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I N T E R N

A T I O N A L

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Cover image: Lisa REIHANA, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, (still), 2015–17, multi-channel HD digital video, colour, sound, 64 min, courtesy of the artist and Artprojects, New Zealand at Venice, Creative New Zealand, New Zealand at Venice Patrons and Partner.

A Grand Parade

In early 2008, as Paul Grabowsky was taking up his appointment as the Adelaide Festival of Arts' new 2010 Artistic Director, I sat down for coffee with Kate Gould, the Festival's Chief Executive and Associate Artistic Director. The University of South Australia's **Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art** had opened only a few months before in October 2007 and I was keen to promote a partnership scheme with the Festival for an ambitious exhibition of contemporary international art, designed to complement the Art Gallery of South Australia's *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*.

UniSA, in fact, was offering sponsorship for the Festival to biennially undertake three high-quality international exhibitions in a proposed collaboration that would (I suggested) add valuable critical mass to the Festival's visual arts, and to its national appeal as a destination of cultural diversity.

I had a calling card. Not only was the newly minted Samstag Museum of Art (designed by award-winning architect John Wardle) a spacious, architecturally brilliant state-of-the-art public gallery space—Adelaide's first since AGSA's contemporary wing opened in 1996—but we also had on display at that very moment a perfect demonstration of contemporary international art: *Penumbra: Contemporary Art from Taiwan*, produced independently by Samstag to coincide with Brett Sheehy's final Festival, featured cutting-edge new-media and installation work by several of Taiwan's rising young stars.¹ It was a practical demonstration of our capabilities.

The Festival agreed to a partnership, and the *Adelaide International* was born. The first of three biennial events commenced under the Festival's banner in 2010: its title—*Apart We Are Together*—neatly captured the notion of five separate Adelaide visual arts venues all participating in a shared project. Two more *Adelaide International* exhibitions followed, in 2012 and 2014.²

In early 2010, Premier Mike Rann announced that the Adelaide Festival of Arts would become annual from 2012.³ Effectively, this meant that the first annual Festival to break the biennial cycle would occur in 2013, an 'off-year' for the *Adelaide International*, thereby providing new Festival Director David Sefton an opportunity to create an original project of his own, in partnership with Samstag.

It's in the nature of Festival directors to conceive ambitious artistic projects beyond their own artform specialty: in the case of the visual arts, this can raise sceptical eyebrows among the cognoscenti (whose expectations are sometimes incommensurable). However, Sefton's American connections were distinguished. His impressive 2013 *Laurie Anderson: Language of the Future, selected works 1971-2013* at Samstag was popular; the exhibition not only convincingly surveyed Anderson's international career as a pioneering visual artist but also delivered the star in person to Fenn Place outside the Samstag Museum, where she performed her iconic *Duets on Ice* to a rapt audience on the Festival's opening night.

In its default role as South Australia's specialist museum of contemporary art, diversity and change are oxygen for Samstag. With the 2014 conclusion of three Adelaide Internationals, a pause in the Festival partnership was agreed. While the events' popular success confirmed that Adelaide audiences had an appetite for contemporary international art, it was time to experiment with something else. Other opportunities beckoned, including a partnership with the Art Gallery of South Australia to produce two consecutive *Adelaide Biennials of Australian Art*, in 2016 and 2018.⁴

History's Page

In matters of Australian history there is no end to dispute—nor it seems any consensus in sight—when considering our colonial past and the associated dispossession and treatment of Aboriginal people. It is increasingly understood, for example, that our received history is a narrative written by (and mostly about) the colonists. Putting Dampier, Tasman and La Pérouse aside, it is a story that for most of us starts with Cook, and the English First Fleet, and proceeds to the pioneering achievements that transformed a beautifully quiet, slumbering continent into an advanced liberal, democratic, multicultural society and leading world economy. Even in 1836, not fifty years after settlement, Charles Darwin, travelling through Sydney on HMS Beagle, presciently described Australia as “a new and splendid country – a grand centre of civilisation”.⁵

It is a magnificent story, and great history. But it is partisan and incomplete. By comparison with our forensically documented 250-year colonial legacy, the history and culture of Australia's original peoples and their 60,000-year occupation of the continent has remained the remit of anthropologists, and largely opaque to most white eyes. Only recently have we more properly come to understand that there has been a living Indigenous culture all along, rich in ancient narratives, mythic histories and knowledge of the land. It is the oldest continuing human culture on the planet, and it is being dynamically renewed.

Following the 1967 referendum that removed constitutional discrimination against Indigenous Australians, progress towards Aboriginal rights, recognition and social justice has been steady (although, for many, still too slow). The historic 1992 High Court of Australia ruling in favour of five Torres Strait Islanders (one of them Eddie Mabo), acknowledging their connection to land and native title rights, was followed in 2008 by the Parliamentary apology to the Stolen Generations. Most recently, a 2017 meeting of Indigenous representatives from around Australia produced the Uluru Statement from the Heart. That manifesto controversially called for a First Nations Voice to be ‘enshrined in the constitution’, a prospect that has raised concern among some federal politicians that it would become a third chamber of Parliament.

And while many Aboriginal activists understandably use the celebratory Australia Day holiday (‘Invasion Day’) as an emotive wedge to foreground Aboriginal disadvantage, not all agree. Noel Pearson—a leader in the campaign for Indigenous rights—pragmatically suggests, “there is no reconciliation myth to be found in the past”. He says, “It is what we do to make good in the future that will define reconciliation”.⁶ He has a politician's eye on a constitutional outcome.

The issue is complex and ongoing. There is talk of another referendum. The elusive goal of authentic reconciliation is now bound to the question of how to recognise Australia's First Peoples in the constitution.⁷ The way it will be resolved is a challenge of deep importance to the future cohesion of Australian society.

But what does all this have to do with the *Adelaide//International*?

2019 Adelaide//International

While the *Adelaide//International* can rightly be seen as a ‘reprise’ of the earlier iterations in 2010, 2012 and 2014, it is significantly different in concept, context and strategy. The earlier Adelaide Internationals looked outwards and sought to offer audiences a succinct introduction to new international art and trends—a boutique alternative, if you like, to the sprawling surveys of the *Biennale of Sydney* and the wonderful *Asia Pacific Triennial*. We now have a surfeit, among which the inaugural *NGV Triennial* (2017/18) was hugely popular and featured some special works, not least *The Enclave*, a gripping video installation by Irish artist Richard Mosse about war and displacement. However, the *Triennial* suffered from curatorial arbitrariness and crowded excess.

In this first of three consecutive *Adelaide//International* exhibitions—for the 2019, 2020 and 2021 Adelaide Festivals, respectively—the Samstag Museum of Art has instead created a focussed conversation between four internationally experienced artists (two from Australia and one each from Aotearoa New Zealand and Singapore). Though their work—at the surface—is entirely different, these artists share certain common links and conceptual underpinnings that relate to (or derive from) the profound sweep of 18th and 19th century English colonisation into ‘our’ geographical world (which is to say the artists’ worlds), and also from the associated migrations, disruptions and exchanges that followed.

Very thoughtfully—and in quite marvellous ways visually—the immaculately crafted work of each artist reveals positions, meditations and imaginative original thinking on the postcolonial world of their own experience. In its various parts, the 2019 *Adelaide//International* is about the love and recovery of Indigenous culture, and challenges questionable assumptions and the uncritically received histories of Empire. It is also about difference, marginality and displacement, and the search for personal identity amidst the suffocating flow of dominant culture.



Image: 2019 *Adelaide//International*, installation view
featuring Brook Andrew, Samstag Museum of Art,
University of South Australia. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

In *Room B*, his new work at Samstag for the *Adelaide//International*, **Brook Andrew** makes good use of his abiding hybridity principle, reassembling a cohort of elements from his considerable archival oeuvre to form an evergreen statement about Indigenous life and recovered memory. It is a work that pushes back against the viewer.

Andrew's artistic journey—encompassing not only his inward reflective process but also his compulsive garnering of found things of interest, and his regular travels abroad to engage with ethnographic museums that typically hold precious Australian Indigenous artefacts—has provided him with a growing armoury of eclectic materials. He uses these to launch highly energised subversions against established orders. There is the appearance of chaos in much of it, but it is deliberate and considered. A Dadaist at heart, Andrew understands anarchy.

Room B comprises an installation of video and three-dimensional constructions set within a gallery space utterly transformed by a vibrant mural of Wiradjuri patterns. This is *his* heritage, one that speaks eloquently to his other (Celtic) self. A standing screen is splattered with painted words and displays a jumble of found things from the extensive Andrew archive. An empty vitrine sits on the gallery floor and is similarly overlaid with painted messaging. Like a graffitied ruin, the vitrine seems to signify the colonising anthropological practice of rendering Aboriginality through 'primitivist' displays of curiosities, objects and bones. As the writer Georges Petitjean has suggested, it is an exorcism.⁸

These are recurring devices and themes for Andrew, in which he cobbles things together in unlikely juxtapositions but with coherent intent: to confront and challenge the viewer with all the contradictions of contemporary white and black Australian cultures. They both are cultures that he loves.

Finally, *SMASH IT*, Andrew's new video for *Room B*, forms a statement about societal intolerance of difference and also about Aboriginal resistance and the destructiveness of forced assimilation. The looped video blends a mix of the artist's archived moving-image treasures—interviews, documentaries and film clips.⁹ One of these captures a moment from Charles Chauvel's legendary 1955 film *Jedda*, a story of tragic love in which two fated Aboriginal characters are caught between seemingly irreconcilable worlds.



Image: 2019 *Adelaide//International*, installation view
featuring Lisa Reihana, Samstag Museum of Art,
University of South Australia. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

Brook Andrew has considerable regard for his Aotearoa artist colleague **Lisa Reihana**—a fellow traveller in the re-examination of history—whose masterpiece *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* Andrew describes as ‘a big idea’ and ‘seminal’.¹⁰ Though true enough, it understates Reihana’s achievement in creating what is an astonishing work of art that has an auteur’s inspired originality and whose creation demanded a warrior’s resolve for its complex production. A decade in the making, it proved a sensation when presented as part of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, the official Aotearoa New Zealand offering at the 2017 *Venice Biennale*, where it was popularly judged the Biennale’s standout work.

A multi-channel video of awesome physical scale and great technical innovation, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* immediately commands the viewer’s interest. As its panoramic visual narrative unfolds like an extended tracking shot, travelling (with one small exception) to the left of screen over two almost identical 32-minute cycles, we are taken on an absorbing journey of simulated pictorial history, set in the late 18th century at peak Pacific Ocean exploration.

Reihana has conceived *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* as a ‘transgressive’ reinterpretation of key events surrounding Captain James Cook’s three voyages of exploration, culminating in his death on the beach of Hawaii’s Kealahou Bay in 1779. Famously, Cook undertook the first of his journeys—as Lieutenant Cook—on HMS Endeavour, with Joseph Banks of the Royal Society leading an unprecedented expedition of scientists, among them Banks’s notable colleague naturalist Daniel Solander. (The expedition also included the industrious and talented natural history illustrator Sydney Parkinson and astronomer Charles Green, both destined to die—like many ill-fated members of the science team and crew—before the Endeavour returned home just on three years later.) Their prime scientific objective was to record the Transit of Venus in Tahiti in 1769, but they also aimed to make ethnographic observations and collect fauna and flora. It was only upon completing their astronomical task that Cook was to open the Admiralty’s ‘secret’ papers, instructing him to proceed south in search of Terra Australis Incognita, ‘the unknown land of the South’.

Over the course of Cook’s three voyages, other artists contributed to what became an unequalled trove of pictorial representations, not least John Webber, who was aboard HMS Resolution at Cook’s death. Cook’s unparalleled exploratory success and brilliance as a navigator, along with his reputation for humane and intelligent leadership, have led to his popular apotheosis, in which history has become myth.

