

HUM

Urges of Imperialism Unravelled

by Rhana Devenport

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Lisa Reihana, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015 (making-of).



Lisa Reihana, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015, HD video (detail), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of Auckland Art Gallery.



Lisa Reihana.



Captain James Cook and his John Shelton clock – Lisa Reihana, detail, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015–17 Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min.



Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique (detail), scenic wallpaper illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and manufactured by Joseph Dufour. (1804-1805). Courtesy of P. Plattier, Musées de Mâcon.

With the 57th Biennale di Venezia opening next week, Contemporary HUM is pleased to publish the first of several writing commissions in response to New Zealand artist contributions in and around this foremost international contemporary art event. In this essay, Rhana Devenport, Curator of the New Zealand Pavilion 2017, sets the context for Emissaries, the solo exhibition of artist Lisa Reihana, selected to represent Aotearoa New Zealand this year.

New Zealand has participated in the Venice Biennale with a national presentation since 2001, with exhibitions by Peter Robinson and Jacqueline Fraser (2001), Michael Stevenson (2003), et al. (2005), Judy Millar and Francis Upritchard (2009), Michael Parekowhai (2011), Bill Culbert (2013) and most recently Simon Denny (2015). Lisa Reihana: Emissaries, the 2017 New Zealand exhibition in Venice, includes an expanded version of Reihana's audiovisual work in Pursuit of Venus [infected]—previously shown at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki in 2015 (watch an excerpt [here](#))—alongside two large-scale digital photographs, and a constellation of sculptural works. This year, for the first time, the New Zealand pavilion is

situated within the Arsenale, one of two permanent venues of the Biennale, as opposed to a satellite building elsewhere in Venice.

For the duration of the Biennale (13.05 - 26.11), Contemporary HUM will strive to engage with the multiple projects of New Zealand artists exhibiting in Venice, and encourage dialogue through a range of perspectives. You can follow our documentation of [Venice projects here](#).

Lisa Reihana's practice encompasses multiple and egalitarian interests—coded languages of performance and customary practices exist within a continuum of re-enactment and alterity. Working from a critical indigenous perspective in post-colonial Aotearoa New Zealand, her practice is collaborative in nature and influenced by indigenous filmmaking, in particular the concept of the 'Fourth Cinema' as articulated by Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay. Reihana—who is of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Tū tribal descent—actively contributed to the development of time-based art in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past two decades. Her forthcoming presentation at the Venice Biennale returns to Europe an ingenious re-imagining of a two-century old European fictionalisation of the Pacific. In the exhibition *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, imperialism's glare is returned with a speculative twist as the exhibition unravels Enlightenment ideals and philosophy, the colonial impulse, and the raw urges of expansionism, power and desire.

Reihana's practice has ongoingly been informed by an uncompromising purpose, playfulness and an inventiveness of material form. Her work is technically ambitious and poetically nuanced, drawing on fiction, historical evidence, mythology and the ties of kinship to disrupt notions of truth, gender and modes of representation. Reihana has earned her place as a respected media and cultural pioneer in Australasia (Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia), and it will be fascinating to observe the response to her particular vision within that very European context which is the jostling, heady amplitude of the Biennale Arte 2017.

In 2005 Reihana was startled to encounter at the National Gallery of Australia in land-locked Canberra, a strange vision of Pacific peoples in the form of a nineteenth-century decorative, scenic

wallpaper. This artifact became the basis for her decade-long project *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015–2017. Created two centuries earlier, the widely distributed neoclassical, quasi-educational French wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, 1804–1805, was illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and produced by wallpaper manufacturer Joseph Dufour & Cie as interior decor destined for the grand homes of Europe and North America. It references the journeys of French explorers Jean-François de Galaup La Pérouse and Louis Antoine de Bougainville, as well as the three Pacific voyages of British navigator James Cook, which occurred 250 years ago. Using the wallpaper as a scaffold, Reihana has produced a 64-minute panoramic single channel digital video with 7.1 audio. The artist has populated the work with real and invented narratives of encounter, harnessing chroma key compositing and animation technologies to recast and reimagine the wallpaper from a Pacific perspective. Through live action capture, the performative gestures of song, music, dialogue and customary ritual—scripted by Reihana and referencing the breadth of the Pacific Ocean, including Nootka Sound, Hawai’i, Tahiti, Tonga, Cook Islands, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand—unfold before us through the 80 vignettes presented in the video work.



Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique (detail), scenic wallpaper illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and manufactured by Joseph Dufour. (1804-1805). Courtesy of P. Plattier, Musées de Mâcon.



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Panel depicting Māori in New Zealand - *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (detail), scenic wallpaper illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and manufactured by Joseph Dufour. (1804-1805). Courtesy of P. Plattier, Musées de Mâcon.



Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique, scenic wallpaper illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and manufactured by Joseph Dufour. (1804-1805). Courtesy of P. Plattier, Musées de Mâcon.

The title's 'infection' reveals itself through the slippages of encounter as Pacific peoples and Cook's English sailors, artists, scientists and astronomers share this heightened phantasmic zone. The title also consciously references the filmmaker's 'point of view' or 'POV'. 'Venus' alludes to the worldwide scientific endeavour to measure the heavens by documenting the 1769 Transit of Venus, in order to determine the astronomical unit—the distance between Earth and the Sun. Arcadian conceptions of the South Seas are also alluded to, with Bougainville having named Tahiti 'New Cythera' in reference to the birthplace of the goddess of love.

Heightening the emotional arc of the work, the soundscape weaves together live recordings of performances, the tunes of Bach, the winding of the Royal Society's clock that accompanied Cook's voyages, and rare recordings of the taonga pūoro (Māori instruments) that Cook collected and are now housed at the national Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. These sounds and others are laid over a bed of electronic flows and pulses.

Sound designer James Pinker, who collaborated with Reihana, describes the process of creating the soundscape as envisaging what Cook would have pre-loaded onto his iPod before his three Pacific voyages.

The wallpaper, *Les Sauvages*, was part instructive, part entertainment, and utterly reflective of its time: the ideological aspirations of Enlightenment thought and the Age of Reason, complete with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the noble savage, societal progress and benevolent encounter, albeit dressed in diaphanous neo-classical attire, following the archaeological 'discovery' of Pompeii in 1748. The original wallpaper, described by Reihana as a 'fabulation', was crafted from a thousand woodblocks and, for nineteenth-century viewers in grand yet domestic spaces, would have offered a portal to exotic lands. Reihana, acutely aware of the legacy of Enlightenment thought and the way this continues to play out in the wallpaper (still in production and sold by the deGournay Company,) explained to me in a 2015 interview:

"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)."



Lisa Reihana, in *Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015 (making-of).



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Reihana's semionautical (from Nicolas Bourriaud's text on altermodernity^[01]) and sustained interest in a popular, decorative and quasi-educational nineteenth-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. It is instead 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 misconception of actions and the disillusion of memory. In twenty-first-century theoretical physics there is the idea of the multiverse, of parallel versions of time, which link back to Henri Bergson’s idea of varying intensities of time and infinite becomings^[02]. Reihana’s scrolling, endlessly-looping field of land, sea and sky cradles a multiverse of actions and encounters.

Working with scale and time, Reihana converges on the dramatic moment of rupture—the death of Captain Cook at Kealakekua Bay in Hawai’i on 14 February 1779—to create the violent and dramatic climax of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]*. This event abruptly ended Cook’s explorations, observations and collecting. In *Les Sauvages*, his death is a barely visible narrative hidden in the far distance. In Reihana’s work, the 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. 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, yet long-known, Pacific theory of time and space known as Tā-Vā (as recently articulated by theorists such as ‘Okusitino Mahina and Albert L Refiti).

