Moana, Unimagined

The 16th Istanbul Biennial

by Millie Riddell

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16th Istanbul Biennial poster.



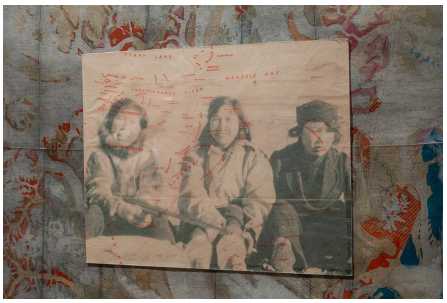
Monster Chetwynd, *The Gorgon's Playground*, 2019. Sculptural installation. 282 × 600 × 345 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Commissioned by the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Produced and presented with the support of Koç Holding.



Simon Fujiwara, *It's a Small World*, 2019. Mixed media. 22 × 110 × 50 cm. Courtesy the artist, Dvir Gallery (Tel Avivand Brussels), TARO NASU (Tokyo), Esther Schipper (Berlin) and Gio Marconi (Milan). Commissioned by the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Produced with the support of Ayşegül & Ömer Özyürek and Goethe-Institut Istanbul. Presented with the support of British Council.



Ozan Atalan, *Monochrome*, 2019. Installation (concrete, soil, video, water buffalo skeleton). 3 × 3 × 1 m. Video: 10'. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Co-produced by the 16th Istanbul Biennial and MO.CO. Montpellier Contemporain with the support of SAHA– Supporting Contemporary Art from Turkey.



Pia Arke, *Legend I-II-III-IV-V*, 1999. Five mixed media collage. 213.5 × 181.5 × 4 cm. Courtesy Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Presented with the support of Danish ArFoundation.

It's difficult to really visualise the 3.4 million square kilometres of waste floating in the Pacific Ocean. Labels, for one thing, are misleading. Names like the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch", the "Pacific trash vortex", or the "Seventh Continent", fail to disclose the fact that there is really no continent, not even a patch, of garbage floating coherently on the surface of the Ocean. In the North Pacific, at least, the "patch" is actually comprised of "two enormous masses of ever-growing garbage", one drifting between Hawaii and California, the other between Japan and the Hawaiian Islands. 6,000 miles of ocean current connects the two masses, which cover an indeterminate area of the Pacific Ocean. Comparisons to more tangible and familiar land masses are often invoked as an orienting device. We are told, for example, that the patch is one third the size of the United States.[01] We are told that

in 15 years it will be the same size as the 10.18 million square kilometres of Europe.[02] At the 16th Istanbul Biennial, we are told, repeatedly, that the eponymous *Seventh Continent* is five times the size of Turkey.

Biennial curator Nicolas Bourriaud insists on taking the Seventh Continent literally, "considering this moving heap as a territory yet unknown, in which humans and nonhumans coexist out of necessity."[03] This unknown territory was explored from 14 September to 10 November 2019, across three venues: the Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture (a last-minute venue, after an asbestos scare at the old Istanbul shipyards forced a relocation), the Pera Museum and Büyükada Island. "Generally speaking," Jennifer Higgie observed in *Frieze*, "the tone of the exhibition is delirious, hallucinatory and kaleidoscopic – as if art is as bewildered by the climate crisis as everyone else."[04] For the most part, artists occupy individual rooms - so that to wander around the Biennial is to be plunged into a brand new ecosystem at every turn. In this often overwhelming exhibition, standout works were those that were firmly rooted in the factual, and in a sense of place. On the top floor of the Pera Museum, a series of large-scale maps of Greenland line the walls. This is Pia Arke's *Legend-I-II-III-IV* (1999), in which the artist collaged over the maps with family snapshots and samples of imported commodities such as rice, sugar and coffee. Exhibited alongside a series of photographs depicting abandoned and desolate houses, along with a VHS video about the Inuit myth of the Tupilakosaurus, Arke's work explored the complexities and histories of the colonial relationship between Denmark and Greenland, quietly reframing and centering indigenous narratives in the process.