It is a myth that Lisa Reihana, as Māori, is concerned to resist. She has questions to ask of the accepted history surrounding these events, and she has alternative versions to propose. Of special interest to her, for example, is the likely perspective of indigenous peoples encountered by Cook and whose views of the explorers would have been experienced, literally, from the beach and so reversed. She is also determined to elevate the otherwise historically understated roles of Tupaia and Omai, two men from Ra’iātea in the Society Islands who travelled with Cook on different voyages, making exceptional contributions to his expeditionary success. Tupaia especially, an *Arioi* high priest taken aboard the Endeavour by Banks, provided vital help with navigation and in the encounters with Māori, who respectfully recognised his status. Along with others, he died of dysentery in Batavia before reaching England.

For Reihana, Tupaia and Omai are distinguished emissaries from the south; she shows them discoursing with Cook and Banks and they make repeated appearances in her narrative. Also prominent is the person known as the Chief Mourner, in this case an emissary between life and death whose spectacular costume—fearful to Tahitians—is based on a famous drawing made by Tupaia whilst travelling on the Endeavour.¹¹ Along with Cook and Banks, these five characters provide the central motifs in *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, for whose creation Reihana found a marvellous device.

A 19th century decorative wallpaper, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* is an extraordinary technical wonder of 10 metres and 20 drops, produced in 1804-5 by Joseph Dufour & Cie and the artist Jean-Gabriel Charvet. *Les Sauvages* drew on representations from the voyages of Cook, La Pérouse, de Bougainville and Jean-François de Galaup to create a fanciful depiction of the South Seas, and, for a time, became much favoured by wealthy Europeans and North Americans as domestic furnishing. As Rhana Devenport, the curator of *Emissaries*, suggests in her very informative and compelling account of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, the wallpaper was intended to ‘cast the wealthy as worldly participants and purveyors of faraway places, and their guests as amused and titillated momentary adventurers’.¹²

To create *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, Reihana has taken elements of the background landscapes in *Les Sauvages* for herself, but rendered them afresh as a revolving sky, land and sea in an extraordinary work of reinterpretation. In her painstaking way, she has disposed of the twenty ‘chapters’ of the wallpaper’s representations—which she calls ‘a concoction, a fabulation invented in someone else’s elsewhere’¹³—and instead, with the technical miracle of the green screen, produced her own depictions of encounters and exchanges, ‘reimagining history and its representations from a 21st-century Māori and Pacific perspective’.¹⁴

There are eighty episodic vignettes of fascinating storytelling to *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, supported by the inventive soundtrack of James Pinker and a large cast of costumed actors and dancers. Two different Captain Cooks are performed by male and female actors, reflecting Pacific peoples’ confusion as to his sexual orientation. Australian Aboriginals, relegated to the near-invisible distance in *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (as was the death of Cook), are now foregrounded. It is a marvel: you will not tear yourself away.



Image: 2019 *Adelaide//International*, installation view
featuring Ming Wong, SASA Gallery, University of South Australia.
Photograph by Sam Noonan.



In a holiday colour snapshot taken in 1972, **Ming Wong**—then about one year old—is sitting in a small pram, foreground and centre to the picture but looking away from the camera, distracted. His mother stands behind, one hand on the pram. She is looking directly at the viewer with an expression that suggests the unseen photographer is not yet ready. A confident, modern tourist, she is smartly dressed, wearing a yellow-ochre blazer, a colourful scarf, a red hat that matches her dress, and a white handbag draped casually across her left forearm. Elegant.

They are in the Piazza San Marco, Venice, on a clear day, with St Mark's basilica and the towering Campanile immediately behind. It's a good, memorable shot and seemingly straightforward, other than for the fact that she is Asian—Chinese, in fact; a Singaporean. Not exactly out of place, but for the era and the European context—to some eyes at least—different!

Thirty-seven years later, Wong will return to Venice, where his exhibition *Life of Imitation*—commissioned for the Singapore Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009—will elevate him to international attention.

Ming Wong makes films; *In Love for the Mood* (2009) is one of three that comprised his Venice exhibition. Each of his projects have a constant: they are reworkings of particular scenes taken from celebrated world cinema classics, moments—typically rich in emotion—he has chosen specifically for what they offer as material for his own purpose. And where the original film tells a complete story (in this case, Wong Kar Wai's 2000 film of unconsummated desire, *In the Mood for Love*, set in 1960s Hong Kong), Wong's objective is different.

Having chosen his cinematic moment to appropriate, Wong sets about representing it in his own unique way, examining it repetitively and forensically from alternative viewpoints, crafting it in a manner that amplifies the viewer's awareness of specific details such as speech and gesture. Yet the result confounds certainty as to what is actually happening as a narrative, or what is exactly intended. Typically, Wong will use the same actor to play duplicate roles and different genders in the same scene, or he may repeat the scene using different actors each time, of differing ethnicities. Often it is himself performing. He takes great care to achieve a professional filmic effect with his use of costume, colour, lighting, music and dialogue.

In the case of *In Love for the Mood*, Wong's chosen moment is a scene where Mrs So (Maggie Cheung in the original) is rehearsing with Mr Chow (Tony Leung) to accuse her husband of adultery. Here, Wong's Mrs So and Mr Chow are both performed over three vignettes by a Caucasian actress from New Zealand. Portrayed in the first scene as struggling to effectively deliver her lines in Cantonese, the actress is clearly miscast. An off-camera Wong is prompting her. In two subsequent scenes, subtitled respectively in English and then Italian, she becomes more confident and her acted Cantonese more accomplished. In all of this, Wong effectively conjures questions of meaning that have additional complexity (and interest) through his emphasis on portraying the cumbersome process of rehearsal, in contrast to the actual performed rehearsal of the appropriated scene.

Growing up in Singapore, Wong's preoccupations as an artist have been much influenced by that country's rich history of multiculturalism and its progressive moves to independence from colonial beginnings. Wong is particularly enamoured of the period following World War Two that ushered in a golden age of cinema and a buoyant multi-ethnic and multilingual culture. However, with the establishment of the Republic of Singapore as an independent and sovereign state in 1965—following the drama of racial disruption that came with Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia and the military confrontation (*Konfrontasi*) with Indonesia—a culture of homogeneity gradually evolved, displacing the diversity of the past.

Wong's films, then, can be understood as being opposed to the levelling effects of government-driven culture and the loss of differentiation—especially of language—that results. He thus deliberately selects actors to perform roles for which—because of their race and gender, for example—they would not conventionally be chosen.

He is about social relations, language, identity, and celebrating difference.



Image: 2019 *Adelaide//International*, installation view
featuring Eugenia Lim, Samstag Museum of Art,
University of South Australia. Photograph by Sam Noonan.

Eugenia Lim thinks deeply about modern Australian society and the forces of history that have shaped and welded our national form and identity. Having grown up in Australia the daughter of Singaporean Chinese immigrants, she is also keenly aware of the cultural and social nuance—and the experience of difference—which impacts distinctly on personal development.

Lim's art provides a means of unwrapping these complexities, no doubt for her own satisfaction of understanding, but also, importantly, to forge a personal statement of values and to make socially critical observations. Her artistic journey is an evolving one in which, project by project, she intimately examines a subject of interest and uses a highly managed blend of mediums such as performance, video and installation to create imaginatively sharp commentaries. They are at once explicit and yet oblique.

In the 2019 *Adelaide//International*, three of Lim's recent projects have been brought together under the unifying rubric of the Ambassador—her abiding character—to create an enhanced perspective on the artist's concerns and versatility. Inspired by the work of Hong Kong-born artist Tseng Kwong Chi and his *East Meets West* series, Lim's Ambassador—Tati-like in manner and mostly mute—is a somewhat distanced and aloof Asian personage, dressed in a gilded Mao suit. The character provides continuity and linkage between each of Lim's works, facilitating audience focus and engagement. In the three iterations in which we encounter her, the Ambassador appears conspicuously out of place or out of time; notwithstanding her implicit diplomatic prerogatives, she is anomalous, a dislocated stranger in a strange Australian land.

Lim's earliest work in the Ambassador series, *Yellow Peril*, begins autobiographically as a meditation on migration and origins, with two enlarged black and white photographs screen-printed on gold mylar. One photograph shows her parents, who migrated to Australia in 1973, standing before Ron Robertson-Swann's iconic public sculpture *Vault* in its original 1980 Melbourne City Square location, six months before it was 'driven out of town' by a reactionary media campaign that derided it as 'the yellow peril'.¹⁵ It is of course a marvellous metaphor for the active racial discrimination against people of non-European origin—especially Chinese—which began with the mid-19th century Victorian gold rush and was formalised by Australia's newly federated parliament under the White Australia Policy in 1901 (though finally made unlawful under the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act).

A second photo shows the Ambassador holding a papier-mâché replica of the Welcome Stranger—the world's largest alluvial nugget, found in Victoria in 1869—a fiction that nonetheless serves to assert the long Chinese presence in Australia. The Welcome Stranger replica is presented, in situ, on a plinth in front of the photographs. The last part of *Yellow Peril* is a video set in Ballarat's simulated gold rush theme park, Sovereign Hill, where the Ambassador wanders the streets and tries her hand at panning for gold.

The People's Currency, Lim's second work, creates a lively interactive play set in an imagined 'Chinese workshop of the world', symbolically illustrating the procedures and transactions of global economics and the underpinning mechanisms of industrial production—with their uncertain worker rewards and remunerations—upon which we have come to rely. Here (in a performance that Lim will reprise at Samstag for the *Adelaide//International*) the Ambassador supervises a process in which voluntary participants 'manufacture' digital devices, for which they might—or might not—be paid a commensurate wage (in fact, a counterfeit currency that Lim has created).

The Ambassador leads the workers in factory calisthenics. We, the observers, are implicated in the systems and labour practices—usually conducted out of sight—that deliver us our treasured products.

In *The Australian Ugliness*, her third and most recent work, Lim reveals an appreciation for (and knowledge of) Australian architecture, which she sees as a vital expression of the national identity. In fact, her interest stems largely from time spent as an artist-in-residence at the South Yarra family home of the late Robin Boyd, legendary architect and influential social critic. Famously, Boyd—who designed the Walsh Street house in 1957—wrote critically of Australian architecture as an allegory of the Australian society of his day, with its mediocrity, superficiality and kitsch suggestive of an ‘aesthetic and ethical gap in the national psyche’.¹⁶

Lim’s *The Australian Ugliness* is in many ways an homage to Boyd, and her Ambassador takes up his example of critical provocation by visiting more than thirty architectural sites across the country. Shape-shifting into a tourist, property investor, client or resident—and taking selfies— Lim inspects and witnesses both grandly iconic public and more modest residential buildings that embody identity, place, design and class.

For Lim, much of this contemporary architecture maintains the qualities critiqued by Boyd, and continues to represent “a culture that still privileges the white, the male, and the monumental”. She says she wants “to bring to these my own experiences as a woman, non-architect and Asian-Australian—an identity largely invisible or under-represented in architecture and architectural discourse”.¹⁷ Lim’s critical project could be seen as aspirationally channelling her own Asian heritage towards a future integrated Australia.

A triptych of videos comprising *The Australian Ugliness* chart the Ambassador’s journey of architectural inspections, and are displayed in a gold pavilion—a gesture to one of Boyd’s last works, Neptune’s Fishbowl (1970) in South Yarra. Ten photographs, documenting several of the Ambassador’s activities, are presented nearby.

