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The Art of Contested Histories

In Pursuit of Venus [Infected] and the Pacific Legacy

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ABSTRACT

European artists of the eighteenth century framed an exotic textual and visual narrative of the Pacific, drawing largely on knowledge gained from exploratory journeys of the 1760s and 1770s. Visual representations of the Pacific became socially fashionable and commercially successful. The French wallpaper manufacturer, Dufour, captured this commercial potential in a dramatic, panoramic wallpaper that told stories of European encounters with Pacific peoples: *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804). Yet it was selective, defining the Pacific by moments of contact with Cook and other explorers. Lisa Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* (2015–17) dramatically interrogates the eighteenth-century narrative of the Pacific, responding to Dufour's wallpaper in a complex, panoramic work. By attending to ways in which the factual and speculative are brought together in Enlightenment artefacts and Reihana's restaging of them, we explore how art might be put to use in the service of historical interpretation.

Keywords: Lisa Reihana, Emissaries exhibition, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, Captain Cook, Sydney Parkinson, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*

INTRODUCTION: PERSPECTIVE AND TRUTH

European explorers of the Pacific during the Enlightenment created, on their return, a complex narrative of the region that arose from both their textual and visual evidence. Eighteenth-century expeditions of discovery were commonly forged as partnerships between powerful states, including Britain, France and Russia, and their scientific academies. Amongst the earliest of these was the Great Northern Expedition to the Arctic in the 1730s, while the most famous are arguably those to the Pacific by Louis Antoine de Bougainville in the 1760s and James Cook in the 1770s. Artists were assigned to exploratory missions with instructions to record and interpret people, landscapes and objects they encountered. Using ethnographic conventions that were then popular, artist-explorers framed an understanding of the Pacific as an exotic ‘other’, thereby suiting the objectives of scientific enquiry, social expectations and prevailing ideas of the Enlightenment.

After the publication of the Bougainville and Cook journals, and with the widespread dissemination of artwork arising from their voyages, representations of the Pacific became both socially fashionable and commercially successful. A French wallpaper manufacturer, Joseph Dufour, captured this commercial potential in 1804 in a dramatic, panoramic wallpaper. The largest of its kind then printed, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* wove stories of early encounters in the Pacific. It was printed with rich colour and details, using a combination of wood blocks, stencils and brushwork. The stories it captured of Pacific societies drew heavily on the explorers’ written and visual records. Yet it remained selective. Dufour’s wallpaper interpreted the history and society of islanders only through their moments of contact with Cook and other Europeans. Their complex social structures, histories and relations with each other were not understood.

<Insert Figure 1 around here>

In the standout *Emissaries* exhibition at the 2017 Venice Biennale, Lisa Reihana, the New Zealand artist of Māori (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine, Ngāi Tu) and British descent, interrogated the eighteenth-century narrative of the Pacific, dramatically responding to Dufour's wallpaper with a complex, panoramic work of her own: *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*. Combining digital paint techniques with film and sound, Reihana reinterpreted Dufour's Pacific landscape, placing it against a rich backdrop that is reminiscent of woodblock and stencilling techniques. Her landscape, like that of Dufour, is populated by Indigenous peoples from Pacific societies. Yet in contrast to the unitary perspective presented in Dufour's work, Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* is a work of dualities. A panoramic spectacle of story, sound and colour, it is a rigorously and methodically researched work that brings together the speculative and the factual; the past and the present; and imagination and reality. It acknowledges 'what was' and asks 'what could have been?'. It draws life from prosaic representations, splices opposing perspectives and brings complexity to what has often been made reductive. In so doing, it shatters dominant narratives and restages the fragments to reveal the mystery, the humanity and the tragedy of encounter.

In Pursuit of Venus [Infected] reimagines the encounters made between islanders and Cook's crew from Indigenous perspectives, inserting into Reihana's 'wallpaper' re-enactments of daily activities before the experience of colonization. Polynesian and Aboriginal performers fill scenes that include 'a Kava ceremony, a Hawaiian mourning dance, a "wedding", a welcome to country, two floggings, and episodes of intercultural communication and trade'.¹ Historical figures and objects feature; Joseph Banks is resplendent in a colourful robe and turban; Cook is played variously by a male and female actor; the *Endeavour*'s crew are seen at work with navigational instruments. Sound is laid over the visual material, adding to an observer's sense of immersion in the work and its apparent authenticity. A cough is heard, the harbinger of disease; so are the chatter of voices,

music, and the metronomic ticking of Cook's own clock (recorded for the work in London).² The work loops seamlessly through 21 metres of digital material.³

