aloisio-Shearer reads the epic's fraternal bonds through the fractured conditions of masculinity today, asking what kinds of closeness remain possible inside a hyper-networked culture that is at the same time shaped by estrangement.

"Why do you desire to do this thing? ... anything ...
a feat that never was done in the land.'

They kissed each other and formed a friendship."

Max Athans

Ovithrope, Ornithrope, Epithrope

Plastic, steel, resin, 1475 x 900 x 300cm, 800 x 320 x 130 cm

Max Athan's sculptures unfold as a compacted epic: three suspended narrative junctures. Two ends of a timeline can be bent out of shape and into a circle. The circumference on its side appears as a line.

The sequence traces Enkidu's vision of Irkalla, the underworld in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where he joins the dead who are "clad like birds in coats of feathers" as he is led into the house of dust.

Ovithrope begins and closes the cycle. Primordial mythologies have long dreamt the world into being through the cosmic egg. Ovithrope's form summons masterpieces of both man and nature: the faberge egg, the flagellar motor, or the cellular vault. Skewed like a lop-sided spinning top, we suspect its generative centre has gone awry. Regardless, the centrifugal form steadfastly occludes the origin of all things within.

Epithrope turns to Enkidu's death, the moment the soul loosens from its vessel. Invoking ancient votive forms, the carcass becomes a redundant offering placed before an absent or withholding divine.

Ornithrope charts Enkidu's descent into this underworld. Delicate feathered appendages blooming from the sculpture's axis recall the wings of Mesopotamian lamassu: the mythological sentinels who were stationed at monumental thresholds. The sculpture's tapered descent references the dive pattern of the osprey, a bird of prey who sharpens its body mid-air before

piercing the water's surface. Here, that violent crossing mirrors the mythological breach through the Abzu, the watery deep ocean of wisdom, toward the House of Dust.

Speed creates a cyclical image, centrifugal force generates its static form. The faster we move the more we stay in the same place. Bleeding from one iteration to the immediate next, feet firmly below the ground.

“ '[He struck me and] turned me into a dove. VII 182 '

[He bound] my arms like the wings of a bird, to lead me captive to the house of darkness, seat of Irkalla: to the house which none who enters ever leaves, VII 185
on the path that allows no journey back,”

Travis Ficarra

Untitled, 2026

pigment transfer on canvas, dimensions variable

The grammar of comfort is curdled. Too smooth, too available. A nudity that is sweet but synthetically so. Hollow surface charm incubates a low, ambient menace.

A field of daisies. The turf before us is downlit with a faux radiance, though it fails to dispel the incongruous darkness pressing at the image's edges. Where are we? One senses that Ficarra offers us a mere paradisiacal decoy, a trap disguised as pastoral reprieve. Early in the Epic of Gilgamesh we are told of strange gardens on the edge of the world, of jewel bearing trees, and a miraculous plant that promise new life. In his quest for this floral antidote to mortality, Gilgamesh is foiled by a serpent who steals it away as he bathes. Paradise was never ours to keep.

A grin without a face. A chrome-skinned oracle is split by a toothy aperture. Light spews with holiness from his lips. Nothing in Ficarra's world should be trusted so easily. All revelations are suspect in a narrative that severs desire from the counterweight of mercy.

The glossy seduction of digital imagery, however appealing, is subjected to abrasion as Ficarra facilitates its passage to the physical. The transferred image cracks and falters as it is veiled over the canvas, as though the fantasy it contains is struggling to survive its contact with matter. Ficarra's worldbuilding offers us only fragments of some fully formed elsewhere; a place unhospitable and unwilling to surrender its key.

“there was brilliance: he went straight, as soon as he saw them, to ... the trees of the gods. A carnelian tree was in fruit, hung with bunches of grapes, lovely to look on. A lapis lazuli tree bore foliage, IX 175 in full fruit and gorgeous to gaze on .

. . cypress cedar , IX 185 its leaf-stems were of pappardilu-stone and ... Sea coral sasu-stone, instead of thorns and briars [there grew] stone vials. He touched a carob, [it was] abashmu-stone, agate and haematite”