Erica Green
February 2019

- 1 *Penumbra: Contemporary Art from Taiwan* was curated for Samstag Museum of Art by Sophie McIntyre.
- 2 The 2010 and 2012 Adelaide Internationals—*Apart We Are Together* and *Restless*, respectively—were curated by Victoria Lynn. The participating venues were: Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art; Australian Experimental Art Foundation; Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia; Flinders University Art Museum; and (in 2010 only) JamFactory. The final Adelaide International (*Worlds in Collision*, 2014) was curated by Richard Grayson at: Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art; Australian Experimental Art Foundation; Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia; and the South Australian School of Art Gallery, University of South Australia.
- 3 In his February 26 2010 announcement of the change, Premier Rann cited the successful transition of Womadelaide and the Adelaide Fringe from biennial to annual events. The Premier also noted that the 2008 Festival had delivered an economic benefit of \$14 million to the state; Labor, he declared, would ‘more than double existing biennial Festival funding’.
- 4 Other international projects of note initiated by the Samstag Museum of Art have included: *William Kentridge: Tide table*, 2008; *Bill Viola: Observance*, 2010; *do it (Adelaide)*, 2015; and *Countercurrents*, 2017.
- 5 Quoted in Luke Slattery, ‘Destined to breath free’, *The Weekend Australian*, January 26 2019
- 6 See Pearson’s ‘Diversity in unity best balm for our conflicting identities’, *The Australian*, 26 January 2019. Noel Pearson is a director of Cape York Partnership. His evocative eulogy for Gough Whitlam at his State Memorial Service, Sydney Town Hall, 5 November 2014 (“This old man ... a friend without peer of the original Australians”), widely considered one of the greatest of political speeches, was in respectful gratitude for Whitlam’s contribution to the Aboriginal cause.
- 7 For an informative report on the Uluru Statement and its implications, see Deborah Snow, ‘Progress lost in a sea of words’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January, 2019.
- 8 Georges Petitjean, ‘The constructive iconoclast: the art of Brook Andrew’, an unpublished essay written in response to Brook Andrew’s installation *Room A*, as presented in, *The Boomerang Effect – The Aboriginal Arts in Australia*, Musée d’ethnographie de Genève, Switzerland, 2017/2018.
- 9 *SMASH IT* was created through a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship undertaken by Andrew in 2017 at the Smithsonian Institute, USA, and while in residence at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, from July 2017 - June 2018.
- 10 See ‘Brook Andrew and Lisa Reihana In Conversation’ in *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, exhibition catalogue for the 57th International Art Exhibition – *La Biennale di Venezia*, 2017. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, p76.
- 11 Among the illustrations brought back to England by Joseph Banks from the Endeavour expedition, were eight watercolour drawings (now in the British Library) attributed to an unknown artist, ‘Artist of the Chief Mourner’, but long speculated to have been made by Banks. It was only in 1997, following a review of Banks’s correspondence, that these were reattributed to Tupaia.
- 12 Rhana Devenport, ‘Emissaries: A New Pacific of the Past for Tomorrow’ in *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* exhibition catalogue for the 57th International Art Exhibition – *La Biennale di Venezia*, 2017, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2017, p19. Curator, director and commissioning editor Rhana Devenport. An initiative of New Zealand at Venice. Presenting partner Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.
- 13 Ibid, p19.
- 14 Ibid, p20.
- 15 Commissioned by Melbourne City Council in May 1978 and without a name when installed at Melbourne’s City Square in May 1980, Ron Robertson-Swann named the work *Vault* in September that year. *Vault* (built of prefabricated steel, painted yellow and popularly known as *The Yellow Peril*) was removed in December 1980 and since 2002 has been located alongside the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Southbank, Melbourne. In 2017 *Vault* was recommended for heritage protection status.
- 16 See Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1960
- 17 Eugenia Lim, ‘Ugly-beautiful Australia: Eugenia Lim’, in *Assemble Papers: The Culture of Living Closer Together*, 2018. <https://assemblepapers.com.au/2019/01/24/ugly-beautiful-australia-eugenia-lim/>

B R O O K
A N D R E W



The constructive iconoclast: the art of Brook Andrew

GEORGES PETITJEAN

This text responds to Brook Andrew's installation *Room A*, presented at the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève, Switzerland, 2017 - 2018.

Room A

Brook Andrew's *Room A* was the last room in *L'effet boomerang: les arts aborigènes d'Australie* (19 May 2017 – 7 January 2018), an exhibition at the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (MEG). *L'effet boomerang* showcased the MEG's rich collection of Aboriginal material culture and art. Conventionally, it examined via several themes different regions throughout Australia, including the desert areas, Arnhem Land, the Kimberley, the Tiwi Islands and Far North Queensland.

In many respects *Room A*, as the name suggests, should have been at the start of this exhibition. This space, transformed into an immersive and inclusive installation, sharply contrasted with what was physically the first room – a space which strived for a white cube effect: objects and artworks were placed in neat, symmetrical rows within white enclosing walls. *Room A*, by contrast, radically broke with this modernist setting and opened up a whole new space, both physically and figuratively. If the white room at the entrance of the exhibition enclosed the art and the objects of an 'alien' culture, the last room uncompromisingly immersed the viewer into contemporary debates surrounding art and culture.

Room A was destabilising. Andrew created a new space, complete with mesmerising wall paintings, sculptural vitrines, and archival materials. Irreverently mixing postcards, high art, erotica, humour, critique, facts and historical archives, Andrew provided an abundance of images, sounds and impressions. The comfortable and safe zone that the museum generally offers is radically altered, if not eliminated. This is the approach of an iconoclast.

An iconoclast creates rather than destroys. It seems a contradiction; yet, Andrew's practice as an artist – by definition someone who creates – has been one of deconstructing icons, of highlighting the possibilities for historical reconstruction through assemblage.

Andrew is a maker. How then does the idea of 'iconoclasm' apply to this artist's work? Clearly, Andrew's instrument is neither hammer nor axe. It is, paradoxically, an immense and intricate international archive of images – photographs, postcards, prints, drawings, magazine clippings – text fragments, found objects and videotaped interviews. This archive covers many cultures from around the globe, has been collected over two decades, and continues to expand with Andrew's many international research trips as it interacts with institutional archives and collections that he has visited and explored. In the face of a conventional linear approach to history, Andrew proposes a non-linear approach, one that is multifaceted and stimulating.

An invitation

Since 1995, Andrew has actively sought interaction with the collections of ethnographic and historical museums. An exercise that he has been undertaking – often in preparation for exhibitions – is the study of archives held in museums and historical institutions such as the Royal Anthropological Institute in London, United Kingdom; the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University, United Kingdom; or the Mitchell Library in Sydney, Australia. In 2016, Andrew revisited the photo archives at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, France, in order to prepare them for re-evaluation and reinterpretation.

In *Theme Park*, a large immersive museum installation held at the Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art (AAMU) in Utrecht, The Netherlands, in 2008, Andrew presented himself very much as an iconoclast. *Theme Park* radically reversed the traditional role of the museum or art gallery in exhibiting the work of an artist. Instead, Andrew used the museum as his prime material. His freewheeling selection and inclusion of a wide array of art spanning diverse media by artists from different countries, continents, and periods, served to activate the space, creating a dialogue between objects and encompassing visitors. It confronted the preconceived expectations of visitors to the AAMU.

L'effet boomerang at MEG invited visitors to participate in a new way – a very direct and active way. As art historian Anthony Gardner has keenly observed: many of Andrew's works are 'space-makers', even in a literal sense. This is particularly true for *Room A* and *Mirror*, Andrew's second installation in *L'effet boomerang*, which disrupted the otherwise conventional museum environment. Through the abundance and variety of information presented, both immersive installations gave visitors the impression of being thrown into or swallowed by a physical manifestation of the internet, and could be considered as exhibitions in their own right – exhibitions within an exhibition. As anchors of radical information and as thought-provoking displays, both installations evoked a strong sense of disorientation. They caused the effect of a hard reboot, doing away with the expected and providing new grounds for interpretation, both in terms of this exhibition, and the histories and collections on which they are based. Both installations provided a fertile meeting ground for an encounter between Western culture and contemporary Aboriginal culture. The radical settings allowed for equality – the necessary basis on which any attempt at historical review should take place.

Dada

Both Andrew's immersive installations in Geneva qualify as Dada-esque, which is apt considering the iconoclastic nature of the Dada movement, and the perhaps surprising link between Dada, Switzerland and Indigenous Australian culture.

During and in the aftermath of World War I, the Dada movement strongly criticised all art and cultural expression made by the establishment, believing a society that was capable of wielding destruction at such atrocious levels was no longer worthy of producing fine arts. Dada advocated for a radical break from art of the past, of a society it deemed barbaric.

Roughly one hundred years ago, in 1917, at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Switzerland, Tristan Tzara – an artist who had a culturally varied background and also included diverse influences in his oeuvre – recited his famous *Poèmes Nègres*. The *Poèmes Nègres* as the Dadaist 'poems' by Tzara were called, are in fact Tzara's French translations of Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow's German interlinear translations – the literal word-by-word translations that appeared between the lines of original language and his final translation – of the Arrernte and Luritja songs he transcribed and translated during the many years he worked on the Hermannsburg mission in Central Australia, between 1894 and 1922. Tristan Tzara was attracted by the rhythmic tonality of the songs and appropriated them – although his selection and further translation transformed them into an original work – in his revolutionary attempts to divorce himself from Western society and art.

Dadaists by nature are iconoclastic in their practice of doing away with the old world. Andrew explicitly names Dada as his most important influence while he was an art student.

Icons of colonial thought

Icons, in the strictest sense of the word, are religious works of art. The term 'iconoclast' generally has two meanings. The first one is historical. An iconoclast in this sense acts in opposition to idolatry; is the breaker or destroyer of religious images – images or idols that gained too much influence and could hence be misused. The second meaning is

contemporary: a person who attacks cherished beliefs and traditional institutions as being erroneous or based on superstition. Andrew's artistic practice perhaps finds resonance with both definitions of the word. It is aimed at icons that are dogmatic, compulsive images in a literal as well as a figurative sense.

In the historic context, iconoclast refers directly to the icon – a religious work of art. Because icons are supposedly the result of a divine hand, they are believed to show a glimpse of the divine, to open a window into the realm of the sacred. Icons therefore should be approached with reverence. People do more than just look at icons. Icons, representing divine presence, also look at people.

In the case of colonialism, this divine hand is that of the colonising powers. For political and economic reasons, they desired control over the production of imagery of the colonised peoples and countries. These constructed images presented an idealised world in which colonised regions and their inhabitants, both indigenous and new immigrants, were intended to benefit greatly from the imposed new order. The legacy of this colonialist imagery is still present in contemporary depictions of the 'other'.

Imagining this idealised vision was not only important from a nationalistic point of view *vis-à-vis* other nations. It also served to keep their own population in check with a near fairy tale: that of the exotic unknown, the far-away promised land that now belonged to the common good of the nation. That in many instances the autochthonous or indigenous populations of the colonising powers' motherland were themselves subject to oppression by an authoritarian regime – one that often sought to suppress or even eradicate the cultural identity of those groups – is often bypassed. Examples in European countries are rife and often related to issues of language as a crucial aspect of cultural identity. Failure to comply often entailed physical punishment. The exotic splendour and glory of far away colonies indeed provided a welcome distraction from oppressive politics closer to home.

Phenomenal world fairs such as the Great Exhibition held in 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London, England, or the Exposition Universelle in 1900, Paris, France, tried to impress not only the local population, but also, and even more so, other nations by promoting products and riches of the colonies. They played a key role as showcases in the geo-politics of their time. Immersed in these new exotic worlds, visitors to these fairs were struck with awe and would leave with a deep, albeit heavily controlled, impression.