An installation of five antique telescopes often accompanies Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*.⁴ As instruments of navigation and magnification, the telescopes are strategically placed among the surrounding works. Although the purpose of a telescope is to provide its user with clarity of knowledge and confirmation of whereabouts, the lenses of Reihana's telescopes are fitted with digital transparencies that interrupt the anticipated vision. Instead of augmenting the familiar reality of an object at which the telescope is pointed, these instruments disrupt the expected and reveal nuanced details, text or characters of Reihana's creation, including the numinous ancestral figure of Nootka Sound. Reihana uses this historical mode of seeing to reveal a new perspective, but also to bring together the documented past and an imagined future: the viewer looks through the telescope and beyond recorded history to see a different temporal, spatial, and even epistemological perspective. One of the lenses reveals an image that reads 'because we are from the future', suggestive of Reihana's conviction that 'History can be a laboratory for the future'.⁵ In these 'perspectival tubes', then, past and future, and historical reality and imagination are intimately connected. Through the intervention of the viewer, they are made to face each other.

The *Emissaries* exhibition, in which Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* first visited Perth, helps us to interrogate the utility of art in the contesting of history. From February to April 2018 the exhibition was held at the John Curtin Gallery as part of the Perth Festival, one of a growing number of locations to which *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* has toured since Venice. The version displayed in Perth was custom-designed for Curtin's venue, and includes subtle differences in the work's size, content and technology to that installed in Venice and elsewhere.

Curtin's *Emissaries* exhibition supplemented *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* with other works from Reihana, including digital portraits of figures within her wallpaper, and her collection of telescopes. It also included historically significant pieces from the Kerry Stokes Collection, including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century drawings of Pacific exploration; Banks's own cedar specimen cabinets; and a reproduction of the Dufour wallpaper from the National Gallery of Australia.⁶ It is this exhibition and, specifically, this version of *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, that our article interprets. By attending to the ways in which the factual and speculative are brought together in both the Enlightenment works and in Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, this paper explores how art might be put to use in the service of historical interpretation. We argue that through this comingling of historical realities and imaginative reinvention, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* offers intellectual possibilities far beyond its own artistic medium. This might be thought of as the *work* of the work of art; the ways Reihana's piece, particularly as it was exhibited at Curtin alongside eighteenth- and nineteenth-century objects, might be thought to engage in historiography and, therefore, to redress contested histories so to open up creative new entry points for debate, understanding, subversion and above all, humanity, ultimately reconstituting what may be thought to constitute postcolonial history.

EXPLORATION, ENLIGHTENMENT, AND THE FASHIONABLE PACIFIC

The skilful juxtaposition of Enlightenment artefacts with Reihana's works is a powerful contribution to the postcolonial discourse of Pacific exploration. With the current resurgence of wallpaper within interior design – including the trend in using reproductions of historical papers⁷ – it is also a timely reminder of the cultural, political and imperial origins of this form of visual evidence. Wallpaper can be understood as a 'social agent'.⁸ Artefacts such as Dufour's wallpaper demonstrate the origins of a now well-understood trope of the Pacific that

persists in western myth. This trope is often linked to the perceived sexuality of Pacific women (though it goes well beyond that). ‘We are all familiar with the South Seas maiden’, writes Michael Sturma ironically, with her long hair, “grass skirts”, bare breasts, garland of flowers, and hibiscus behind the ear.⁹ It is what Patty O’Brien calls an ‘effigy of exotic femininity’,¹⁰ a sensuous fantasy that finds its origins in the breathless reports of Enlightenment explorers.

The role of artists on the exploratory voyages of the Enlightenment was critical in recording and sharing new knowledge, and in establishing this myth. The Pacific encounters of Cook, Bougainville, Samuel Wallis and Philip Carteret were recounted and animated not simply with words, but with sketches, watercolours, prints, maps and oil paintings. These were, according to Kathleen Wilson, the ‘plunder’ of the late-eighteenth century, and ‘very real weapons in the wars for empire’.¹¹ By the late 1770s a distinct visual narrative of the Pacific had been established in Europe. From Cook’s voyages alone, 600 watercolours and drawings, over 180 engravings and 2000 natural history and specimen depictions were produced, visually integrating the Pacific into consumer culture in a way that no voyage had previously done.¹² This, in turn, established the commercial context in which the later success of Dufour’s wallpaper can be understood.

