

Stories Told by Empty Worlds: Lewis Reid on World-Building as a Philosophical Tool

Artworks by Lewis Reid

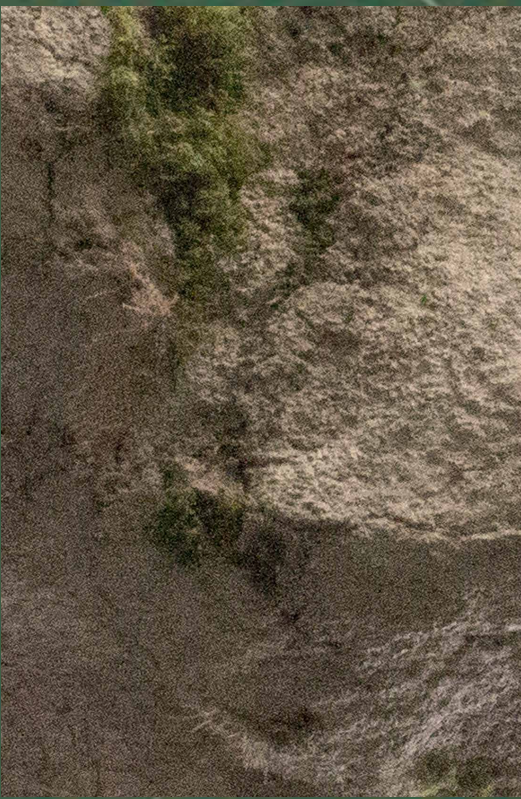
Profile and artist photos by Héloïse Auvray



Many groundbreaking and mind-twisting universes have emerged from humanity's creative power. Some of these parallel worlds are elaborated to the point that they have their own rules, politics, and history books. The planet Arrakis was created to tell the story of *Dune* and the continent of Tamriel hosts the quests of the *Elder Scrolls*, but universes such as these are often built to serve as the background for fantastic plots and charismatic characters. What if these worlds had enough to tell on their own?



Stories Told by Empty
Worlds: Lewis Reid on
World-Building as a
Philosophical Tool
LEWIS REID &
HÉLOÏSE AUVRAY



“When domination is exerted over the planet, when Man only look up to Man, there is no need left for myths.”

Fourth-year BFA Visual Art student Lewis Reid has always been attracted to world-building, spending time exploring specialized online forums and gathering inspiration from literature and video games. But when imagining his own universe for the first time, he had no particular ambition to populate it with characters. He was more interested in the geographic and historical contextualization of the universe, how the imaginary climates would have an impact on populations and how they would adapt to it. He focused on details such as flag designs and architecture rather than on how to use his universe for storytelling.

Reid is a history buff, but he has never been interested in studying the prominent figures of our world—the main characters of our history textbooks. Instead, he focuses on how life was and how populations lived, what they believed in, and which items filled their interiors. He believes that the way he studies history led to his interest in worlds and populations as a whole, with no focus on individual narratives. When world-building, he creates items and objects related to the universe and its genesis. Therefore, Reid's work feels like subject-less art but still bears extensive narratives.