Equally important in this massive colonial propaganda machine were the colonial museums. They offered a permanent display of the mainly material culture of colonised peoples and countries. In doing so they also dictated a particular way of perceiving the other, often imposing moral judgements in line with the ideas of the colonial regime. It is within this space that Brook Andrew discovered a fertile basis for his art practice. His working terrain *par excellence* is the 'Museum', its collections and its archives waiting to be reopened and mined; consequently, he subverts colonial dogmas from the inside.

Collecting the other

Many ethnological or ethnographic museums – museums for non-Western cultures and art across Europe – find their origins in colonial museums. The Musée du quai Branly in Paris came forth from the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, which in turn derived from the Musée des Colonies, built in 1931 for the Exposition des Colonies at the Porte Dorée. The British Museum, among numerous other institutions in the United Kingdom, reflected (and still in part reflects) the British Empire. The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam was founded as a museum of the Dutch colonies and discoveries, and focussed on the Dutch East-Indies (present day Indonesia). It is now part of the newly formed National Museum of World Cultures.

As with many other former colonial museums across Europe that originated in the nineteenth century or earlier, the National Museum of World Cultures is continually

struggling to reinvent itself. An increasing trend among this and similar institutions is to include contemporary artworks in their exhibitions and collections: either by European and diaspora artists commenting on the colonial histories of their countries, or by artists of former colonised countries reassessing and reclaiming the colonial histories of their countries. Hence many museums that have not traditionally been concerned with contemporary art have started to collect and display contemporary art. Contemporary art has the potential – in a more nuanced way than any other medium – to expose the broad spectrum of complexities that make up today's societies. This sharply contrasts with past practices of attempting to collect everything, to make collections as complete as possible in a necessarily flawed attempt to possess the other.

The obsession with completeness, with possessing encyclopaedic collections, is characteristic of many twentieth century museum-collecting policies, including that of the MEG. Just after the mid-twentieth century, between 1955 and 1960, the MEG's then director, Marguerite Lobsiger-Dellenbach, endeavoured to build the most important collection of Australian Aboriginal material culture in Europe. To that effect she took recourse to the activities of travellers and private collectors to complete the collection as elaborately as possible. Georges Barbey, one of those collectors, secured for the Geneva museum a rare carved tree trunk (in two parts) from New South Wales. This dendroglyph, or carved tree – the only known example in a European public collection – was obtained through an exchange with the Australian Museum in Sydney, a museum Andrew revisited in 2006. Carved trees marked burial sites or ceremonial grounds for the *bora* initiation ceremony in Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi country. The tree once stood on the country of Andrew's ancestors, from where it was removed around 1919. The dendroglyphs bear his family's clan motif and are important identity markers.

Early on in the exhibition this carved tree trunk is displayed next to a work from *The Island* series (2008). This series of monumental coloured metallic screenprints is based on lithographs of original drawings by Gustav Mutzel made during an expedition led by Wilhelm von Blandowski (known as William Blandowski), a Prussian explorer, to the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers in 1856–57. The mode of representation is very much the result of an imaginary reinterpretation of Australia. Rather than capturing an accurate depiction of real people and the Australian landscape, the imagery contains references to European classical paintings and echoes of German romanticism.

Juxtaposing the carved tree fragments with this red screenprint, *The Island II*, which portrays a *bora* burial ground surrounded by carved trees, creates a visually stimulating tension that instantly activates the mind. The viewer is confronted with a nineteenth century fantasy, a romanticised interpretation of a past reality. Simultaneously, in one installation, the viewer is challenged by another reality: that of nineteenth and early twentieth century museum practice and its complicity in colonial domination over forms of cultural representation.

The exhibition title *L'Effet boomerang* – the 'boomerang effect' – resonates particularly well in this context. In his intervention *Fuselage*, Andrew placed shelves within the closed glass wall cases adding selected objects from his personal archive. These seemingly odd inclusions served to disrupt the conventional displays and alienate the viewer from the comfort zone, the 'safe zone'. For example, a 1940s advertisement for Violet Crumble rested among a group of early artefacts and Albert Namatjira watercolours, upon a wooden display shelf on which the word 'silence' had been painted. The boomerang comes back in the face of the inattentive, uninitiated thrower. The thrower, in this instance, can be the museum as well as the visitor. Interventions throughout the many cabinets are little markers, slight disturbances, or readjustments, in an otherwise rather conservative and pedagogical display of objects.

Andrew's polarising interventions, collectively titled *Fuselage*, reoccur throughout the exhibition and ultimately take over in the two immersive installations. The viewer becomes a subject. Ultimately, the installation it is not merely about Aboriginal history or objects

and pictures of the archive; it is about how these relate to the daily, contemporary life of the visitor. The interaction with the viewer, between the viewer and the objects, is at the core of Andrew's art practice. As Andrew states in the catalogue of *Defying Empire*, the Third National Indigenous Art Triennial held at the National Gallery of Australia in 2017: 'We are the sum of our Ancestors. We are not yesterday, we are today, and with this we need to change accordingly, not to be caught up with yesterday.'

Kill Primitivism

Room A featured a number of wooden and sculptural vitrines, which reference traditional display cabinets; walls patterned with Wiradjuri motifs; wooden sculptural forms with inset video installations; and a floor carpet based on the Aboriginal flag. The walls and cabinets have been overwritten with paint, glued posters and text.

At first glance the colourful brushstrokes and handwritten words look like an act of vandalism, defacing the Wiradjuri patterns. One immediately wonders why an artist of Wiradjuri descent would do this. As can be suspected, and after having adjusted to the overwhelming brutality of the total installation, the signs, slogans and words on the wall contain powerful messages. A number of words in Aboriginal languages convey a different cultural sensitivity. Many of the words that describe the subjects exhibited are literally present and suggest a rich culture, while other English or French words seem to voice unspoken thoughts of the visitor from the past ('We, we all agree'). The sheer clash of convictions implies an exorcism of the primitivist credo. It also suggests a renewal of Andrew's own art, a wish to go further, to reinvent himself continuously as an artist.

It is then one realises that the Wiradjuri patterns are not so much defaced as renewed. There is a stimulating complicity between the elements: they enhance one another, charge each other.

Sculptural vitrines

In *Room A*, the surfaces of Andrew's sculptural vitrines *Habitat I & II* – which have been constructed using sapele timber, a colonial trade timber from Africa, and in which ephemera ranging from a *Tintin* comic book to postcards were placed – are drawn over with oil pastels, as if anarchists had come through the exhibition.

Sculptural vitrines are a recurring element in many of Andrew's installations. They stand for the old order, the colonial practice of encasing the other, the strange, the exotic, the unknown, the extraordinary. In *Theme Park*, for instance, a number of antique glass and mahogany cabinets were provided on loan by the Belgian Royal Museums for Art and History, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervueren near Brussels – a museum which in its monumental buildings still evokes the reign of Leopold II – and contained Australian Aboriginal objects from the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa.

By transforming traditional display cabinets into sculptures, Andrew shifts the way they are encountered: the vessel is as much a subject for contemplation as its contents – the two elements become complicit in their disruption of past ways of seeing. Andrew's intervention for the 2013 exhibition *Mémoires Vives* (*Vivid Memories*) held at the Musée d'Aquitaine in Bordeaux, France, also included a number of glass display cabinets. One of the showcases at the entrance of the exhibition featured a plaster cast of the head of a classical antique sculpture used in drawing classes at the local art school. This cast, which Andrew retrieved from storage, had been splashed with paint by art school students during the student protests of May 1968: an act of dissent against the academic system of the establishment. Situated within the display cabinet, the cast, still marked by the paint, possessed an iconoclastic aura.

For the exhibition at the MEG, the sculptural vitrines were custom-built. They became

bearers of words and signs, more so than the items contained within them. In this way, the sculptural vitrines confounded the predispositions and assumptions of the typical European visitor. In conjunction with the painted glass panels they became new identity markers in line with trees bearing carved patterns. These mesmerising, almost hypnotic, Wiradjuri patterns and spirals served to focus the attention rather than distract. They disturbed the gaze, even eradicated the gaze, by taking away the comfortable distance, and encouraged viewers to look again with an open mind.

Mirror

While Andrew created a number of interventions throughout *L'Effet Boomerang*, it was in *Room A* and *Mirror* that his mediation came to full maturation. Both rooms were radically different to the other spaces in the exhibition as they in turn 'colonised' a museum which used to provide a showcase of the 'other'.

Mirror featured wooden panels into which videos, photographs, prints and drawings had been placed. The panels evoke slogan boards left behind after an election, bearing painted motifs and tagged with an array of visual material ranging from reproductions of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century ethnographic photographs, manuscripts and printed text fragments, to contemporary pop culture ephemera (e.g. a Bulgari advertisement). Cut out viewing windows allowed the visitor – once inside the installation – to observe the conventional display of objects in neighbouring spaces as well as the people viewing the conventional display. In this way, *Mirror* operated as a kind of *camera obscura*, a mechanism through which the spectator in a traditional museum context could be observed and their role reflected upon.

The wall installation, with its sloganesque expressionist painting, seems like an anarchist nihilistic construction. 'END' is written on one panel. But the end of what? The end as a nihilistic fatality or the end of primitivism as a colonialist construct? In order to see again, one must destroy.

'KILL PRIMITIVISM', the graffitied mantra dominating one of the wooden panels in *Mirror*, is in-your-face iconoclastic. In this particular setting of a mainly modernist exhibition in an ethnographic museum, the slogan calls to mind now contentious exhibitions such as *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, in 1985. Andrew seeks an end to the construction of primitivist imagery, which has so influenced collective consciousness throughout the twentieth century. If the *acheiropoieta* – the original icon – is perceived as a template for the production of icons with a particular theme, Andrew is set on destroying the template of colonial-inspired primitivism.

Yet, his aim is not simply the gratuitous destruction of deeply embedded ideas as new information is provided. This becomes clear through the content displayed on the various video screens set into the sculptural forms. The 'talking heads' are those of reputable Indigenous commentators, researchers and educators, including Maxine Briggs, Wesley Enoch, Lyndon Ormond-Parker and Marcia Langton. Marcia Langton, for instance, is filmed in her office and patiently, but uncompromisingly sharp, explains Indigenous Australian culture and its protocols today. Land rights and other fundamental issues are tackled head on. Within the chaos of destruction there are moments of clarity.

If icons are also known as 'windows to the divine', these icons of museum display and approach are also windows to colonial vantage points. Andrew presents an iconoclasm in order to encourage us to see more clearly, to perceive the true face of the false icon, the false idol. It is an incitement to think.

The iconoclastic practice of subverting Western conventions relating to presentation, categorisation and mythologising the past is further explored in *AHY-KON-UH-KLAS-TIK*, an installation at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, The Netherlands. This museum has distinguished itself over the past decades through its challenging exhibitions, which have

sought to blur art and politics, question the role of the museum in contemporary society, place geopolitical concerns in the foreground, and rethink the relationship between art and social change. It has in recent times pursued a geographically diverse collection policy. In this context it seems befitting that after Geneva, Andrew's investigations into museum practice would take a further turn in a museum of modern and contemporary art that equally shifts paradigms, searching to break through its historical and socially imposed boundaries.