Orientalism first collided with classical mythology in Bougainville’s accounts of Tahiti, published in 1771. The French explorer likened Tahiti’s women to Venus and named their island ‘La Nouvelle Cythère’ after Cythera, the mythic island birthplace of Aphrodite.¹³ Their appetites whetted, Europeans waited enthusiastically for more news of the Pacific. John Hawkesworth’s publication of the Cook, Byron, Wallis and Carteret journals in 1773 sold out in Britain, went through several new editions, and was translated into French, German and Italian.¹⁴ Hawkesworth reframed the scientific assessments made by the four navigators with moralising, philosophical interpretations of his own. Where Wallis had originally described

the Tahitians as ‘Smart Sensable People’, Hawkesworth ‘preferred to see them in terms of the philosophical question of whether or not their way of life was a matter for European envy’.¹⁵ Where Wallis described ‘fine brisk-spirited women’ in Tahiti,¹⁶ Hawkesworth described their sensual behaviours, causing a controversy in Britain that probably contributed to the book’s commercial success.¹⁷ It was a disaster in authenticity, but a fascinating historiographical episode. Reihana found such accounts of encounters in the Pacific – and, particularly, those of Cook – to be a powerful influence in her re-staging of the Dufour wallpaper, recognising the collision of culture arising from Pacific exploration and the slippery nature of truth and perspective.¹⁸

Several artists of varying skill accompanied Cook to the Pacific, including Sydney Parkinson, Alexander Buchan, William Hodges and John Webber. They were usually informed by one of two artistic conventions: the allegorical, in which land, country or cities were personified as human characters (such as ‘Britannia’); and the ethnographic.¹⁹ The latter approach was commonly favoured by European artists on expedition and defined human figures by the costumes, adornments, traits and structures understood to belong to their culture. There was a codification, of sorts, to this process: the documenting of ethnographic contexts was thought to be in itself a scientific approach. Artists who accompanied the Great Northern Expedition to the Arctic in the 1730s, for example, were given particular instructions by Russia’s Academy of Sciences to record the ‘ethnographica’ of Indigenous peoples they encountered, particularly their costume. In this way, it was thought that the stature and character of people of culture would be captured.²⁰ ‘This is the nature of ethnographic convention’, wrote Joppien and Smith in their analysis of art from the Cook voyages: ‘It defines by means of costume and adornment, and is present in Western art from Hellenistic times onwards, wherever the foreigner needs to be specified’.²¹

Parkinson produced several ethnographic-style portraits during Cook's first Pacific voyage, including depictions of heavily adorned 'New Zealand warriors' with distinct facial expressions, and Indigenous Australians, 'advancing to combat'.²² His drawings of the islanders, combined with the accounts of Cook and Banks, were later used by artists to create such imagined scenes as *A View of the Indians of Terra del Fuego in their Hut*, one of the works from the Stokes Collection exhibited alongside Reihana in *Emissaries*.²³ In this instance, the artist focused on ethnographic curiosities such as the islanders' seal skins and their rudimentary shelters. A handful of accoutrements were included: a spear, most notably, and some bags. The bracelets, face paint and shoes that Cook described were ignored. The figures and landscape were drawn in a neoclassical style, while the image was framed in a method that endured even in the 'picturesque' approach favoured by William Gilpin a century later. This, and others like it, were included as illustrations within Hawkesworth's book.²⁴

By the time John Webber joined Cook's third and final Pacific voyage, European tastes in visual representations had changed. Devenport describes Webber's depictions of the Pacific as 'encounter' images that were shaped by narrative-driven genre scenes.²⁵ His drawings revealed episodes of dance, performance, ceremonies and rituals. Remarkable examples of these included his graphite and watercolour studies of Tongan dances observed by Cook's crew in 1777. In *A Night Dance*, Cook and others are pictured in the shadows of the foreground – voyeurs, like us, of dramatic dance scenes. Women are gathered in the distance, shrouded by darkness, also observing the spectacle. Native costumes are carefully recorded according to the ethnographic convention, as are some material artefacts. It is a powerful catalogue of people and their things, but which also brings the European viewer into the moment itself, sharing the experience of travel and encounter.²⁶

<Insert Figure 2 and 3 around here>

The drawings of artists from exploratory missions were often reframed by others who later translated them into such forms as paintings and engravings. A filter was therefore applied to the original images, sometimes changing their purpose and/or accuracy. Foreign landscapes and objects were placed into shapes and frameworks that were instinctively understood in Europe and practised by its artists. The artistic works arising from Cook's voyages were conceived of as first drafts, suggests Smith, before their transformation for official publication in London and elsewhere. Many were copied as engravings for efficient dissemination through newspapers and books.²⁷ It was rare for an image to remain unchanged, and it was often reimagined in several different forms for exhibitions and publications.²⁸ Parkinson's kangaroo, for example, is nearly recognizable as such in its original drawing. Yet its later translation into oils by George Stubbs, the eighteenth-century artist best known for his paintings of horses, transformed the animal into something that resembles a giant mouse.²⁹ That, in turn, was produced as an engraving in Hawkesworth's book and recopied in more than a hundred other natural history books over the next century.³⁰ Images could therefore change dramatically in the hands of other artists, informed at least partly by prevailing political, cultural and commercial demands.³¹

