COLLECTING IN THE SOUTH SEA

This book is a study of ‘collecting’ undertaken by Joseph Antoine Bruni d’Entrecasteaux and his shipmates in Tasmania, the western Pacific Islands, and Indonesia. In 1791–1794 Bruni d’Entrecasteaux led a French naval expedition in search of the lost vessels of La Pérouse which had last been seen by Europeans at Botany Bay in March 1788. After Bruni d’Entrecasteaux died near the end of the voyage and the expedition collapsed in political disarray in Java, its collections and records were subsequently scattered or lost.

The book’s core is a richly illustrated examination, analysis, and catalogue of a large array of ethnographic objects collected during the voyage, later dispersed, and recently identified in museums in France, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States. The focus on artefacts is informed by a broad conception of collecting as grounded in encounters or exchanges with Indigenous protagonists and also as materialized in other genres—written accounts, vocabularies, and visual representations (drawings, engravings, and maps).

Historically, the book outlines the antecedents, occurrences, and aftermath of the voyage, including its location within the classic era of European scientific voyaging (1766–1840) and within contemporary colonial networks. Particular chapters trace the ambiguous histories of the extant collections. Ethnographically, contributors are alert to local settings, relationships, practices, and values; to Indigenous uses and significance of objects; to the reciprocal, dialogic nature of collecting; to local agency or innovation in exchanges; and to present implications of objects and their histories, especially for modern scholars and artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.
Bronwen Douglas, as ever, dedicates this book to Charles, Kirsty and Ben, Allie and Andrew, Jean and Owen, whose enduring love and support make everything possible.

Wonu Veys dedicates it to her mum and grandmother, to Paul, and to her colleagues and mentors whose enthusiasm, patience, and support made this project possible.

Billie Lythberg dedicates it to her family, collaborators, and mentors, without whose unwavering curiosity and generosity such projects would simply not eventuate.
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Lisa Reihana’s Emissaries
Billie Lythberg

Following a chance encounter in Canberra in 2005 with a panoramic French wallpaper summarizing 18th-century voyages in the Pacific,1 Māori multi-media artist Lisa Reihana has produced a series of works that reimagine *Les sauvages de la mer pacifique* (The savages of the Pacific Sea) as large-scale digital installations. *in Pursuit of Venus (2012) [iPOV]* and *in Pursuit of Venus [infected] (2015–2017) [iPOVi]* are live action masterworks of filmic interrogation.2 All feature contemporary Pacific peoples engaged in the cultural activities upon which the original wallpaper was based. *in Pursuit of Venus [infected] (2015–2017)* also includes British navigator James Cook and his men, its title denoting pathogens and miscegenation.

*Les sauvages de la mer pacifique* (Figure 18.10) was realized by Jean-Gabriel Charvet—a known admirer of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau—and exemplifies both universalist French Enlightenment perceptions of human similarities and differences and the cutting-edge technologies of the time. Ten metres long, the 20-panel wallpaper required the capabilities of ‘designers, papermakers, pigment chemists, woodblock cutters, printers’ as well as ‘the vision of industrialists’.3 More than one thousand engraved wood blocks were required to print, individually, its lush colours.4 Each 2.5 metre long drop was assembled from pieces of handmade paper, probably 610 x 459 mm, with hand-painted details overlaying printed faults and pasted joins.5 In many ways, the construction and decoration of the wallpaper resembled barkcloth making in Polynesia.

The wallpaper was later often referred to as *Les voyages du capitaine Cook* (The voyages of Captain Cook).6 However, in his 48-page prospectus for the project, the manufacturer Joseph Dufour acknowledged La Billardière's narrative of Bruni d’Entrecasteaux’s voyage as his source for sections to be devoted to the ‘peoples’ of Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania), New Holland (Australia), and the Admiralty Islands. He explained that they would occupy the middle ground of panels 18 and 19—though in the finished work they extend into panel 20. Following Dufour's plan, Charvet represented men and women variously fishing, preparing the sail of a canoe, grouped beneath coconut palms, and resting after a meal.7 Close scrutiny of panel 20 reveals a Tasmanian kelp water carrier positioned behind a woman kneeling to gather shellfish. One such artefact features in an engraving by Copia in La Billardière's *Atlas of the voyage: 'Sauvages du Cap de Diemen préparant leur repas' (Savages of Cape Diemen preparing their meal)* (see cover and Figure 2.5).8 The modern revival of these Tasmanian women’s artworks is the subject of Julie Gough's feature in this book.9