- 1 Georges Petitjean, 'Smoke Signals', Trent Walter (ed.), *Theme Park*, AMMU Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Utrecht, 2008, pp. 7–12. Between 2001 and 2017 this museum was the only publicly accessible permanent gallery space dedicated to contemporary Indigenous Australian art. AAMU gave Brook Andrew free access to its exhibition spaces, collection and associated collections. Andrew's own multidisciplinary work was juxtaposed with objects and artworks from the collections of ethnographic museums in the Netherlands and Belgium, seventeenth century Dutch prints of the VOC Dutch East India Company, Aboriginalia and Australiana, and work by artists Marcel Broodthaers, Marlene Dumas and Felix De Boeck.
- 2 Anthony Gardner, 'Assemble/Assembly/Assemblage', in Judith Ryan (ed.), *Brook Andrew: the right to offend is sacred*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2017, pp. 89–102.
- 3 Ann Stephen, 'Modernists and Black-fellows: Not Just Black and White', in Mary Ann Gillies, Helen Sword, Steven Yao (eds), *Pacific Rim Modernisms*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2009, pp. 151–172. These *Poèmes Nègres* were published in the Dada journals between 1917 and 1918.
- 4 Carl Strehlow, *Die Aranda-und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*, 7 vol., Joseph Bär, Frankfurt am Main, 1907–1920. The volumes were published consecutively in Frankfurt am Main between 1907 and 1920.
- 5 Roberta Colombo Dougoud, Pierrine Saini, Clotilde Wuthrich, 'Conversation avec Brook Andrew', in Roberta Colombo Dougoud, *L'effet boomerang. Les art aborigènes et insulaires d'Australie*, MEG, Musée d'Ethnographie and Infolio éditions, Geneva and Gollion, 2017, pp. 111–119.
- 6 If language is a marker of cultural identity, Leopold II of Belgium, sole proprietor of the Congo Free State between 1885 and 1908, was intent on committing a near cultural genocide by the gradual suppression of the native Flemish (Dutch) language of a majority of the population of that country and imposing the French tongue. Similarly, Gaelic speakers were prohibited to speak their own language in some parts of Great Britain.
- 7 In a seemingly parallel move contemporary art museums, galleries and international art events such as recent editions of documenta and the Venice Biennale now include art produced outside the direct influence of the European sphere. In many cases it concerns so-called diaspora artists, who have studied or base an art practice in the Euro-American centres, and to a lesser extent artists living outside the Western centres.
- 8 Roberta Colombo Dougoud, Pierrine Saini, Clotilde Wuthrich, 'La collection australienne du MEG, une histoire de regards', in Roberta Colombo Dougoud, *L'effet boomerang. Les art aborigènes et insulaires d'Australie*, MEG, Musée d'Ethnographie and Infolio éditions, Genève and Gollion, 2017, pp.47–90.
- 9 *ibid*, p.74.
- 10 Brook Andrew quoted in Tina Baum, *Defying Empire*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2017, p. 25.

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This text responds to Brook Andrew's installation *Room A*, presented at the *The Boomerang Effect – The Aboriginal Arts in Australia* exhibition from 19 May 2017 to 7 January 2018 at the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève, Switzerland.

E U G E N I A
L I M



Eugenia Lim: The Ambassador

MIKALA TAI

life is one continuous shift / afterlife is extended overtime / we aspire to the assembly line / we work faster than machines / we manufacture desire / together in globalisation / we turn an eternal profit / in the Ambassador we trust / what we touch turns to gold

The Ambassador presents three distinct series by Melbourne-based artist Eugenia Lim, centring upon a gold-suited figure who appears halfway between truth and fantasy. In each series, Lim transforms herself into her eponymous invented persona, the Ambassador, an insatiably curious character who traverses time and space, playfully exploring Australia's cultural and built landscapes.

This exhibition marks the first institutional solo exhibition of Lim's work, and presents all three series together for the first time. Together they represent a compelling and witty examination of contemporary Australia from a female, performative and Asian-Australian perspective. As the Ambassador, Lim shape-shifts to unearth multiple dimensions of the Asian-Australian narrative, drilling down into racial politics, the social costs of manufacturing, and the role of architecture in shaping society, and exploring how national identities and stereotypes cut, divide and bond our globalised world.

Yellow Peril

In *Yellow Peril*, Lim's deftly critical yet comical Ambassador persona first appears. The central video was shot on location in regional Victoria at Ballarat's Sovereign Hill, a historical theme park memorialising Australia's gold rush era of the 1850s, where the Ambassador tries her hand at panning for gold.

Among Sovereign Hill's tourists and mock-colonial performers, the Ambassador appears as a time-traveller of sorts. With a sense of studious examination, she negotiates the terrain, peering into shopfronts, diligently searching and approaching each encounter with wide eyes. Her diplomatic mission, whatever it is, is a serious one. Amusing as this video is, it is also a critical examination of the complexities of Chinese migration to Australia. Since the gold rush of the mid-1800s, Australia has had a fraught history with Chinese migrants, punctuated by racial flashpoints and violence—the twin emotions of fear and fascination, and the repercussions of the White Australia Policy.

Lim extrapolates the ominous existential fear of Asian 'invasion' (or 'yellow peril') in a pair of photographs—screen-printed on gold mylar—spanning three decades of her family's presence in Australia. One depicts a stiffly posed Ambassador in a Sovereign Hill photo booth, holding a papier-mâché replica of the Welcome Stranger, the world's largest-ever alluvial nugget (found in 1869 in Moliagul, Victoria); the other, an archival snapshot of her parents soon after they first arrived in Melbourne, standing proudly in front of Ron Robertson-Swann's 1980 public sculpture *Vault*. While the Ambassador's stiff pose and fake gold is comical, it is the image of Lim's parents that is most powerful. The much-maligned and now iconic *Vault* has been nicknamed 'Yellow Peril' for many years, capturing the public's disapproval of the hard-edged geometric structure. Lim's parents' determined expressions signal both the hope and uncertainty of their new life in Australia. For Lim, the loaded history of *Vault* acts as a reminder of the complexities of Chinese migration to Australia.

Lim's Ambassador persona nods to the work of Hong Kong-born US-based artist Tseng Kwong Chi. In *East Meets West* (1979–89), Chi captured himself in a series of self-portraits in front of iconic tourist sites and monuments of Euro-American culture. Drawing inspiration from Chi's deadpan 'diplomat', the act of self-portraiture is of equal importance to Lim, allowing her to explore, frame and represent a more nuanced Asian identity and history.

For Lim, as an Asian-Australian born and raised in Melbourne, 'Yellow Peril' is, as she says, 'in her blood.' As the Ambassador evolves in later works to become a conduit to interrogate architecture and the built environment, it is the reoccurring motif of Robertson-Swann's *Vault* that has become Lim's 'own visual shorthand to collide a personal, national and geopolitical exploration of identity.'

The People's Currency

The People's Currency is a participatory performance and 'Special Economic Zone' run by the Ambassador. Here, the Ambassador occupies a 'world factory'—an imagined China—where Lim tests Australian understandings and expectations of a place we are increasingly economically and socially tied to. The work takes its name from the renminbi, China's official currency, and explores the social impact of globalisation on those who seek their fortune in the factories of China—or what economists like to call the 'workshop of the world'.

While remote from Australia, these factories and their activities have local and global impacts. When almost everything is now 'Made in China', how are we all implicated as consumers in the labour conditions of the production line? In the Ambassador's factory, she presides over short-term 'workers' (members of the public), leads factory calisthenics workouts, and monitors the production of 'iDevices' (each individually cast from Lim's own smartphone), all while printing counterfeit currency of her own design. Each worker completes basic menial tasks, the products of which are inspected by the Ambassador. Remuneration of workers is unpredictable; some receive standard payment, some nothing, while the chosen few are gifted their own iDevice to keep. In this closed-looped 'Special Economic Zone', mass production and money-printing become strategies for contemplating the human impact of the long march of global capitalism.

The Australian Ugliness

The third and most recent iteration of the Ambassador is the artist's most ambitious work to date. *The Australian Ugliness* is a contemporary examination of architecture's role in shaping national identity, using Robin Boyd's 1960 polemical book of the same name as its catalyst. In his text, Boyd ponders Australian urbanism and its tendency towards 'featurism'—a lazy satisfaction with the mediocre or cosmetic. Aligned with his discussion of architecture and aesthetics is Boyd's still-timely and biting assessment of Australia's national identity as one satisfied with the status quo.

More than half a century later, Lim locates her video and photographic series as an almost wordless yet outspoken update to Boyd's text. In the era where box-like apartment buildings and cookie-cutter project homes form concentric rings around Australian cities, Boyd's scathing appraisal still holds. In Lim's *The Australian Ugliness*, the Ambassador shape-shifts as a student, tourist, client, property investor and resident as she visits over thirty architectural sites and spaces across Australia. Tracing architecture from the academy to the office, the city to the suburban fringe, and contrasting places of lesser privilege with the grand icons of Australian architecture, Lim is interested in the limits of architecture—where is architecture absent, where can it do more? Is 'The Australian Dream' unsustainable and in need of an update?

As the Ambassador negotiates each space, from Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House to Denton Corker Marshall's Melbourne Museum, she appears incongruous, at times absurd, in her surrounds. In *The Australian Ugliness*, Lim and her small cast of performers of diverse ages, body shapes, fluid genders and sexualities intervene into public and private space, 'othering' architecture through choreography and costume to ask: who holds the right to design our spaces, and who are they designed for? Who shapes our built environment and, in turn, how do these forces shape us?

Curated by Mikala Tai, Director, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, *The Ambassador* is a 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Museums & Galleries of NSW touring exhibition. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.

L I S A
R E I H A N A



Emissaries: A new pacific of the past for tomorrow

RHANA DEVENPORT

First published to accompany *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* at the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017.

‘Above, Afraid, Aloft, Anchor’ are the first four words in a dictionary of Polynesian language from the Pacific Island traveller Omai in the late 18th century.¹ The words, brought together by accident of alphabetisation, can be seen as a kind of shorthand for Omai’s cross-cultural experiences and for events from the project of exploration in which he was an active agent. While it was Captain James Cook who took Omai to England, it was the well-connected and ambitious naturalist Joseph Banks who ensured that he was fêted in the nation’s centre of power, London. Omai was born around 1751 in Ra’iātea, the second largest island after Tahiti in the South Pacific’s Society Islands.² He first met Cook as a teenager in Tahiti on the commander’s first voyage in 1769. During Cook’s second voyage, Omai joined the HMS *Adventure* in 1773 under Captain Tobias Furneaux and arrived in London a year later. Renowned for his charm, wit and to English eyes his exotic good looks, Omai was a feature at social gatherings, and in 1776 the influential portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds painted the young attaché. Omai’s voyage home after a two-year stay became the topic of a wildly popular pantomime, *Omai – A Voyage ’Round the World*, which from 1785 played to full houses in London. His safe return from England to the Pacific was the prime motivation for Cook’s third voyage (1776–79). After arriving back to his home island of Huahine in 1777, Omai decorated a European-style house with furniture and other accoutrements that he had been gifted, only to die two years later aged just 29.

Omai’s diplomacy unfolded in the high society of London, but another great emissary, Tupaia, who was also from Ra’iātea, played a key diplomatic role with both Australian Aboriginal people and the New Zealand Māori during Cook’s first voyage (1768–71) in the Pacific. A brilliant navigator, translator and *Arioi* high priest, Tupaia was born around 1725 and in 1769 joined the HMS *Endeavour* at the insistence of Joseph Banks when it passed through Ra’iātea. Banks personally paid for Tupaia’s welfare on the journey while he drew navigational charts for 130 Pacific islands in a vast radius and named 74. Tupaia accompanied Cook and Banks on forays to Australia and New Zealand and worked closely with the latter to compile an account of Tahiti and its people. Although the *Endeavour*’s sailors were not impressed by Tupaia’s regal and authoritative disposition, Māori immediately recognised him as a *tohunga* (expert) and presented him with an esteemed dog-skin cloak. Tupaia, however, never reached England: in 1770, aged 45, he died from dysentery in Batavia along with many seamen and scientists on that voyage.

Omai and Tupaia – both recognisable in their spectacularly draped sun-bleached white *tapa* (bark cloth) attire – are constants in the exhibition *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* (2017). Both appear discoursing with Banks and Cook in the exhibition’s centrepiece – the panoramic projection *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015–17. The repeated appearances of these emissaries from the South in the scrolling narrative of this work is a powerful signifier of the exchanges that took place during Cook’s Pacific voyages of discovery – and indeed helped secure the success of those voyages, whose effects remain alive and contested to this day.