In this way, a system of convoluted authorship was created, and also of convoluted truth. What may have been a faithful depiction of reality in an artist's original drawing was easily modified by others to present a romanticized, imagined and/or visually appealing new image. This established a paradox for the scientists – including artists – who were on voyages of discovery. As Clegg notes, navigators were trained in accuracy and truth when composing charts; the life sciences demanded high degrees of authenticity in the making of visual records. Yet drawings of people and places created on the same voyages were rendered unsuitable for 'empirical description' by the allegorical and ethnographic conventions then favoured:

Even when an artist set out to make what we should now recognise as a picture postcard, they were discouraged from verbatim reportage by influential critics like Sir Joshua Reynolds, who declared the representations of a particular spot, custom, or fashion could last no longer than the fashion portrayed, whereas pictures made up from various beautiful scenes and prospects and thus built upon general nature, might last for ever.³²

When assembling the *Emissaries* exhibition curators at the John Curtin Gallery were mindful of the importance of the evolving and imagined interpretations of the Pacific by eighteenth-century Europeans, which was also a significant influence on Reihana's approach to perspective in her work *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*. That awareness influenced the choice of materials from the Stokes Collection that were assembled in Curtin's exhibition: 1840s copies of *Banks and Solander visiting a village in Tierra del Fuego*, in both drawn and lithograph forms, were hung within the exhibition's first gallery; so were several copies of illustrations published by Hawkesworth in the 1770s, drawn later by an unknown artist. *A View of the Inside of a House in the Island of Ulitea, with the representation of a Dance to the Music of the Country* and *A View of the Island of Ulitea, with a double canoe and a boathouse* were among them. Before being copied in the form that was exhibited, the images had already been translated by the engraver, Francesco Bartolozzi, from drawings by Giovanni Battista Cipriani, which had, in turn, been interpreted from the original sketches of Parkinson.³³

Such pieces must be understood, therefore, as being the result of multiple perspectives – or lenses, if we are to borrow from Reihana's provocative use of telescopes – only some of which were the result of eyewitness observations. Given the number of hands through which a published image passed in the late eighteenth century, and the influence of ideas such as those of Reynolds, we cannot accept that they are likely to have been empirically truthful.

They are, however, ideal sources through which we can understand westerners' perceptions of the Pacific 'other'. Images like those of Stubbs, Bartolozzi and Cipriani circulated through Europe in the late eighteenth century, providing a rich body of imagery to populate western imaginations of the 'exotic' South Seas. Many became the sole visual resources for imaginative and commercial depictions of the Pacific, which were then manifest in artworks, trinkets, fabrics and wallpapers. The Pacific in the age of Enlightenment was considered by Europeans to be different, exciting and exotic. Perhaps most importantly, it was also fashionable.

JOSEPH DUFOUR'S LES SAUVAGES DE LA MER PACIFIQUE (1804)

European explorations of the Pacific in the 1760s and 1770s were driven largely by scientific interest. As the century ended, however, the financial and political incentives for expansion into the region had become obvious in both Europe and North America. By then, France had endured the social and political upheaval of its revolution and had entered the phase of the consulate. In 1804 Napoleon was declared emperor, and France an empire. The country's influence spread across Europe through war in the years that followed, and France actively sought opportunities for colonial expansion abroad. Voyages were launched by Nicolas Baudin, who in 1800 left to chart the coast of New Holland, and others. Meanwhile, according to Mamiya, the rise of an affluent middle class brought changes to French architecture and interior design in urban centres. Tall new homes were filled with a variety of rooms, each of which was likely to have a specific purpose and demanded decoration. The design of these interiors was carefully navigated, as families sought to demonstrate their identity and social standing within France's new regime. In this environment, wallpapers became a popular tool with which a family could 'demonstrate their taste and establish their status'.³⁴

<Insert Figure 4 around here>

Dufour's wallpaper, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, was launched from his factory near Lyon in the same year that Napoleon rose to the throne. It was based on the artwork of Jean-Gabriel Charvet, who was an experienced painter of exotic flora and fauna.³⁵ Reaching 10.5 metres in length and 2.5 metres high, the wallpaper was the longest of its kind at the time. Its grand, panoramic design took advantage of persistent interest in the Pacific and featured a multitude of imagined landscapes and people across twenty non-repeating panels. Scenes were included from Nookta Sound, Ulietea (Raiatea), New Zealand, Tahiti, New Caledonia, Easter Island, Tonga and other islands – one of which was featured on each panel of the panorama. Its release was accompanied by a lengthy prospectus, which proudly extolled the artistic, philosophic and historical value of the work and explained its complex references.³⁶ It was the perfect convergence of neo-classical design, then at its peak, with classical mythology and western imperialism. Prevailing Enlightenment philosophies informed Dufour's claim that the wallpaper revealed the commonality of humanity and, by demonstrating the happiness of 'primitive' cultures, illustrated Rousseau's claim that society led to the corruption of man.³⁷ Cook's influence on the work is particularly evident, and the prospectus refers often to events recorded in his journals. Even the story of his death is included in the wallpaper: the calamitous events are detailed dramatically in its prospectus, while the scene itself is implied in the background of the eighth and ninth panels.³⁸ With such attention to detail, Dufour proudly wrote that:

We have thought it would be good to gather, in a convenient and apparent manner, the multitude of peoples whom the immensity of the seas keep separate from us, so that without leaving his home [...] a studious man, reading the general history of travel or the stories of travellers, will believe in the presence of characters and compare their

text with the painting [...]. A mother will give, with little effort, lessons of history and geography to a young girl, lively, spiritual and questioning [...].³⁹

In their acquisition and reinterpretation of this wallpaper, museums and galleries have recognized its value as a cultural document. It is understood to reveal more about the society that produced it and the people who acquired it, than the societies it depicts. The exact print run of the wallpaper is unknown, but it is thought to have been in the hundreds.⁴⁰ There are now only five complete examples in the world that are known to remain in situ, most of which are privately owned. Approximately 30 fragments of the panorama are held in museum and gallery collections throughout the Pacific, including Hawai‘i, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Hawaii’s Bishop Museum has the smallest sample, which features, poignantly, the scene of Cook’s death; the Portland Museum of Art, Maine, hosts the largest collection.⁴¹ The wallpaper first appeared in an Australian collection in 1983, at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, while the Art Gallery of New South Wales obtained a piece in 1989.⁴²

Thanks to the research of the National Gallery of Australia, we know a considerable amount about the production of Dufour’s colourful and complex wallpaper. It was produced using a combination of woodblock printing, stencilling and brushwork. Its base layer of blue was hand-brushed to produce a smooth, opaque surface, onto which masses of clouds, grassy banks and trees were stencilled. Hundreds of engraved woodblocks were then used to add detailed scenes, with each colour laid down requiring a different block (flesh tones required up to seven woodblocks alone). Pigments were made of various materials, and produced rich and vibrant colours. Blues came from natural chalks and dyes; oranges and reds from vermilion, red lead and haematite; greens were derived from copper verdigris; animal glue was used to bind the panels together. Panels of the wallpaper could be hung in varying

combinations and be tailored to suit rooms of different sizes.⁴³ Dufour explained that the panorama contained two main tableaux: panels one to ten included scenes of a Tahitian dance and of Cook's death; panels eleven to twenty featured a wrestling match in Tongatapu, Tonga, and fête before the chiefs of the Society Islands and their wives. Instructions were given by which three scenes of six panels could be hung instead, as well as a four and five-panel scene. Panels ten and twenty could be cut down to suit placement over windows and doorways.⁴⁴

Inspired by the records of the Pacific explorers, and influenced by his own four-year sojourn to the Caribbean, Charvet used Tahiti as the landscape setting for his design.⁴⁵ Enlightened Europeans believed Tahitians to have reached a level of cultural development akin to the idealized classical world, achieving a paradise.⁴⁶ Links made by Bougainville and Cook to Greek mythology were drawn upon in its design, which reflected the idealization of Tahitians and their island:⁴⁷ its characters are adorned in Romanized clothing, and are posed in scenes that bring to mind Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescos. After all, Dufour concluded, the purpose of the wallpaper was to 'please the eye' and 'excite the imagination'.⁴⁸

There is an implicit hierarchy in the work; one in which the European observer sits at its centre while analysing the wondrously exotic, other peoples of the Pacific.⁴⁹ Yet they are kept at arm's length: the viewer, in this case, observes but is not immersed in its scenes. The wallpaper's design was meant to appeal to the Enlightened public, particularly the upper and middle classes who could use it as an aesthetic addition to their homes and also lay claim to an intellectual faith in human equality, popular education and scientific progress. Even those values, however, were informed by implicit understandings of rank. Dufour hoped the work would bring attention to the observations of the Pacific explorers which would, in turn, reveal the commonality in taste and behaviours of all peoples—including those who were

‘civilized’, and those who were not.⁵⁰ The *sauvages* in the work’s title had a broader meaning to these Enlightened people. To those familiar with Rousseau’s ideals of ‘primitive’ peoples living in harmony with nature, this wording echoed Enlightenment speculation that Indigenous people lived in a pure and ideal state.⁵¹ The decorative location of Tahiti, abundantly fertile, friendly, and resplendent with the pleasures of life, further presented Enlightened *philosophes* with the opportunity to reflect on ‘true nature of humankind’.⁵² Its colourful scenes reflected an idealized vision of primitive society that was ‘stripped of the corruption brought on by civilisation’.⁵³