Over in the main venue, the Museum of Painting and Sculpture, En-Man Chang's three-channel video installation *Ungrounding Land – Ljavek Trilogy* (2018) tells the story of the Balasasau family, one of many indigenous families in Taiwan who moved to urban centres in order to meet labour demands in the 1950s. An example of the unseen labour driving urban development in modern Taiwan, the family's makeshift lodging was ultimately destroyed by local government, and the family charged with illegal occupancy. Urban expansion poses a different kind of threat in Ozan Atalan's installation *Monochrome* (2019), where the bleached

skeleton of a water buffalo rests on a concrete slab, spotlit in the centre of an otherwise dark room. Screens on the surrounding walls show footage of recent construction of a new Istanbul airport and motorways, urban progress that is causing the destruction native water buffalo habitat.



Biennial curator Nicolas Bourriaud speaking at the 16th Istanbul Biennial, 2019.



Pia Arke, *Legend I-II-III-IV-V*, 1999. Five mixed media collage. 213.5 × 181.5 × 4 cm. Courtesy Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Presented with the support of Danish ArFoundation.



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En Man Chang, *Ungrounding Land - Ljavek Trilogy*, 2018. Three channel video installation, 13'9". Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.



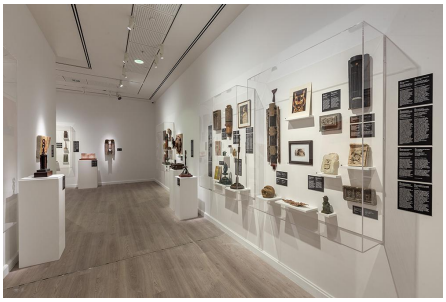
Ozan Atalan, *Monochrome*, 2019. Installation (concrete, soil, video, water buffalo skeleton). 3 × 3 × 1 m. Video: 10'. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Co-produced by the 16th Istanbul Biennial and MO.CO. Montpellier Contemporain with the support of SAHA– Supporting Contemporary Art from Turkey.

These works do not have very much directly in common, except perhaps for their tangible subject matter. The works invoke real losses, displacements and existential threats. That these works deal in reality may not seem like a particularly unusual or pointed connection, until you consider its comparative absence elsewhere in the Biennial. One room in the Pera Museum resembles an ethnographic museum display, with Norman Daly's decades-long project depicting archaeological remnants of the fictional Civilisation of Lluros, created by Daly out of commonplace materials such as fork handles, lemon squeezers and polystyrene

packaging. Scottish artist Charles Avery continues his world-building exercise in the form of a fictional, philosophical island (inhabitants include a beast named after Kant's Noumenon). Drawings of the island and its inhabitants line the walls, though the main event is a sculptural fish market with sea creatures made of hand-blown glass.

Simon Fujiwara's chaotically entertaining *It's a Small World* (2019) combines discarded pop culture figures (Homer and Bart Simpson, Mickey Mouse) with dystopic civic architecture (the Joker is the eye of the panopticon, for example) while the titular Disney track plays on a loop. These imagined worlds are immersive and engaging, and particularly in the case of Avery's glass sea creatures, beautifully and expertly crafted. But when you exit the fantasy and pull back to remind yourself of the Biennial's urgent theme, the immersion starts to feel a bit like easy escapism. One reviewer observed that the proliferation of imaginary societies and histories "registers less as idealistic yearning than as a playful fabrication."[05] Another "grew tired of the amount of work that deals with fictitious histories; given the crisis at hand, what is needed right now are facts … not a retreat into solipsism."[06]

The imaginary, however, is positioned as a key feature of the Biennial. In his curatorial statement, Bourriaud considers the Seventh Continent as the negative side of the historical "new world": this time, not a continent to invade and occupy, but a nation "formed behind our backs, almost without our noticing, born of our ways of life and production."[07] This new world is imagined through what Bourriaud describes as a "post-ethnicist (even post-human) vision", exploring a territory where human and non-human subjects coexist, "a new mental space within which the traditional Western separation between nature and culture is fading away."[08] *The Seventh Continent*, he explains, calls for a new, "relational" anthropology, a rejection of classical hierarchical relationships and centred instead on " immersion into a living ecosystem."[09] Several reviewers were critical of the Biennial's reliance on the abstract and reluctance to engage with the politics of contemporary Istanbul, with one noting that the relatively tame Biennial was "unlikely to run into trouble" with industrial conglomerate Koc Holding, chief sponsor of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.[10]



Norman Daly, *Civilization of Llhuros*, 1972. Mixed media (artifacts, sounds, texts). Dimensions variable. Courtesy David Daly.



