
ESSAY

by Wilna Fourie

In 2010 James Harney presented *Lesson for Living: Know Your Resource No. 1 (Wood)* at Firstdraft's Chalmers Street location. Exhibited as part of the Studio Residency Program, the resulting piece of furniture was the culmination of Harney spending three months teaching himself how to fashion a chair using antique carpentry tools and recycled Eucalyptus Pilularis (Blackbutt) timber. By the artist's own admission, the chair failed as a chair, however the work stood as the particular result of a particular process and was presented as a monument to the commitment of an autodidact with an end goal in mind. This exhibition would prove to be the start of Harney's interest in and exploration of the generative space between expectation and reality; labour and result.

Four years later, Harney puts forward a progress report on his investigations into joints and finishes in Japanese Master Carpentry in *Takadanobaba Findings*. These works are again the culmination, or result, of a three-month skills development research intensive in Japan. Harney travelled the country and interviewed and observed master craftsmen at their work. This exhibition speaks to the realisation that fifteen years of practice cannot be subsumed and digested in a three-month period – no matter how intensive the experience. The works hold with the inevitable failures and unexpected successes contained within the expectation of personal transformation that these trips seem to generate. Whether they are for professional development, research or personal time, these excursions hold the lure of possibility, a promise of transformative experience through interaction with difference in a change from your everyday.

Although sitting through another person's travel photos and films is not everyone's favourite past time, this type of photography is a meeting point between different ways of seeing. The traveller's view is obviously coloured by personal experience, however the comparatively disinterested party sees merely another image of a Parisian street or illuminated city that can be found through any image search. What happens then when the banal commuter's view is subsumed into a narrative of transformative experience? Removed from the context of the everyday, the view from a train is presented as both an objective presentation of a landscape but at the same time exists as a recording of an intensely subjective experience within an individual's travel narrative. Harney's *Across Japan: View from Train*, a single channel video, offers us the twinned experience of an everyday view as seen for the first time.

Travel presents a chance for re-presentation, free from old contexts or conceptions. However, the reality is not always what was imagined. Harney's exhibition is a testament to the expectation and realities of experience. One of the first works to greet the viewer, is a Noren, or fabric curtain, painted as faux Hinoki wood. It is a representation of a desired material. Similarly, in the installation *The Next Step*, Harney presents an example of Japanese lacquerware called Urushi. Elevated and bathed in light, this hallowed material is presented to us as something to be revered. Hinoki, or Japanese Cypress produces a glowing golden blonde timber. It is a highly prized material in Japan and is often used in the construction of temples, palaces, and traditional Noh theatres. Like the lacquerware, Harney's screen is an homage to the ideal, an image of what is possible – of what is hoped for. It is presented as a statement of intent and an acknowledgment of noble attempt. Perhaps it is the closest the artist is going to get to what he describes as "a beautiful wood I would surround myself with."

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