The scope and history of the Pacific region portrayed in the panorama is limited to the period in which the European scientists explored the region from the 1760s. It is a story that is shaped by the lenses of the European gaze – that of Cook, Bougainville and others – as it falls on individual places, societies and moments of time. It does little to explore the complex cultures and relations between the peoples it depicts. In a post-colonial world, the museums and galleries who are custodians of this work have a responsibility to acknowledge this artistic licence employed by Charvet, and even admitted by Dufour. In fact, it seems that the application of artistic licence was irrelevant to those who bought the wallpaper. It was a ‘shrewdly promoted spectacle’, according to Martin Terry, then curator of Australian Drawings at the National Gallery of Australia. Interrogation of its authenticity was not expected: ‘No one bought it on the basis of whether the Tahitians were accurately portrayed’.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, the moments of contact portrayed in the wallpaper are important in understanding its significance in a post-colonial context. Reihana reflects that Dufour’s work ‘exhibits an entertainment for colonial voyeurism’.⁵⁵ It ignores histories of resistance, and those that are independent of European contact. While some panels depict Indigenous societies in a favourable manner, not all cultures are equally illustrated. It excludes or

minimizes certain peoples, most noticeably Indigenous Australians – reflecting even then a broad European bias against Aboriginal Australians who were thought to compare unfavourably with the ‘noble races’ of New Zealand and Tahiti.⁵⁶ It excludes events incompatible with European ideals of the idyllic Pacific. Brutality and cannibalism are missing from the wallpaper, though are discussed in its prospectus. The panorama’s treatment of women is consistent with the inability of Europeans to comprehend Pacific femininity, which did not meet their own standards. The ‘apparent absence of inhibitions’ described by various explorers, led Charvet to portray Pacific women in a vague, yet suggestively erotic manner, seemingly ‘uncomplicated by civilisation’.⁵⁷ Much like the records of the voyages that inspired its design, the wallpaper’s depiction of Indigenous people is romanticized ‘out of all proportion’.⁵⁸

LISA REIHANA'S *IN PURSUIT OF VENUS [Infected]* (2015–17)

Reihana has frequently spoken of the origins of her work, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*. In 2005 she first observed the National Gallery of Australia’s fragmentary piece of Dufour’s wallpaper. Shocked that, as a Māori woman, she could find little in the work that she could recognize of her culture and landscape, Reihana began to imagine what it would be like to bring the wallpaper ‘back to life’.⁵⁹ Her project required the collaboration of artists, performers, technicians and costume designers, and demanded lengthy historical research. The result is a 64-minute, four-channel, synchronized and multi-screen video installation that plays out against the geographic terrain pictured first in Dufour’s wallpaper. It is widely recognized as both conceptually and technically ambitious. The video-projection comprises over 1500 individual digital layers, totalling 33 million pixels per frame. It is accompanied by 7.1 surround sound, producing a rich soundscape in which language, song, ceremony and

biology converge and overlap. In New Zealand's Venice Biennale catalogue, Jens Hoffmann writes that the work:

borrows from several different media and artistic approaches, ingesting the technologies of film, relying on the dramatics of the theatre, and capitalizing on the impact of immersive multimedia works. And while it can certainly be understood as being securely within these traditions [...] it is those earlier traditions that Reihana calls on which contain the most evocative points of comparison and departure.⁶⁰

Indeed, the inclusion and restaging of traditional practices of Pacific cultures (including ceremony, dance, language, epistemology and song) in collaboration with Indigenous writers and actors is a crucial aspect of Reihana's practice, and is the chief means by which she presents nuanced and empowering images of Pacific peoples that work to challenge and reposition colonial histories.

The technological form of the digital wallpaper presents another duality. Just as Reihana's work uses highly sophisticated technologies, *Les Sauvages* was also considered a technical marvel of its time. In Reihana's version, the landscape has been repopulated with around 70 filmed scenes that work to reimagine, reinterpret and challenge the historical truths and untruths of Dufour's wallpaper. Both artworks are set against a fictional and theatrical Tahitian landscape, and each offers an uneasy fusion of creative invention and historical reality, fantasy and truth. Yet while Dufour's work models 'a pictorial fantasy of Enlightenment humanist values'⁶¹ and pursues a single-point perspective that depicts Indigenous peoples and culture through a rigid imperialist gaze, Reihana's work interrupts Dufour's unitary perspective to redress these colonial encounters from an Indigenous perspective and reveals them in the fullness of imagination and complexity.