Internationally, Reihana’s work has featured extensively, including at the inaugural Honolulu Biennial 2017, a multi-site, contemporary visual arts festival. For the Honolulu Biennial, Reihana exhibits *Tai Whetuki – House of Death – Redux*, 2016, a powerful two screen work that references the astonishing Chief

Mourner’s costume on display at the Bishop Museum which is the Hawai’i State Museum of Natural and Cultural History in Honolulu. Her conscious activation of this wondrous collection of historical objects and artefacts continues a direction in her practice that saw interventions in the Oceanic Collections at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Britain as part of the *Pasifika Styles* exhibition and festival in 2006–2008. In fact, *Tai Whetuki* was created by the artist whilst making *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* as an antithesis to working for ten years within the studio’s lurid green screen glare set to evoke the mid-afternoon Tahitian sun. Shot day for night with a RED digital cinema camera, *Tai Whetuki* explores customary and metaphysical perspectives on death and transitions to underworld realms.



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Lisa Reihana: Emissaries, the New Zealand exhibition for the 2017 Venice Biennale, will include *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* alongside two large-scale digital photographs, each a meditation on emissaries of sorts. Accompanying the video and photographs are a constellation of sculptural works that literally telescope in on certain moments and personalities drawn from the looping video.

As an Australian living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand for ten years, I am constantly struck by the fact that New Zealand's history includes the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, signed by representatives of the 'British Crown' and over 500 Maori Chiefs (including 13 women). Contentious and often the source of heated debate, the Treaty provided for Māori ownership of land and granted them the same rights as British subjects. Although the Treaty was disregarded by colonial powers initially, leading to decades of land confiscation, wars and struggle, this is a far cry from the ongoing trauma that is Australia's fraught relationship with its own indigenous peoples. Claims to land and associated rights continue to be heard by the Waitangi Tribunal in New Zealand, which was established in 1975 by statute to negotiate Treaty breaches since the signing of the Treaty and to help manage redress. One fascinating and very recent example of the Tribunal's work is that the North Island's Whanganui River was in March 2017 granted all the rights of a legal person under a Treaty of Waitangi settlement).

New Zealand has participated at the Venice Art Biennale since 2001, most recently in the Marciana Library and Marco Polo Airport, with Simon Denny (2015). Denny's *Secret Power* project is an examination of the accrual of knowledge from 21st-century international security agencies and their associated codified visual imaging of knowledge ('solving problems visually'), while Reihana's 2017 project re-imagines and re-casts the codified language of French and British colonial claims to the South Seas from two centuries ago.

Reihana's Venice exhibition is sited in the Arsenale, and this is the first time New Zealand has located itself within either of the two major shared exhibition zones. Securing a space with the proportions required to mount *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* was a considerable challenge, as the work measures 23.5 metres in length and 3.3 metres in height. Tese dell'Isolotto in the Arsenale is a marvellous space. It's tough, with a stripped back materiality that brims with five centuries of utilitarian activity encompassing ship-building, maritime, trading and emissarial endeavours. Yet in its rawness the space provides a resonant platform for Reihana's practice and its contemporaneous re-imagining of the tropes of a never-too-distant historical past.

Footnotes

01. Nicolas Bourriaud trans. Jeanine Herman Postproduction, New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005.

02. John Potts, *The New Time and Space*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015, p 11.

Biographies



Lisa Reihana (b. 1964) is a multi-disciplinary artist from Aotearoa New Zealand (of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Tū tribal descent) whose practice explores how identity and history are represented, and how these intersect with concepts of place and community. The subjects of Reihana's portraiture inhabit a world in which the boundaries of past, present, and future are mutable; their identities are likewise unfixed and transgress everyday expectations of cultural and social norms.

She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland University, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1987, and recently completed her Master of Design through the Unitec Institute of Technology. Reihana has an extensive exhibition history in New Zealand and abroad and in 2014 she was awarded an Arts Laureate Award by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand. Her works are held in private and public collections including Te Papa Tongarewa; Auckland Art Gallery; Australia National Gallery; Staatliche Museum, Berlin; Susan O'Connor Foundation, Texas and Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Rhana Devenport, Curator, *New Zealand Pavilion* at Biennale Arte 2017, is Director of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. 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 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand where she played a key role in the Len Lye Centre project (2006—2013). 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 Maori 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).