Despite his interest in the past, Reid places his universe in the

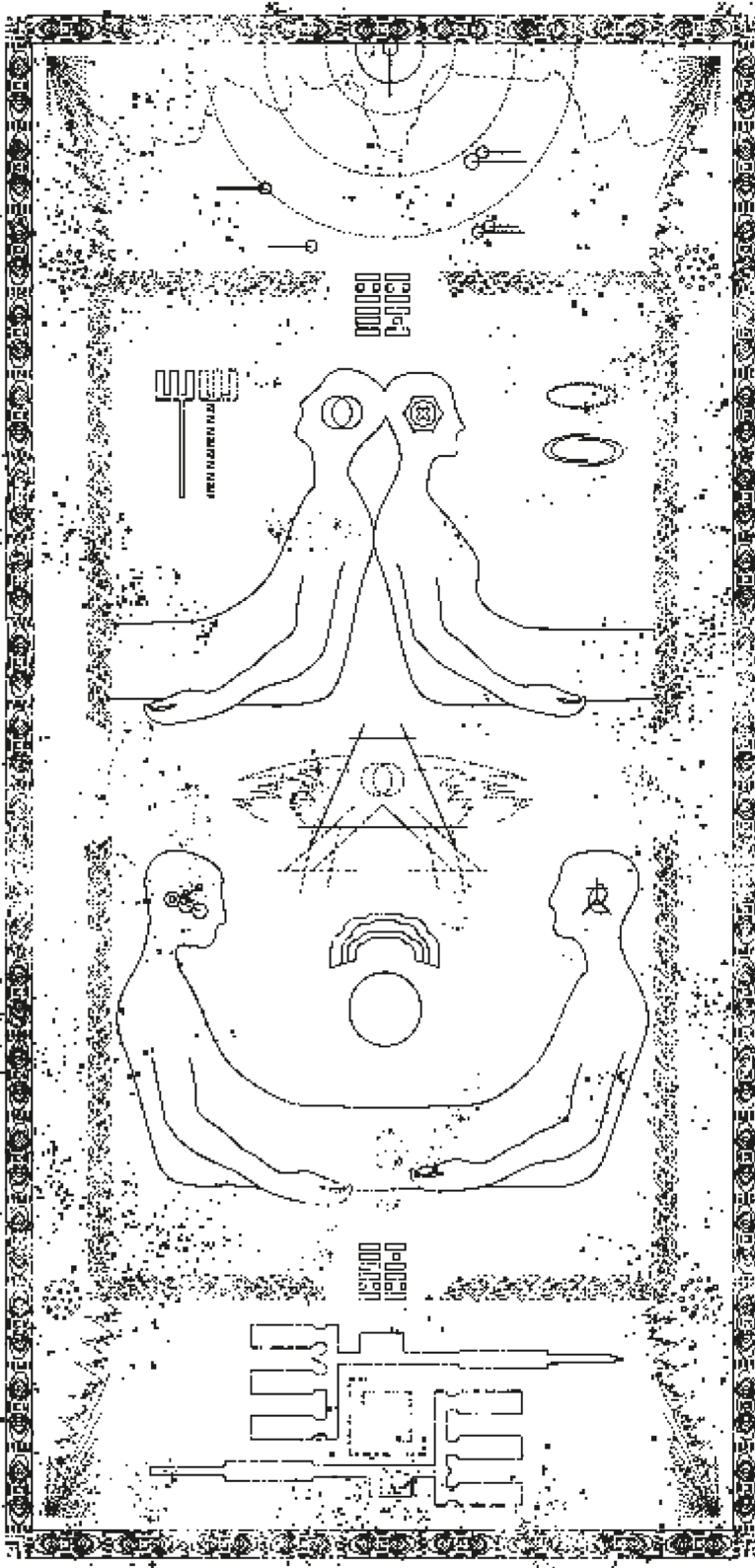
future. He wants an equidistant positioning between realism and fantasy, dating his universe far enough for it to be uncanny but close enough so the viewer can understand how we got there. He is fascinated by how our current reality will be remembered and the irony that an age so heavily documented could be forgotten and misunderstood. He jokingly considers his approach to world-building as “social sciences fiction,” focusing on how societies and human behaviour will evolve, rather than on technical advancement such as further exploration of space or development of artificial intelligence.

Reid's body of work investigates our consumption of information, understanding of data, and the domination of humankind over nature. When viewed chronologically, his work tells a story of a possible future that he created by drawing on diverse sources, ranging from philosophical theory to cognitive science. Among his many references, he cites ontological concepts such as Heidegger's “Dasein.”¹

Photo of me and my friends (2021) is a digital collage representing a stream of consciousness. This work, which is the starting point of Reid's fictional chronology, is anchored in our reality. All

images are taken from the various, skillfully curated image repositories that Reid has been building over the years. The random assortment of images is combined in Photoshop to create an aesthetic similar to AI-generated visuals, with ethereal light effects and a pastel, yet muddy colour palette. It conveys the feeling of sensory overload that one can feel online. Despite containing visuals ranging from horrifyingly violent to lightly superficial, *Photo of me and my friends* creates an image where nothing stands out. Regarding the origins of the work, Reid cites Adam Curtis's 2016 *HyperNormalisation*, a documentary that examines our desensitization to shocking images and what led to it. *Photo of me and my friends* subjects us to images that could generate a myriad of strong feelings, yet it is hard to focus on only one part of the collage, with our eyes always fixing onto the bordering shapes. In the middle of all the morphing shapes is a selfie of Reid and his friends, blended and barely recognizable, representing an attempt to draw some attention in the middle of an oversaturated feed.

Photo of me and my friends explores the repercussion of the information age, when too much data exists and when spreading and consuming information has never been as easy. This over-



Mesas, digital,
2021.

abundance causes us to become numb when confronted with horrifying news and to doubt everything we encounter, as it is becoming increasingly complex to spot fake or biased information. Eventually, our systems of information are going to become completely unreliable. According to James Bridle in his book of the same name, we live in a *New Dark Age* ², and this larger-than-us way of consuming information and data cannot be without repercussions.

Mesas (2021) is set further into a fictional future, entering Reid's imagined realm. In a post-apocalyptic scenario, billionaires and corporations have fled, leaving behind a ravaged planet. The civilization left on Earth must degrow and return to a subsistence existence that revolves around

needs. *Mesas* is a schematic tapestry depicting an actual event in Reid's fictional lore. In his story, a human sacrifice that allowed the protection of the human species has been reinterpreted as the base of a completely new mythology, elevating the martyrs to idol status. This builds an entirely new spirituality around a real event that is too old to be understood but real enough to be seen.