In a visual and aural language that outsteps western perceptions of time, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* loops continuously, with no edge of frame. In 64 minutes it moves between 140 scenes. Cook is played by two actors, one male and the other female – playfully recalling the uncertainty many Pacific islanders had of Cook’s gender.⁶² There are no clear beginnings, nor endings; the artwork rejects the linear regularity that is evident in Dufour’s wallpaper, imposed by the ‘calm remit of the Enlightenment gaze’.⁶³ Rather, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* takes place in a circular temporality.⁶⁴ As such, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* makes no distinction between past and present: there is a sense of eternal return, placing the viewer intimately within each moment. And yet, there is a point of departure around which the work orbits, ‘THE site of rupture’⁶⁵ as Reihana put it: the scene of Cook’s death in Kealakekua Bay, Hawai‘i in 1779. While this moment is implied in the background of *Les Sauvages*, in Reihana’s story it is the *point de repère* of its digital reinterpretation, which acts as both the dramatic climax of the piece as well as a crucial reference point to its historical realities.

MEANINGS, TRUTH AND PERSPECTIVE

The perspectival tubes, or telescopes, placed in Curtin’s *Emissaries* exhibition were surrounded by old and new materials in a startling act of juxtaposition. Three digital portraits were hung, featuring characters from *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*. They were *Emissary No.1 Chief Mourner*, *Emissary No.2 Joseph Banks*, and *Emissary No.3 Nootka Ancestor*. Artefacts from the Stokes collection placed nearby spoke to the historical, scientific and cultural context of Dufour’s wallpaper and, logically, Reihana’s response to it. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century drawings and engravings of the explorers’ Pacific voyages were placed on an adjacent wall. In a nearby alcove an extract of Dufour’s wallpaper was

reproduced, forming a backdrop to Banks' own specimen cabinets, built with Australian red cedar he brought home on the *Endeavour*.⁶⁶

Reihana's use of the antique telescopes suggests a curious approach by which we might look forward, as if from the past. It is a subtle device which reveals an inverse effect of *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, in which new technologies are used to look backward. In both cases, lenses are ground and reground to subvert the historical claims made by the eighteenth-century works included in the exhibition. In a timescale that Devenport calls a 'contemporaneous, historically inflected now',⁶⁷ Reihana comingles two (often opposed) spatial and temporal realities: the historical and the imaginative. Reihana's artistic treatment of historical reality has profound implications, not only for the individual viewer's perception of and relation to the past, but *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* also demonstrates how imagination might be put to use in the service of historical interpretation, offering intellectual possibilities far beyond its own artistic medium.

Reihana herself has played a number of roles in the creation of *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, and historian is undoubtedly one of them. Using both written and visual records of voyages of discovery undertaken by Cook and others in the Pacific, as well as those secondary representations in Parkinson's drawings and in *Les Sauvages*, Reihana actively engages in the historiography of first contact between Indigenous and European peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by intervening in dominant histories of colonial encounters – perceptions that often admit only a rigid, unitary perspective constructed through the lens of the European, as in *Les Sauvages*. Historical truth and creative invention are not easily thought of as interdependent modes of knowing, yet in Reihana's work, they are always contingent. As Looser has written, 'truth' in *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* 'does not inhere in Western standards of documentary fidelity, but emerges through and alongside fictional inserts', and plays out in its synchronous, continual loop.⁶⁸ These brief re-enacted

moments of encounter between Indigenous peoples of the Pacific and their European visitors are born from an objectively true past. Yet every moment and every relation performed in Reihana's piece contains a host of speculative twists, imagined 'what ifs' and conscious anachronisms. In this way, Reihana incorporates the preservation-driven logic of the archive with a performance of discovery that subverts the colonial frame and shows how flights from realism may counterintuitively work to expand and clarify our understanding of a historical reality.

According to Devenport, Reihana is not attempting a 'reclamation of truth', but a critical merging of cultures and stories.⁶⁹ Indeed, Reihana appears to privilege questions and ambiguities over conclusions of truth. Reihana's vision is never singular but always double, and so the viewer is not offered any sense of finality. The work itself has expanded over the past decade to become longer and more detailed, further denying any conclusiveness. Reihana thereby positions history not as a fixed, unitary and authentic narrative, but as a fluid and creative medium of exchange that is necessarily ongoing.