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Charles Avery, *Untitled*, 2019. Mixed media installation with hand blown glass, galvanised steel, plastic, rope. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, GRIMM Amsterdam | New York and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh. Commissioned by the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Produced with the support of Outset Scotland. Presented with the support of British Council. Glass work in collaboration with Studio Berengo and Marc Barreda.



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But this engagement was not the only dose of reality missing from the Biennial. When you're in a large-scale international exhibition, surrounded by other people's histories and other people's escapist imaginary worlds in the face of a climate crisis, it's not surprising that you might seek to orient yourself, to reach out for the familiar. It's even less surprising to want to do so when the Seventh Continent and its terrifying potential are closer to your own home than they are to Istanbul. In the Pera Museum, Los Angeles-based Paul Sietsema's *Figure 3* (2008) shows still images of what appear to be a series of archaeological objects, including pre-colonial artefacts from the South Pacific. Across the three locations of the Biennial, out of the fifty-seven artists from twenty-six countries, this was the closest the Biennial came to the South Pacific. And that is not very close at all. Like Daly's imaginary lost civilisation, these objects are in fact meticulously crafted contemporary pieces, created by the artist to explore the

production and consumption of cultural objects, challenging the truth-claims of the exhibition setting.

The twenty-six countries represented at the Istanbul Biennial and their kaleidoscopic responses to its theme remind us that the Anthropocene (or, by its other and perhaps more appropriate name in this context, Capitalocene) age is global, and its effects are complex and indeterminate. But, as HG Masters observed reviewing the Biennial in *ArtAsiaPacific*, the Anthropocene may be global, but we are not all equally impacted.[11] For Masters, the absence of voices from the Pacific and other parts of the global south meant that the Biennial came across as "conversational and hypothetical" in its response.[12] To point this out is not to suggest that an artist from the South Pacific should have been included as a representational gesture, nor that the Pacific should have been the subject of the many artistic imaginings on display. Both outcomes would be a disservice to the range and complexity of Moana contemporary art, and would risk revitalising the legacy of the colonial imagination of the Pacific. As Lana Lopesi recently explains, colonial myths of the peaceful Pacific "spill over into our expectations of Moana contemporary art, dehumanising contemporary Moana peoples and trapping them within a certain era, set of concepts and aesthetics."[13]

Lopesi also observes that "what one calls the Moana, the other calls the Pacific Ocean," the peaceful seas.[14] This, as Lopesi describes, "is a Western term that subsequently degrades the peoples inhabiting it by identifying them as peaceful, tranquil and passive – Moana subjectivities that are not self-appointed."[15] There may be no colonial myths of a Pacific paradise at this Biennial, but its absence has the same effect as that described by Lopesi: the real effects of the Seventh Continent, the stories and imaginations of those most immediately affected, are leap-frogged in favour of imaginary new worlds. Bourriaud describes the Biennial as fashioning a "new mental space" to engage with the collapse of "the physical and symbolic limits that formerly separated human beings from their environment".[16] The theme invokes (though does not cite) the transdisciplinary rise of "new materialisms", a conviction that the non-human has agency.[17] As some authors have observed, "once we take indigenous worldviews into account, the 'new materialisms' are no longer new."[18] "The

radicality of this move", consequently, "remains stymied by the absence of indigenous voices *in* and *about* the mutually affecting spread of modernity."[19] Bourriaud considers the exhibition to function as a "reverse mirror-image of our societies," where "the seventh continent is the country we don't want to inhabit, made up of everything we reject."[20] But as Anselm Franke has observed, the self-reflexive critique of Western dichotomies between humans and nature may function as a "mirror", but one that excludes more than it reflects.[21]



Paul Sietsema, *Figure 3*, 2008. 16mm film, black-and-white and colour, no sound. Approx. 16'. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery. Presented with the support of Matthew Marks Gallery.