For Reid, the end of the Anthropocene will allow time for myth and belief. According to him, there has been a loss of oral legends and tales in Western society. Religion and spirituality have been overcome by an age of rationality, objectivity, and data. He does not want to dismiss the importance of science in our society, but rather question what led to the loss of legends and non-human figures to look up to. For him, the Anthropocene, or the domination of the world's climate, ecosystems, and topography by humans, has destroyed any feeling of humility and the need for the sublime. Reid reclaims a comeback to the awe and fear caused by sights and stories greater than humanity and its achievements. When domination is exerted over the planet, when humans look up only to one another, there is no need left for myths.

That is why the fictional universe in which *Mesas* takes place—one

where the quest for progress and exploitation of finite resource has ended—has room for new legends and beliefs that carry gratitude. Humanity's limits have been made visible and its fragility revealed.

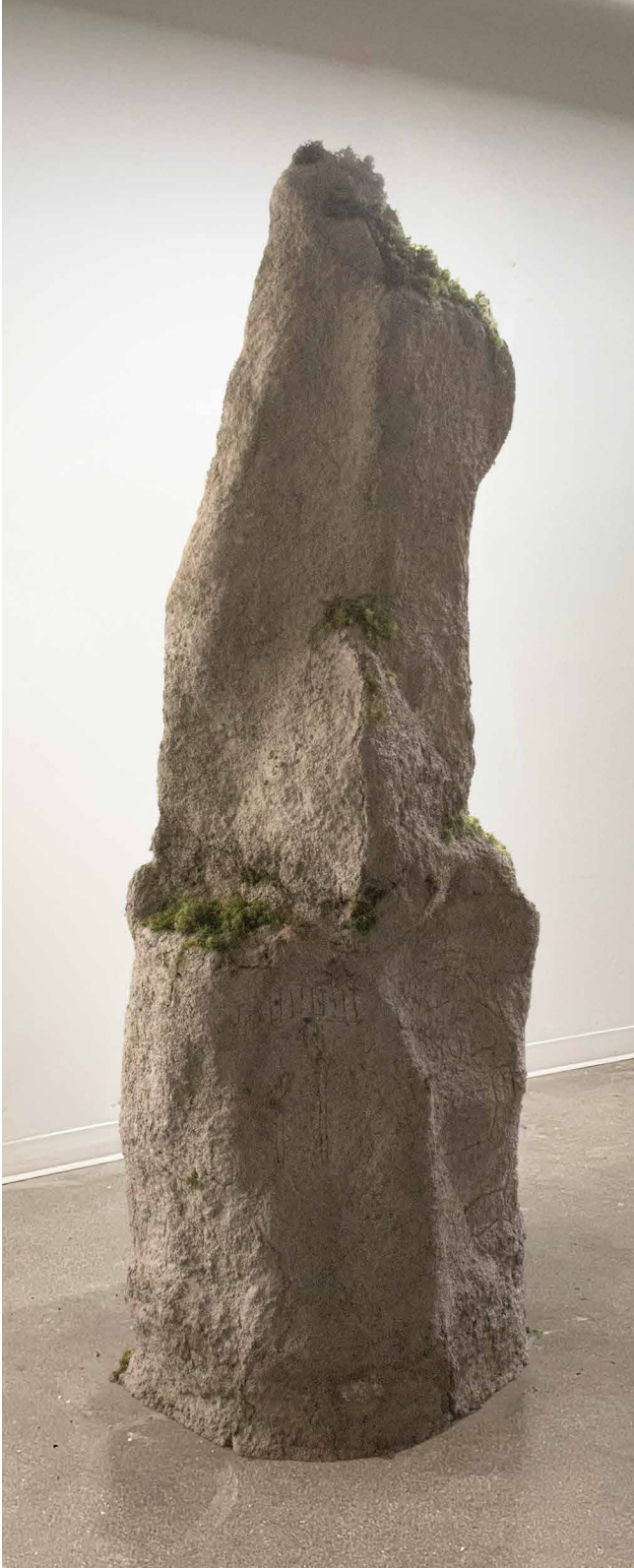
Chronologically, *Mantles* (2021) is the furthest in time. It is hard to say if it is from a time when humanity even still exists. Standing nine feet tall, *Mantles* is shaped around a structure made of Styrofoam, chicken wire, and burlap. Hypertufa, a lightweight rock material used for garden sculptures—composed of cement, peat moss, and perlite—has been applied onto the structure and left to dry before growing moss on it. Under the moss, we see carved symbols.