A Wallpaper of Elaborate Scheme, a Work of Shifting Scales

For this exhibition, Reihana has brought together a group of works that encircle speculative ideas generated by the Enlightenment's most reproduced and fanciful depiction of the South Seas – Joseph Dufour & Cie and Jean-Gabriel Charvet's *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, 1804–5.³ The wallpaper acts as the intellectual–aesthetic scaffolding of Reihana's *Emissaries* project. Borrowing from visual and descriptive representations of Cook, Jean-François de Galaup, de La Pérouse and Louis Antoine de Bougainville's voyages, Dufour and Charvet's decorative panoramic wallpaper proved to be both a zenith in the technology of representation at the outset of the 19th century and the hardened pinnacle of an idealised colonial impulse. Of *Les Sauvages* Reihana says, 'This fascinating wallpaper is a concoction, a fabulation invented in someone else's elsewhere, and a technical marvel of its time.'⁴ Comprising in total 20 drops of paper embellished with over 1000 woodblock prints, *Les Sauvages* graced dining and drawing rooms across Europe and North America, creating site-specific immersive environments 200 years before the invention of Oculus Rift. In these domestic settings of the privileged, the wallpaper cast the wealthy as worldly participants and purveyors of faraway places, and their guests as amused and titillated momentary adventurers. The buried Roman city of Pompeii had been rediscovered in 1748 and rapidly influenced the fashions of the late 18th century. It is in part for this reason that the diaphanous and alluring neoclassical costumes caressing the near naked pale-skinned dancers in the wallpaper spoke less to Tahitian or Hawaiian modes of dress than to the prevailing taste of the European elite. Charvet, as illustrator, crafted an imaginative hybrid accumulation of bodies in attire ranging from elaborate quasi-tribal to seductive exotic. In the wallpaper Tahitian afternoon sun falls warmly on verdant land populated with plants plucked arbitrarily from botanical illustrations drawn on Cook's Pacific voyages and flora from South America, where the illustrator had recently travelled.

Les Sauvages was part instructive, part entertainment and utterly reflective of its time and the ideological aspirations of Enlightenment thought and the Age of Reason, complete with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the noble savage and societal progress. Reihana, acutely aware of the legacy of Enlightenment thought and the way this continues to play out in the wallpaper, explains:

I chose to transgress the wallpaper's conventions. Well aware of the slippery nature of viewpoints and truth, I deliberately included scenes that show the risks of encounter and cultural conflicts . . . I used several techniques in my attempts to resist what I describe as the 'festival gaze' (brown bodies on show).⁵

She draws attention to ruptures and fault lines, to contradictions, and to the irrevocable failures and the unexpected surprises of communication. The video panorama, then, raises questions about cultural forgetting, visceral power and sexual identity. The radical introduction of a transgender Captain Cook references Pacific peoples' confusion as to the explorer's sexual orientation. In fact in relation to this there is a doubling with the inclusion of a male Cook in the 'Gender Cook' vignette of the initial version and then a second vignette with a female Cook cast in the same role. The 32-minute loop becomes 64 minutes with the inclusion of this barely discernible yet fundamental flip.

By re-enacting scenarios through digital video and photography, Reihana recasts, reclaims and reimagines history and its representation from a 21st-century Māori and Pacific perspective. The enhancement and enlarging of characters to a human scale in *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* implicates us, the viewers, fully in the speculative theatrical and historical drama that unfolds. Simultaneously, the presentation of key characters at a giant size in the photographic portraits diminishes us. And in a dramatic inversion of scale, Reihana introduces the miniature in her manipulation of telescopes – or as they were known in Cook's time, 'perspectival tubes' or 'spying glasses' – which hone nuanced details and characters including the Nootka Sound figure that so captured the artist's imagination when she was researching the collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.⁶

Time and Space

While the panoramic pseudo-pantomime⁷ of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* can be traced to *Les Sauvages*, its filmic point of view is reflective of Reihana's ongoing interests in Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay's conception of the 'fourth cinema' from which an indigenous theory can be framed. Reihana explains:

The fourth wall is a cinematic term that describes an audience's invisible 'fly on the wall' viewpoint. Barclay considers it a privileging view, and in 'Celebrating Fourth Cinema' theorises an indigenous cinema where First Peoples control the camera rather than being the subject of its gaze . . . *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* reflects these ideas by placing viewers as tangata whenua (people of the land). The resulting experience is that you are watching the foreshore action from behind the flora. With the inclusion of the haka (posture dance), which is unusually seen from behind, the dancers are performing a challenge on our behalf. This reverses the perspective to one of insider/tangata whenua rather than an outsider/audience member.⁸

Working with scale and time, Reihana telescopes into a dramatic moment of rupture – the death of Captain Cook at Kealakekua Bay in Hawai'i on 14 February 1779, which is an almost invisible event hidden in the far distance in *Les Sauvages* – to create the violent and dramatic climax of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*. Potentially mortal consequences of actions, hubris and misunderstandings are brought to the fore. The finality of this moment and its impact is profound, yet this drama plays out within an endlessly looping visual world, ensuring that time here is cyclical and not teleological.⁹ A limitless becoming, the temporal and spatial dimensionality of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, is one of its most radical elements; it eschews European readings in favour of engaging with metaphysical perspectives that include the recently articulated Pacific theory of time and space known as Tā-Vā. I suggest that the cyclical time of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* is informed by Pacific conceptions of time as articulated in the Tā-Vā theory. Tā-Vā differs from Aristotelian-founded, Western temporal and spatial metaphysics in its emphasis on *perpetual cycles*, and in this way it relates more to Henri Bergson's idea of duration while also offering something entirely new.

Spatial theorist Albert L Refiti notes that 'Although barely ten years-old, the Tā-Vā theory of reality has been vital to the work of producing concepts in Pacific Thought.'¹⁰ 'Pacific Thought' is a broad grouping of ideas from thinkers, writers and artists in Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere in the Pacific, which has been in circulation since the 1990s. Theorist 'Okusitino Mahina proposed in 2010 that the Tā-Vā theory is a productive concept unifying nature, mind and reality, and is a cyclical process of becoming. In this theory, time and space are in a perpetual game of repulsion and attraction in an eternal state of cycle and exchange. The theory derives in part from Tongan conceptions of performance ('doing time in space') and material arts with Tā (beating) being active and Vā (intervals/silence) being inactive. The transformative combination unleashes volcanic power within objects and produces a constant state of flux. Mahina explains: 'The crux of the theory suggests that the material world is perpetually under transformation by Tā (time and action) and Vā (space and content).'¹¹

Refiti discusses the production of *ngatu* or Tongan bark cloth as a negotiation of Tā and Vā into form. Reihana is conscious of the technological advances wrought through French paper-making in the late 18th century and the technical precision required with woodblock printing to produce multiple versions for international distribution.¹² Her elaborate and ambitious digital compositing and spatial and temporal conception in *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* – which in sheer complexity of production is a contemporary equivalent of the Dufour wallpaper – also parallels the negotiation of Tā-Vā within the creation of customary *ngatu*.

Cosmogony is the theory of the origin of the universe – the birth of time and space in which mythological time plays a key contributing role. The phrase made famous by Claude Lévi-Strauss is apposite: myths, he said, are ‘machines for the suppression of time’.¹³ John Potts notes, ‘ancestral events continuously described though oral narration are understood not as “history” – consigned irretrievably to the past – but as foundational events existing simultaneously in past, present and future.’¹⁴ Ka mura, ka muri is a Māori proverb that aligns with the Māori world view that one walks through life backwards looking not to the future as one approaches it but instead looking back to and being informed by the past. The past and present are, therefore, a single space.

The all-pervasive mathematical conceptions of time proposed by Descartes and Newton were challenged by Henri Bergson at the turn of the 20th century in a new conception of time which focused on intuition and internal streams of consciousness, known as ‘duration’. This idea was explored by writers James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, among others, and later championed by Gilles Deleuze in the 1980s. Bergson’s durational and intuitive time offered affinities for late 20th and early 21st-century time-based practitioners such as video and performance artists.¹⁵ At the eve of the Information Age, in the 1970s, Frederic Jameson associated modernism with time and postmodernism with space; and in 1989 David Harvey described ‘the condition of post-modernity’ as one in which there was ‘space-time compression’ and communication and information flows – a quickening of time and a shrinking of space.¹⁶ Since the turn of this century theorists have focused on ‘internet time’ and networked online communications; and since 2007 the smartphone phenomenon has radically altered and integrated time and space with geospatial ‘locative media’, a ‘collaborative cartography of space and mind, places and the connections between them’.¹⁷ This has introduced what Ichiyo Habuchi terms ‘telecocooning’. Nicolas Bourriaud talks about ‘altermodernity’ rather than ‘postmodernity’, recognising a ‘translation orientated modernity’ where the immigrant, the wanderer, the exile and the tourist are the dominant figures of contemporary society.¹⁸ This idea relates to Reihana’s exploration of the inquisitive and acquisitive explorer and the mis-translation of custom in hitherto unknown lands. Bourriaud also speaks about artists as ‘semionauts’, agents who navigate the virtual oceans of images or signs.¹⁹

Reihana’s semionautical and sustained interest in a popular, decorative and quasi-educational 19th-century representation of the idealised Pacific is not a nostalgic revisiting or a righting/re-writing of wrongs; rather, it opens fissures in codified representation and the colonial impulse to explore directly the intentions and possibilities of human encounter and exchange. This is not a reconstruction of the past but a regenerative imaginative inquiry into a contemporaneous cultural present and future. Politics of memory come into play as Reihana challenges both the truth of the observations and the authenticity of events and appearance. The post-death dismembering of Cook which we see in *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* – itself an act of reverence by the Hawaiians – is perhaps symbolic of the disillusion or misconception of memory. In 21st-century theoretical physics there is the idea of the multiverse, of parallel versions of time, which link back to Bergson’s idea of varying intensities of time and infinite becomings. Reihana’s scrolling, endlessly-looping field of land, sea and sky cradles a multiverse of actions and encounters.

The Transit

It was the scientific project of measuring both chronological time and heavenly distance that launched Cook on his first voyage to the Pacific or, as the region was called then, the 'South Seas'. At the insistence of the Royal Society, King George III initiated a voyage to record the Transit of Venus in Tahiti in 1769. Never before had such an amount of money been committed to a scientific project. The Navy purchased a vessel and named it *Endeavour*, and Cook, a cartographer and astronomer, was commissioned by the Admiralty to lead the voyage (he was paid a flat fee of £100 for his astronomical observations). In the spirit of the Enlightenment, Cook was requested to make 'ethnographical observations and botanical, mineral and animal collections . . . to make sense of this new world'.²⁰ The Admiralty's secret papers, read by Cook only after the Transit sighting, outlined the secondary purpose of the voyage – to seek Terra Australis Incognita, 'the unknown land of the South'.

The first recording of a Transit of Venus was in 1639;²¹ in 1761 another Transit was more widely observed and recorded, and soon after this the scientific and astronomical communities understood that the Transit offered a rare and important opportunity to measure the heavens. Simply put, by recording the time it took for Venus to transit the Sun, and comparing the solar parallax, or differences between observations across the globe, the distance between the Earth and the Sun could be determined. This was by no means merely a British venture; in many ways that was one of the world's first and most collaborative international endeavours, as the comparatives from different parts of the world were essential to determine the result. The project engaged 125 observers from 10 countries in over 100 locations across the world. Catherine the Great, for example, was thrilled at the project's potential and took a passionate interest in the scientific rationale and in Russia's active engagement as an indicator of her own and her country's intellectual sophistication. Lenses were ground, astronomers located, expeditions embarked upon, wars halted, pamphlets urgently printed, couriers dispatched, information freely shared, and excitement heightened by this new collective approach to a shared scientific purpose. Cook, lead astronomer Charles Green and botanist Daniel Solander recorded the Transit on the morning of a clear day on 3 June 1769 in Matavai Bay, Tahiti. It lasted for almost six hours and proved to be one of the most successful sightings. The outcome, determined in 1771 after an aggregation of results from across the globe, was that the distance between the Earth and the Sun was 93,726,900 miles, which is astonishingly close to today's calculation of 92,960,000 deduced from ground-based radar and time delays in radio signals sent from spacecraft.