Dufour’s imagined ‘general gathering place’ was ‘Otahïti’ (Tahiti), named *la Nouvelle-Cythère* (New Cythera, the island of Aphrodite, the Roman Venus) in Louis-Antoine de Bougainville’s ‘so seductive description’, following his visit in 1768.10 Supposed ‘kings’ and ‘queens’ and their most elegant subjects occupy the foreground of this evocative dreamland, while less beguiling people, events, and encounters—including the death of Cook in Hawai’i, shown in panel 10—are relegated to the middle distance: that is, to areas designed for excision to accommodate the doorways and windows of the upper- and middle-class domestic spaces for which the wallpaper was designed. The Admiralty Islanders and Tasmanians, met and admired by Bruni d’Entrecasteaux and his men,11 are consigned
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to just such background status within ‘a kind of imaginary utopia peopled in the most unlikely way with a few familiar subjects, such as the Three Graces, amid the unfamiliar luxuriant tropics that serve to reassure and to perhaps lend a hint of European authority over unfamiliar cultural domains’.12

Reihana first saw *Les sauvages de la mer pacifique* at the National Gallery Of Australia.13 The only example of the wallpaper in Australia at the time of its purchase in 1983, its arrival at the NGA coincided with a burgeoning interest in the cultural legacy of French explorations of Australia, exemplified by the publication of Leslie Marchant’s *France Australie* and the conference *The French Australian Connection*.14

While referencing Venus as both a location for European imaginations and for the planet’s transit across the sun in 1769, for which Tahiti was a key observation point,15 Reihana’s series also include the cinematic moniker ‘POV’ for ‘point of view’: an apt denotation for her time-based digital artworks designed to challenge notions of representation and unsettle viewpoints. Technically and conceptually complex, they restore agency, movement, sound, dignity, solemnity, and humour to their Pacific inhabitants. In Reihana’s hands, the wallpaper is recreated as a painted and painterly backdrop within which men and women, in dramatized scenes, dance, prepare and drink *kava*, joke, sing, and drum. Whereas Dufour’s wallpaper wrapped a room, with its audience at the centre and Pacific-as- periphery, Reihana’s viewer-as-witness is part of a circular journey as the ‘panorama’, now a slow-moving filmic loop, pans before their eyes. As each vignette unfolds, anticipation and revelation are masterfully handled: the point of view may be from behind the main actors and protagonists may slip out of frame while still moving, reminding the viewer that theirs is merely a glimpse of multiple, complex Pacific lives. An evocative soundscape conveys further information about what can and cannot be seen—the birdsong and ambient lapping of waves enhance this outdoor utopia.

With great subtlety, Reihana points towards things missing from Dufour’s original and rewards those of her viewers able to bring lived experience of the Pacific and its people to their viewing. Anthropologist and historian Nicholas Thomas has described this series as ‘the most remarkable work to date, by any contemporary artist, to engage the legacies of European romance and representation in the Pacific in relation to the Islanders’ own sense of self’.

As the centrepiece of Aotearoa-New Zealand’s Venice Biennale installation in 2017, *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* is the first of Reihana’s iterations to feature Australian Aboriginal people (Figure 18.11) and thus re-emphasize Tasmanian presence in the documentation of Bruni d’Entrecasteaux’s voyage—strikingly so, in comparison to the relative absence of Aboriginal Australians in the many published accounts of Cook’s three voyages. More than this, their re-occupying the foreground of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (2017) offers a visual counterpoint to the myth of Australia as *terra nullius*, employed to justify the dispossession of the continent’s original inhabitants. Reihana’s restorative strategy extends to the catalogue of *Emissaries*, which includes an interview with Aboriginal artist Brook Andrews, reconsidering and reimagining colonial histories and, in Andrews’ words, ‘questioning historicity and the museum narrative’.16
Lisa Reihana’s Emissaries

Notes

1 Reihana explained that her partner and collaborator James Pinker was fascinated by the wallpaper on seeing it at the National Gallery of Australia and took her to see it.


5 Ibid.:23.


7 Dufour, *Les sauvages de la mer pacifique* … (Mâcon: 1804 [an XIII]):45.


11 Chapter 2.


13 For a list of complete and partial sets of this wallpaper in private and civic collection, see Hall, ed., *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (Sydney and Canberra, 2000):44–7.


Figure 18.10. Charvet’s design of Dufour et Cie’s Les Sauvages de la mer Pacifique (The Voyages of Captain Cook), 1805, panels 11–20, held in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, woodblock, printed in colour, from multiple blocks, hand-painted gouache through stencils, 170 x 1060 cm (83.1524.1–5).
Figure 18.11. Detail of the Koomurri Mob in Lisa Reihana, in Pursuit of Venus (infected), 2017, still from single channel immersive panorama.
Lisa Reihana’s Emissaries