Monster Chetwynd, *The Gorgon's Playground*, 2019. Sculptural installation. 282 × 600 × 345 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Commissioned by the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Produced and presented with the support of Koç Holding.

The forces at play that bring artists to the attention of a curator like Bourriaud and, relationally, cause them to appear on the competitive international biennial circle do more to explain the absence of artists from the South Pacific than speculations on conceptual blindspots or gaps in curatorial reasoning. Much has been written on the "resolutely Northern histories" of international biennials, showcases that reinforce, "even in their self-reflexive critique, a lineage of influence within and of the North – despite their claims to globality."[22] And as it happens, artists from Aotearoa and the broader South Pacific were well-represented elsewhere on the international Biennial circuit in 2019: beyond Dane Mitchell in Venice, there was, for example, Simon Denny in Vienna, Lisa Reihana in Toronto, and a huge showing of South Pacific artists and art collectives in Honolulu.

But when major Biennials increasingly frame themselves as discursive spaces rather than straightforward exhibitions of

contemporary art, and the Istanbul Biennial presented itself as a "new mental space" for considering one of the most urgent global questions, the absence of perspectives from the part of the world where the impact of the Seventh Continent is the *most* pressing left that discursive space somewhat hollow. Over on Büyükada Island, Monster Chetwynd's installation *The Gorgon's Playground* (2019) about summed it up: *The Seventh Continent* felt a bit like a game, a playground for the imaginations of the Global North. It seems fitting that press releases for the Istanbul Biennial describe the Seventh Continent as "one of the most visible effects of the Anthropocene." But as it happens, wind and wave currents are constantly shifting and dispersing the debris in the Pacific Ocean, such that you could fly over the Seventh Continent, even sail through it, without really seeing it at all.

Footnotes

01. "The seventh continent of plastic" *#LivingCircular*, 14 May 2014, www.livingcircular.veolia.com/en/eco-citizen/seventh-continent-plastic, accessed 16 December 2019.

02. Ibid.

03. Nicolas Bourriaud, "History, Geography, Demography, Culture, Archaeology, Politics" in *The Seventh Continent: Guide*, Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts and Yapi Kredi Publications, 2019, 24.

04. Jennifer Higgie, "Climate Crisis, Plastic Waste and Bewilderment: the 16th Istanbul Biennial" *Frieze*, 19 September 2019, www.frieze.com/article/climate-crisis-plastic-waste-and-bewilderment-16th-istanbul-biennial, accessed 16 December 2019

05. Chris Clark "16th Istanbul Biennial" *Art Monthly* 431 (November 2019): 26-27.

06. Higgie.

07. Bourriaud, 24.

08. Bourriaud, 25-26.

09. Bourriaud, 26.

10. Rachel Spence "Istanbul Biennial: eco-warriors outdone by dissidents" *Financial Times*, 27 September 2019.

11. HG Masters "16th Istanbul Biennial: The Seventh Continent" *ArtAsiaPacific* (1 October 2019).

12. Ibid.

13. Lana Lopesi "Beyond Essentialism: Contemporary Moana Art from Aotearoa New Zealand" *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 46, Issue 1 (1 September 2018): 106-115.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Bourriaud, 24-25.

17. Jessica L Horton and Janet Catherine Berlo “Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and ‘New Materialisms‘ in Contemporary Art“ *Third Text* 27, issue 1 (2013): 17-28.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Bourriaud, 24.

21. Anselm Franke, ed *Animism* Berlin: Sternberg, 2010.

22. Anthony Gardner and Charles Green “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global” *Third Text* 27, issue 4 (2013): 442-455.

Biographies



Millie Riddell has a BA Honours degree in Art History from the Victoria University of Wellington and has just completed an MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She returned to New Zealand in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic and wrote her thesis on New Zealand expatriate and pioneer of video art Darcy Lange in lockdown in Nelson. In September this year Riddell started her six-month stint as the latest Adam Art Gallery Intern at Te Herenga Waka. She is currently based in Wellington, New Zealand.

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