When fitting out the *Endeavour* before the voyage, Cook requested various provisions to maintain the health of his crew such as vitamin and mineral-rich raisins, sauerkraut, beer and salt, along with objects to trade including mirrors and beads. Also on the stores list were swathes of green floorcloth, presumably to make the Great Cabin feel more habitable.²² Cook's and Banks' green-floored world enclosed in the ship is brought to mind, almost 250 years later, by Reihana's green screen in the darkened film studio as she captured footage to Chroma key composit actors and vessels in the making of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*.

Loaded onto the *Endeavour*, under the direction of Green, was a staggering volume of astronomical instruments including quadrants, clocks and telescopes to set up a portable observatory in the South Seas. Also on board, and much to Cook's dismay, was the botanist Joseph Banks, who had paid a whopping £10,000 for his team's passage. The supernumerary scientists, astronomers and artists were known as the 'experimental gentlemen'. The *Endeavour* returned from its expedition with 30,000 dried plant specimens. Banks became the president of the Royal Society in 1778, a position he held for 40 years, and 'turned Britain into a centre for the scientific study and economic exploitation of the world's flora.'²³ The 'cartographic gaze' was inseparable from the scientific pursuit of the Enlightenment. Cartographers manufacture power and these scientific expeditions simultaneously paved the way for enthusiastic colonial and economic expansionism in the South Seas.

Representations of the Pacific

Imaginative representations of the Pacific and its islands of possibility were not only the domain of the British explorers or the visual artists on board their vessels, as this extract from Herman Melville's famous novel about the white leviathan *Moby-Dick* attests:

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!²⁴

Here, Melville could equally be speaking of what befell Cook in Hawai'i, and it is highly likely that his imagination was fuelled by images of the Pacific which were circulating at the time of the novel's creation, *Moby-Dick* was published 82 years after Cook's first Pacific voyage and 47 years after the production of Dufour and Charvet's wallpaper.

It has been stated that the volume of pictorial representations of Cook's voyages is unsurpassed by those generated during other expeditions before or since.²⁵ Cook's voyages produced 600 watercolours, gouaches and drawings, 130 copperplate engravings and 50 engravings from unauthorised publications, plus 2000 natural history drawings and watercolours. These pictorial reports and artworks circulated in the European book market for generations, and directly influenced Dufour and Chavert's wallpaper.²⁶

Works by John Webber, the artist on the third and final voyage, attracted great attention – particularly *The Death of Cook*, 1787 (National Portrait Gallery, Canberra), which was based on his own experiences, although he did not actually witness Cook's death. Webber's were 'encounter' images that encompassed rituals of dance, performance, banquets and barter and sales. Under Cook's direction, he depicted ceremonies, funerals, rituals and human sacrifices. Cook often took active part in these events, such as the Lono ceremony in Hawai'i involving his partial stripping, which is seen in *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*. On his return to London, Webber produced paintings and the aquatint series *Views in the South Seas*, 1786–92 which helped him become one of the first successful independent artist-publishers, an enterprise that had become popular in the 18th century to meet the desire for images of the exotic and which ensured a lineage of Pacific-related illustration that survives up to the present day and finds new form in Reihana's project.

However, European artists were not the only ones to travel with Cook. Joining Sydney Parkinson and Herman Spöring Jr on the first voyage was our emissary Tupaia, who produced watercolours unlike any other. A reflection of the esteem in which he was held, Tupaia was given access to precious watercolour paints and, using the colours that predominate in bark-cloth painting – red, brown and black – made a number of pencil and watercolour works, which were attributed to ‘Artist of the Chief Mourner’. Only in 1997 were they reattributed to Tupaia. One such image shows Banks exchanging a piece of cloth for a crayfish.²⁷ It is perhaps telling of Tupaia’s perspective on cross-cultural contact during the first voyage that he chose to depict this exchange, which might also be viewed as reciprocal gifting (koha), a customary practice in Polynesia with links to Tā-Vā. Of course, formal gifting is a hallmark of diplomatic ritual, so we should not be surprised by the fact that it caught the watchful emissary’s eye. All seems well in Tupaia’s watercolour, a moment of offer and acceptance performed by each party, but we know not all interactions borne out of Cook’s voyages and the consequential colonisation of the Pacific maintained this calm balance. It is that knowledge that helps give Tupaia’s image the charge it has. And it is this that gives images such as Tupaia’s and the gargantuan fiction of idealisation we experience in Dufour’s wallpaper the intellectual–emotional prompts that make them alive to politically powerful reappraisal in the present.

Emissaries – A New Pacific of the Past for Tomorrow

Framing the action of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* in the exhibition are two large-scaled digital images: one depicts Joseph Banks in his luxuriant and confident splendour; the other is of the Chief Mourner, an emissary between life and death.²⁸ Reihana explains:

The spectacular Chief Mourner costume, heiva tupapa‘u, was worn during funerary rituals, and I wanted to understand why it struck such fear for the Tahitians . . . Rarely seen and worn only when a Chief passed away, its use marked chaotic times when a village was leaderless and political machinations were afoot. The Chief Mourner would terrorise local villagers in the mornings and evenings, accompanied by assistants whose bodies were blackened with soot. The pearlescent mask and breastplate reflect bright light, literally blinding those who beheld it. For unlucky ones, the result was death. Accounts from Cook’s first voyage describe Joseph Banks joining the Chief Mourner. Correspondence from Banks unearthed in 1997 confirmed that Tupaia created the famous illustration of this costumed diviner. *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* restages Tupaia’s drawing – his image is surrounded by a group of women decorating *tapa* and we see Banks’ ‘blacking up’ and joining in the killing spree. It’s fascinating to consider Banks’ willingness to join an indigenous death ritual. The Chief Mourner’s actions were at once those of creator and destroyer, collapsing the space between life and death, chaos and permanence.²⁹

In the centre of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, in drop X, there is a Māori figure who gazes back over his right shoulder, straining to see the death of Cook on the beach of faraway Kealakekua Bay. One way of understanding Reihana’s relationship to her project is to imagine that she inhabits this figure as she envisages representations and realities of Pacific peoples now and through time, and considers Cook’s voyages – his actions, his scientific endeavours, his death and the thousands of images and representations that emerged from those and other European voyages which have been folded into the collective imaginary of the Pacific.

For this final iteration of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* Reihana has included a schism to her own cyclical time register. The rupture is the presence of the Pacific canoes which, with their crews, are the only vignettes in the animated tableau that move left to right, seemingly against time. This gesture, disruptive of a teleological understanding of history, may be read as symbolic of the two emissaries: Omai and his elaborate return to the island of his origin; and Tupaia and his modest yet powerful renderings of gifting between strangers once worlds apart.

- 1 Unpublished, as transcribed in London circa 1775 by Charles Blagden, the secretary for both the Royal Society and Joseph Banks, who would become the Society's president. The dictionary is held in the Royal Society Collections, London.
- 2 Omai was the name mistakenly given by the British. The young man's real name was Mai. It is believed that Captain Cook named the Society Islands both in honour of the Royal Society and also in reference to the closely clustered nature of the island group.
- 3 For a detailed account of the wallpaper's design and construction see Vivienne Webb's essay '*Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*' in this volume, p 116–23.
- 4 Rhana Devenport, 'An Interview with Lisa Reihana' in (ed) Rhana Devenport, *Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland, 2015, p 7.
- 5 As above, p 16.
- 6 See pp 94–95 for a representation of this figure.
- 7 For a discussion of the history of the panorama see Sean Cubitt, '*in Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* and Panoramic Art' in (ed) Devenport, *Lisa Reihana: in Pursuit of Venus*, pp 40–46.
- 8 Devenport, *Lisa Reihana: in Pursuit of Venus*, p 17.
- 9 Reihana commissioned an illustration of sky, land and sea derived from the Dufour wallpaper and this background, populated by flora, characters and objects, moves from right to left over a four-minute period. The background repeats 16 times over the 64-minute duration of the work, with each of these 16 repeats presenting different characters in the same setting.
- 10 Albert L Refiti, 'How Tā-Vā Theory of Reality Constructs a Spatial Exposition of Samoan Architecture', http://www.academia.edu/3570169/How_the_Ta_Va_theory_of_reality_constructs_a_spatial_exposition_of_Samoan_architecture, accessed 17 Jan 2017.
- 11 'Okusitino Mahina quoted in Refiti, 'How Tā-Vā Theory of Reality Constructs a Spatial Exposition of Samoan Architecture'.
- 12 In 1783 the Montgolfier brothers Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Étienne launched the first piloted ascent in a hot-air balloon, which was fabricated from long strips of paper.
- 13 www.researchgate.net/publication/32220654_Claude_Levi-Strauss_at_His_Centennial, accessed 17 Jan 2017.
- 14 John Potts, *The New Time and Space*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015, p 11.
- 15 Potts, *The New Time and Space*, p 33.
- 16 As above, p 44.
- 17 As above, p 62.
- 18 Nicolas Bourriaud from 'The Radicant' quoted in Potts, *The New Time and Space*, p 76.
- 19 Bourriaud from 'Postproduction; Culture as Screenplay' quoted in Potts, *The New Time and Space*, p 79.
- 20 Andrea Wulf, *Chasing Venus: The Race to Measure the Heavens*, Knopf, New York, 2012, p 131.
- 21 This was observed and recorded by Jeremiah Horrocks at his home in Much Hoole, England on 4 December; however, the results were not published until 1661, well after his death.
- 22 Coloured floorcloths or oylcloth were in wide use during most of the 18th and 19th centuries as a less expensive alternative to woven carpets, marble inlay or parquetry.
- 23 Wulf, *Chasing Venus: The Race to Measure the Heavens*, p 204.
- 24 *Moby-Dick*, Wizio, Kindle edition, 2015, loc 4869. The narrator Ishmael's affectionate friend and one of the book's key characters is the tattooed beaver hat-wearing harpoonist Queequeg, from the fictional island of Kokovoko in the South Seas which is inhabited by a cannibal tribe. Perceived by his crew as hovering between 'savage and civilised' he ultimately saves Ishmael's life (using an empty coffin-cum-liferaft), and can be understood as an emissary of sorts.
- 25 Rüdiger Joppien, 'The Artists on James Cook's Expeditions' in (eds) Adrienne Kaeppler and Robert Fleck, *James Cook and the Exploration of the Pacific*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2009, p 112.
- 26 On the first voyage accompanying Joseph Banks were botanical and natural history illustrator Sydney Parkinson and the Finnish draughtsman, botanist, clerk and instrument maker Herman Spöring Jr. On the second voyage was landscape artist William Hodges. The third voyage's artists were John Webber and William Ellis, the latter an amateur who assisted the ship's surgeon.
- 27 See p 45 for a reproduction of the watercolour.
- 28 See pp 59 and 93 for images of the Chief Mourner.
- 29 Lisa Reihana in correspondence with author, 18 Jan 2017.

— This text was originally published in the *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* exhibition catalogue, first published by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki on the occasion of the exhibition *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* for the 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 13 May to 26 November 2017.



