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Lisa Reihana Reworks Colonial Narratives in Venice

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BY JULIET HELMKE | MAY 15, 2017



Lisa Reihana at the opening of the New Zealand Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale.

“Les Sauvages De La Mer Pacifique,” or “The Natives of the Pacific Ocean,” is an early 19th century panoramic wallpaper designed by Joseph Dufour who found inspiration for his overtly colonialist imagery from the accounts and drawings that returned with explorers James Cook, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, and Jean-François de La Pérouse after their voyages to the region. Snippets of the 20 connecting color woodblock prints are now held in museum collections around the world. For New Zealand artist Lisa

Reihana, reinterpreting the work to incorporate a more complex and nuanced understanding of the cultures this decorative work illustrates has been an almost-decade-long process. One that has involved animating the original images with audio-visual technologies into a 64-minute, 70-foot-long projection made up of 1,500 individual digital layers totalling 33 million pixels per frame. Portions of “in Pursuit of Venus [infected]” have been shown before, but it premieres in all its glory at the Venice Biennale’s New Zealand Pavilion at the Tese dell’Isolotto—one of the oldest Naval buildings in the Arsenale. In 2018 the work will also be included in a survey by the Royal Academy of Arts of the arts of Oceania in an exhibition that marks the 250th anniversary of the Academy’s founding 1768 as well as James Cook’s departure on his first journey to the South Seas. Reihana spoke with Artinfo about her “Venus” and her presentation at Venice, titled “Emissaries.”

Tell me about “in Pursuit of Venus [infected].” How was it created and where did inspiration for this work come from?

“In Pursuit of Venus [infected]” re-imagines a French scenic wallpaper “Les Sauvages De La Mer Pacifique” from 1804 as a panoramic video. In the title, Venus alludes to the worldwide scientific mission to measure the heavens by documenting the 1769 Transit of Venus, which led to a fascination with the Pacific voyages undertaken by Captain Cook. I’ve animated the wallpaper with real and invented narratives of encounter, and brought to life cultural performances and ceremonies. It is populated by people drawn from the breadth of the Pacific Ocean, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Europe. The “infection” reveals itself through the

slippages of encounter as Pacific peoples and the English sailors, artists, scientists and astronomers share this heightened phantasmic zone.

The work is vast, a complex audio-visual project and certainly my most ambitious in scale to date. It employs animation techniques and comprises over 1,500 individual digital layers totalling 33 million pixels per frame. At 25 frames a second and 64 minutes in length, that equates to 3.168 trillion pixels. I love the maths associated with it as my aim has always been to future-proof the work. Even though the subject material is historic, the production techniques are utterly contemporary.

What does the title for this presentation, *Emissaries*, relate to?

The exhibition aims to unravel Enlightenment ideals and evoke new understandings around the colonial impulse. The repercussions from these cartographic endeavours and scientific exploration persist for Pacific and indigenous peoples. For example, Captain Cook was an emissary for the British Navy, and throughout the work, a state of being between things is embodied over and again.

What else will be included in your Venice pavilion?

I selected two key figures from “in Pursuit of Venus [infected]” as emissaries: Joseph Banks, the ambitious scientist and astronomer on Cook’s first voyage, and the Chief Mourner, a character who led traumatic rituals of mourning in the Society Islands. They are presented as larger than life portraits, and act as a counter balancing for the two hemispheres. The title consciously references the cinematic term ‘point of view’ i.e. POV.

So the sculptural works or “perspectival tubes” are repurposed telescopes which reacquaint viewers with the physicality of looking through the lens, something that is quickly changing in this current time of selfies taken at arms-length.

I understand that you collaborated with the Royal Society in London for some aspects of your Venice presentation. How did that come about and what, from their collection, did you make use of?

The Royal Society UK played a vital role in Aotearoa’s early western history, and has collaborated with the exhibition in a partnership that echoes support for explorations made nearly 250 years ago. It backed the world-changing Pacific voyages of English navigator Captain James Cook and provided access to some of it’s most precious observational instruments. My partner and collaborator James Pinker recorded “the sound of time” using the ticking of Cook’s much-travelled John Shelton clock. It’s been subtly integrated into the audio that powerfully enhances the emotional arc of the work.

What do you have coming up after Venice?

In the next few months I begin scripting a new video with the working title Nomads of the Sea, it’s an exciting idea that’s been on hold for far too long. I’ll create a new project for a survey show to be held at Campbelltown Art Centre, Sydney Australia. This will be the first screening of “in Pursuit of Venus [infected]” post Venice, very appropriate as they supported the Aboriginal video shoot. Its gratifying to know it will continuously screen

throughout 2018 in galleries around the world, including the Honolulu Art Museum and in London and Paris.

Anything else you'd like to add?

It's taken the dedication and tremendous efforts of a great many clever and talented people to make the video and present this exhibition at the Venice Biennale. I'd like to take this opportunity to sincerely acknowledge and thank the incredible cast and crew. I've been humbled and honoured as the recipient of this heartfelt support, and the generous assistance from Patrons, sponsors, friends and family. Made in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding and love, lest we forget that indigenous people worldwide continue to suffer the colonising effects of the age of Empire. "Nga mihi ki a koutou, i nga koutou katoa".

"Lisa Reihana: Emissaries" is open to the public May 13 through November 26.

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