The interaction between historical realities and imagination occurs primarily through the staged interactions between Reihana's real and imagined cast of characters: the cross-cultural exchanges of knowledge; humorous misunderstandings; displays of curiosity; traditions of ceremony and song; and acts of diplomacy. These encounters engage meaningfully with historiography, demonstrating the critical role art can play in what constitutes postcolonial history. Reihana's depiction of the historically significant Ra'iaŋean navigator-priest, Tupaia, is an example. Tupaia accompanied and assisted Cook and Banks in guiding the *Endeavour* to Aotearoa and was instrumental in establishing communications with local Māori.⁷⁰ While this figure of significant historical importance is omitted from the story of *Les Sauvages*, Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* acknowledges his crucial ambassadorial role and shows that productive and creative exchanges occurred between local

and foreigner. In Reihana's reimagining, Tupaia is interpreted in the fullness of his humanity and agency. He and Cook are placed on equal footing, positioned in an unlikely form of companionship forged through the ambition of a common purpose. This is not only an example of the crucial way in which the work gives agency to those who have been previously muted, but also demonstrates how *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* imaginatively intervenes in the historiographical content of *Les Sauvages* to incorporate other, previously ignored realities. A moment now enters the frame that, for many viewers, was unlikely to have informed understandings of colonial or postcolonial. 'Every act of recognition alters what survives', as David Lowenthal has put it.⁷¹ Our interpretation of first contact between First Nations and European peoples is thereby recast by Tupaia's presence. So, potentially, is our perception of modern relations between one another, recalling Reihana's argument that '[h]istory can be a laboratory for the future'.⁷²

There are other, more troubling interactions in *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* that work to reorient our view of the past. There are intimations of prurience, overt transgressions of protocol, cultural misapprehensions and instances of aggression and flogging—first of Cook's men and then increasingly of islanders. The bleak and the comical are often intermingled, as in a scene in which an Arioi man gives birth to a baby with a beard; a reference to infanticide, which was practised by the Arioi to contain their population growth.⁷³ However, the penultimate act of violence around which *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* orbits – though not sequentially – is that of Cook's murder, which is presented in three vignettes: 'Lono', 'Cook's Folly', and finally 'Grisly Gifts', in which the Lono priest Keli'ikea returns Cook's partial remains to his confounded crew who respond in horror, 'where's the rest of him?'. Reihana explained the significance of this moment:

But the Hawaiians return his thigh and his hat, which by its association to his head – considered the most sacred part of the body – was significant. In Pacific feasts pork is

chiefly food – when they cut the pig up, the prized piece offered to the chief [...] is the leg. So the scene demonstrates something that’s either horrific or honorific, according to what you know.⁷⁴

Staying true to the ambiguities that surround Cook’s death even today, the consequences of this scene remain plural and inconclusive. However, as Looser has noted, Reihana’s restaging of his death ‘opens a space for the Hawaiians involved to be shown as historical co-interpreters of this ambiguous moment of cross-cultural breakdown’.⁷⁵ Western and Pacific epistemologies surrounding violence, retribution and memorialization are interwoven here, again demonstrating a double view of history in the work.

The encounters staged within *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]* disrupt simplified or idealized visions of the past and give shape to new interpretations. The interaction of imagination and historical reality adds complexity where previously – certainly in Dufour and Charvet’s context – the desire was for simplification born from European modes of knowing the ‘other’. Crucially, the history that was interpreted and expressed in *Les Sauvages* is also marked deeply by imagination. It is therefore fitting that Reihana uses *Les Sauvages* not as a bygone historical artefact, but as a living thing that can be reframed, integrated, even literally repopulated, with a myriad of contemporary re-imaginings. She calls it a form of ‘soft activism’.⁷⁶ As if reaching back through time, Reihana tugs on the threads of history and shows how things might have been – and indeed could still yet be – if we saw from a different vantage point. Thus the viewer is given a ‘tangata whenua view’: a perspective that looks out from the land toward the foreign fleets – history from the other side of the shoreline.

Through the interplay of imagination and reality, *Emissaries* demonstrates the utility of art in the reinterpretation of contested histories. By colliding Enlightenment artefacts and

Dufour's paper with Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, the past is opened for re-examination, and audiences are invited to interrogate encounter myths of the colonial Pacific – and, by extension, elsewhere. Reihana's imaginative interpretations of historical realities push back against the reductive representations of Dufour's wallpaper, revealing the ways in which artworks ought to be considered not simply as illustrations of history, but as historical – even political – forces in their own right. The interplay of imagination and reality is critical to this achievement, affirming that history may be continually reframed and enlivened by the imagination.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Lisa Reihana, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, 2015–17. Digital work [detail, 1]. Image courtesy of Lisa Reihana.

Figures 2 and 3. Sydney Parkinson, *Kanguru*, 1770. Graphite on paper. Natural History Museum, London; and George Stubbs, *Portrait of a Kongouro from New Holland*, 1772. Beeswax on mahogany panel. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, ZBA5754.

Figure 4. Joseph Dufour et Compagnie, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, 1804. Wallpaper, panels 1 to 10. National Gallery of Australia, 83.1524.1.

Figure 5. Lisa Reihana, *In Pursuit of Venus [Infected]*, 2015–17. Digital work [detail, 'Cook's Folly']. Image courtesy of Lisa Reihana.