M I N G
W O N G



Ming Wong: In Love for the Mood

SIULI TAN

Originally commissioned for and presented at the Singapore Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale, Ming Wong's *In Love for the Mood* (2009) considers the means through which subjectivity is constructed in cinema as well as through the performative veneers of everyday life.

Well known for his retelling and reinterpretation of world cinema classics such as Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) and Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974), Wong deliberately miscasts himself and others in iconic roles, often playing several different characters in a foreign language to disassemble constructions of identity, gender, and culture.

In *In Love for the Mood*, Wong reinterprets Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai's iconic movie *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by substituting a Caucasian actress in dual lead roles. As the actress struggles with the unfamiliar language, the film's exploration of issues of identity is elevated against the backdrop of heartbreak, a universal condition that transcends race or language.

In Love for the Mood was presented as part of 'Life of Imitation', a body of work that includes *Four Malay Stories* (2005)—a tribute to P. Ramlee, an icon of the Malay entertainment industry—as well as another new commission, *Life of Imitation*, Wong's take on Douglas Sirk's 1959 *Imitation of Life*. Collectively, these works—for which Wong received a Special Mention Award—pay homage to Singaporean and Malaysian cinema's golden age of movie-making from the 1950s to the 1970s, an epoch referenced in *In the Mood for Love*'s mannered melodrama as well as Wong's re-visiting of P. Ramlee's forgotten classics. At Venice, this significant period of Singapore's cultural history was referenced by the inclusion of artworks by Neo Chon Teck, Singapore's last cinema billboard painter, in a nod to a dying art that, along with the heavy red drapes installed in the Venetian palazzo, harked back to a bygone age of cinema.

These historic references go beyond mere nostalgia, however. As noted by Tang Fu Kuen, the curator for the 2009 Singapore Pavilion, this era coincided with a significant period of "nation-building, struggle, rapid modernisation and cultural flux. Multiple worlds co-existed then where language, appearance and tradition were continually negotiated". Cinema was thus "the site par excellence that captured the complex cultural relations and knowledge production during this epoch of change"¹. This fluid and dynamic cultural milieu was reflected in Singapore's pre-1965 multi-ethnic film industry, now standing in sharp contrast with present-day Singapore, where national policies have resulted in a homogenisation of languages,² among other systematically implemented boundaries and frameworks for categorising and organising identity and social life.

In Wong's works, language and identity are in flux and constantly renegotiated. *In Love for the Mood* re-enacts a scene from *In the Mood for Love* where Mrs Su (originally played by the luminous Maggie Cheung) rehearses for a confrontation with her husband, preparing to accuse him of infidelity. In Wong's version, the roles of both Mrs Su and her confidante Mr Chow (Tony Leung in the original movie) are enacted by the same Caucasian actress (Kluane Saunders). The scene plays out over three screens as Wong, off-screen, prompts Saunders with the Cantonese lines, which she initially repeats with halting unfamiliarity and palpable frustration. The third channel of this video installation captures her final take, Saunders at last at ease with her script as well as her persona, delivering her lines with a nuanced poignancy.

The actress's repetition of her lines—and her gradual mastery of both the language and her role—suggest that language and identity are learned and familiarised over time, both “requiring continual re-enactment to bring them into being”.³ That the scene is framed as a rehearsal of a rehearsal adds further critical piquancy to the notion of multiple performative veneers that are open to destabilisation and renegotiation. The disjuncture and disconnect between the miscast actor playing a role which has already been fixed in the collective cultural imagination as belonging to an actor of a different ethnicity, gender and/or culture, critically foregrounds a recognition of difference(s), even as it reaches towards a shared empathy of universal human experiences.

The staging of *In Love for the Mood*'s vignette over multiple screens is a mode employed by Wong in several of his works. By deconstructing and reworking films across numerous projections—thereby replacing the immersive single screen of traditional cinema, which assumes a narrative continuity and more passive mode of spectatorship—Wong facilitates a new and often critical reception of a specific and familiar film fragment.

Despite Wong's use of these distancing techniques—which extend to the inclusion of false starts and outtakes—the scenes are still “remarkably poignant, proving the power of cinema to suck us into its affective realm”.⁴ This affective dimension of Wong's work lies in part in exposing vulnerabilities, be they in Saunders' attempts to master a foreign language and the emotional engagement of a scene, or those of Wong himself when he tackles a role in a foreign language, such as in *Learn German with Petra von Kant* (2007).

This willingness to put oneself in a position of vulnerability through attempting to inhabit a culture or cultural role speaks of an openness to difference, and an empathy in encounters with the Other. As a term, ‘world cinema’ presupposes a notion of the foreign, and, concurrently, a spirit of cosmopolitanism in the sense of feeling comfortable with cultural diversity. The recognition of shared human experiences that bind us informs this empathy towards the other. So it is that Wong—as a blonde-wigged and dissolute Petra von Kant—proclaims, “ich bin so im Arsch”, the character's bitterness and desperation echoing Wong's own sense of a mid-life and mid-career crisis⁵. So it is, too, that audiences who may initially be startled at the miscasting of Kluane Saunders as Mrs Su will nonetheless recognise the universal heart-rending experience of betrayal in love.

This shared emotion across boundaries of time, space and geography, between ‘strangers’ who look and speak differently from us, who uneasily inhabit roles we do not normally attribute to them, is an invitation to reconsider stereotypes and assumptions about others, and to imagine the self as the Other or the Other as the self. This, ultimately, is the affective power of Ming Wong's filmic works, especially urgent in a time when the walls of the world are closing in.

1 Tang Fu Kuen, “Notes From The Curator” in *Ming Wong: Life Of Imitation*, exhibition catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum, 22 April – 22 August 2010. Singapore Art Museum: Singapore, pg. 51.

2 English has been adopted as the lingua franca; Mandarin as a ‘mother tongue’ for citizens of Chinese descent -- replacing other dialects such as Cantonese and Hokkien -- along with Malay and Indian as other official ‘mother tongues’.

3 Russell Storer, “Repeat After Me” in *Ming Wong: Life Of Imitation*, op. cit, pg. 62.

4 Storer, *ibid*, pg. 61.

5 See artist's statement on http://www.mingwong.org/tag/pvk_sections

This text has been commissioned by the Samstag Museum of Art to accompany *Ming Wong: In Love for the Mood* at SASA Gallery, City West campus as part of the 2019 *Adelaide//International*.

Author biographies

ERICA GREEN is the curator of the 2019 Adelaide//International. She is founding Director of the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, established in 2007 at the University of South Australia, Adelaide. In a career of over thirty years in the professional visual arts, she has achieved national renown for her enterprise and leadership as an art museum director, curator and arts administrator, curating or managing over 100 original exhibitions. As director of the Samstag Museum of Art Green is responsible for commissioning and developing the Museum's exhibitions and public programs. She additionally manages the University Art Collection; the prestigious Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships program; and the University of South Australia's many cultural partnerships. Green was Curator of the *2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Divided Worlds* exhibition across the Art Gallery of South Australia, Samstag Museum of Art, JamFactory and Adelaide Botanic Garden including the Santos Museum of Economic Botany.

GEORGES PETITJEAN is an art historian who wrote his PhD at La Trobe University, Melbourne. From 2005 to 2017 he was curator of AAMU, Museum for Contemporary Aboriginal Art, in Utrecht, The Netherlands. In 2017 he was appointed curator of the Collection Bérengère Primat in Switzerland, one of the most significant collections of contemporary Indigenous Australian art worldwide. He has curated or consulted on numerous exhibitions in Europe and Australia, and has written extensively mainly on Indigenous Australian art and culture.

RHANA DEVENPORT is Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia. She is a curator, writer, editor and cultural producer, and has curated solo projects with artists Nalini Malani, Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, Zhang Peili, Jin Jiangbo, Lee Mingwei, Judith Wright, Peter Robinson, Alex Monteith and Lisa Reihana. Devenport was Director of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, New Zealand (2013-2018) and Director of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand (2006-2013). In 2017 Devenport was Curator of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* in the New Zealand Pavillion of the 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. She has held senior positions with the Biennale of Sydney (2005—2006), Artspace NZ (2005) and the Sydney Festival (2004), and was Senior Project Officer for the Asia Pacific Triennial with the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia (1994—2004). She is a member of the International Advisory Council for the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, was Chair of the jury of the International Public Art Awards, Shanghai (2015), and a jury member for the Nissan Art Prize, Japan (2015).

MIKALA TAI is Director of 4A Centre for Contemporary Art. Tai is a curator, researcher and academic specialising in contemporary Asian art and Australian design, who over the past decade has collaborated with local, national and international organisations to strengthen ties between Australia and Asia. Curatorial projects include Closing The Gap: Contemporary Indonesian Art (2011) at Melbourne International Fine Art (MIFA) when she was director; Yang Yongliang (2009) at 45 Downstairs, Melbourne; public programs for Swimming in Sand; Growing Rice under an Umbrella (2014) at No Vacancy Gallery, Melbourne; project managing Common Threads (2015), a project initiated by the Council of Textile and Fashion Industries of Australia (TFIA) to strengthen the relationship between Australian fashion and textiles and Hong Kong; and leading VIP Tours to Art Basel Hong Kong, Art Dubai and Sharjah Biennale. As an academic Mikala has taught at both RMIT and the University of Melbourne in both undergraduate and graduate programs in Contemporary Art, Modernism and Exhibition Management, in addition to having devised and delivered the inaugural Contemporary Asian Art syllabus at RMIT (2012 –) and the first China Fieldwork Course (2015 –) with Rebecca Coates and Kate McNeill at the University of Melbourne. More recently Mikala was the founder and director of Supergraph – Australia’s Contemporary Graphic Art Fair, which has been held twice at the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne and exhibited at Somerset House, London (2015). She was also part of the public programs team for Melbourne Now (2013) at the National Gallery of Victoria, and previously the Cultural Program Manager for the Melbourne Fashion Festival (2009-2013). Mikala currently sits on the board of BUS Projects, Melbourne. In 2006 Mikala completed her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at the University of Melbourne and in early 2015 submitted her PhD at UNSW Art & Design examining the influence of the Global City on China’s local art infrastructure.

SIULI TAN is Head of Collections and Senior Curator at the Singapore Art Museum, where she oversees the Indonesian contemporary art portfolio. She was the lead curator for the traveling exhibition “After Utopia” which was presented in Singapore in 2015 and at Samstag Museum in 2017 in tandem with the OzAsia Festival. She was part of the curatorial team for the past 2 editions of the Singapore Biennale. Currently, she is pursuing further studies in Asian art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

2019 Adelaide//International

28 February — 5 April 2019

Samstag Museum of Art Galleries 1, 2, 3 & SASA Gallery

2019 Adelaide//International Curator: Erica Green

Published by the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art University of South Australia

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ISBN-13: 978-0-6485117-0-0

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The Samstag Museum of Art is delighted to present this new series of exhibitions for the 2019, 2020 and 2021 Adelaide Festivals, each comprising works by artists from Australia and overseas, along with associated forum programs.

In 2019, two Australian artists — Brook Andrew and Eugenia Lim — and two international — Lisa Reihana (New Zealand) and Ming Wong (Singapore) — are featured in four distinct exhibitions exploring histories of migration, the impact of cultural exchange on communities and individuals, and questions of who holds the power of narration.

The Samstag Museum of Art wishes to express our special gratitude to the four artists of the 2019 Adelaide//International, whose thoughtful and immaculately crafted works give this exhibition its power. Our sincere thanks also go to the authors of this catalogue, Georges Petitjean, Mikala Tai, Rhana Devenport, and Siuli Tan, for sharing their insights with us.

Adelaide//International is a Samstag Museum of Art exhibition series for the Adelaide Festival.

Eugenia Lim: The Ambassador is a 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Museums & Galleries of NSW touring exhibition. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.

Ming Wong: In Love for the Mood is presented courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum.



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