The idea for *Mantles* started with the nuclear waste burial problem, specifically the question of how we can create infrastructure or symbols today that will keep civilizations away from our nuclear waste ten thousand years from now. Questioning the fragility of symbols and their meaning is particularly interesting to Reid. He considers symbols to be what separates us from Nature. A symbol carved on the bark of a tree indicates that a human being is or has been here. Symbols are epistemes, their understanding is rooted within a certain culture and timeframe. So, what does it mean to have symbols with such

fleeting meaning?

Reid uses symbols as tools to understand the limits of knowledge and understanding. He creates a world where humanity has slowly died out or has evolved so far from what we are now that symbols have become unreadable and irrelevant. The moss has taken over and this fake rock with lost meaning is absorbed by nature. Ashes to ashes. *Mantles* emulates the mystery around old artefacts that we cannot decipher anymore and transports it into a fictional future, showing that this cycle is ongoing and that everything we are so sure of might never be transmitted to future generations.

Reid's entire body of work revolves heavily around data, the things we know and how we make sense of the things we don't understand. His constructed worlds may not host epic plots, but they tackle philosophical questions such as "What do we know?" and "How do we know that we know?" Reid does not consider himself an artist, preferring the term "designer." He considers his practice to be closer to the design process, as most of his work is entirely digital or relies on a graphic design base such as symbols. His self-declared "lack of skills in fine art" does not prevent him from creating ambitious works of art and complex universes that question our relationship to technology, time, and one another.



*Mantles, peat
moss, perlite,
cement, 2021.*

ARTIST PROFILE



*Tecclesiomentist
Hood, recycled
leather, cotton,
2021.*



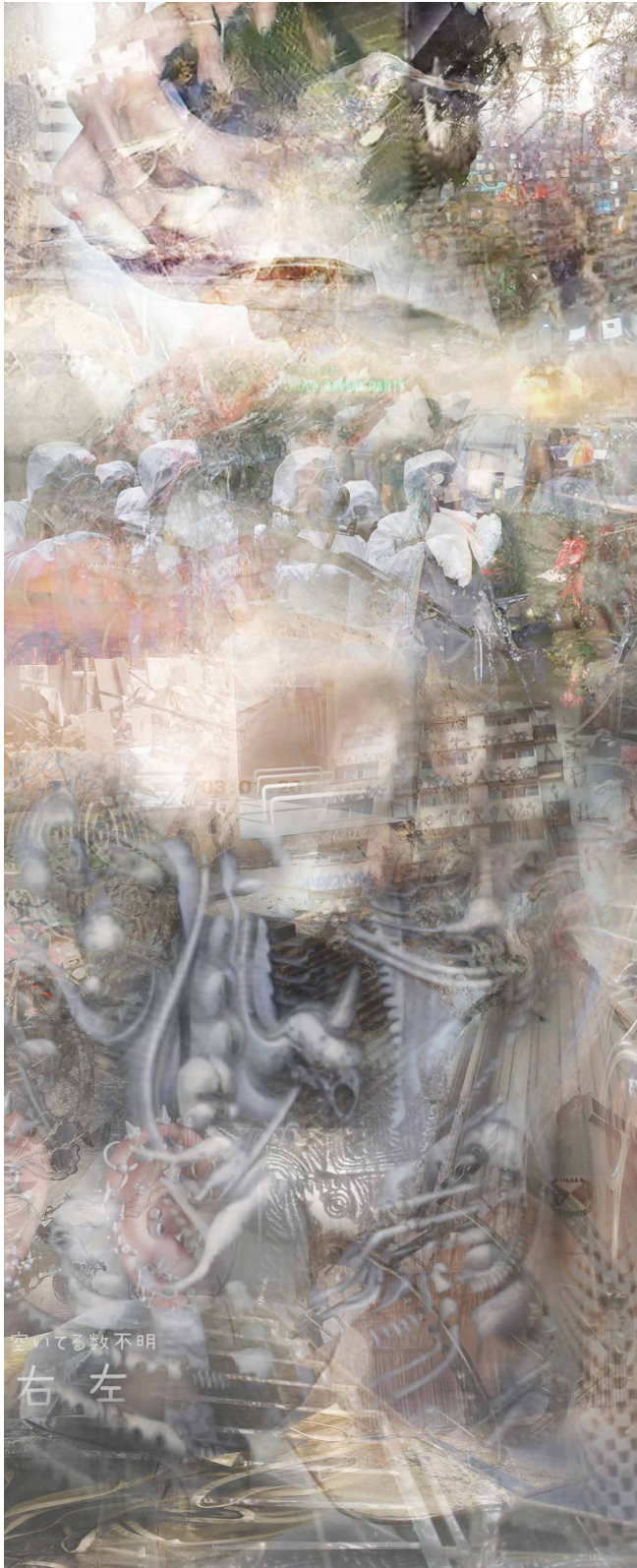


photo of me and my friends, digital, 2021.

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (United States: Stellar Books, 2013).
2. James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018).

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Bridle, James. *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*. Verso, 2018.

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