



Randy Dodson / Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Grand lie and reclamation

At the de Young, a massive work of fiction on the South Pacific, and the view recast

By Charles Desmarais

In the year 1804, a new technology offered the wealthy an immersive visual experience. In the comfort of their own homes, people could experience the Pacific Islands as British explorer Capt. James Cook saw them on his three voyages from 1768 to 1779.

The contrivance by which they would make that journey was a huge work of art on paper, more

than 35 feet wide and 8 feet high, comprising hand-painted passages and as many as 1,000 wood-block print impressions. This wallpaper mural, the largest ever produced up to that time, was published in France by entrepreneur Joseph Dufour, working with artist Jean Gabriel Charvet as designer. It was to be hung high above the dado of a grand room.

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco owns one of the few

Half of the 35-foot mural "Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique" ("Native Peoples of the Pacific Ocean") is displayed at the de Young Museum. It presents a resplendent — yet completely false — view from the time of the British explorer Capt. James Cook.

nearly complete examples of the work still in existence. Purchased in 1977, "Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique" ("Native Peoples of the South Pacific") takes so much space it is generally shown only half at a time. It is currently on view in its entirety at the de Young Museum for the first time in nearly two decades. And it is magnificent: imposing in scale, vibrant in color and in extraordinary condition,

Mural continues on E2

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



"Lisa Reihana: in Pursuit of Venus [infected]" continues at the de Young Museum through Jan. 5.

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Reihana's work refutes a decorative lie

Mural from page E1

with only two replica replacements in the 20-panel suite.

It is also a bald-faced lie.

The de Young exhibition "Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus [infected]," on view through Jan. 5, includes the mural, impressively installed. The show goes beyond that one object, however, as a superb example of how art, with the right curatorial intervention, can cure an error of its own making. How, in this case, three brilliant acquisitions can add value to the museums' collection that far exceeds the sum of the individual works.

Cook brought two artists along on each of his voyages. Their tasks, long before the invention of photography, were primarily scientific and documentary, even if their observations were inevitably through a lens of European bias. Their images were reproduced as copper engravings, 60 of which were included in a large folio to accompany the official publication, in 1784, of Cook's "Voyage to the Pacific Ocean." FAMSF acquired one of the rare folios this year, and it is included in the show along with a digital copy that allows visitors to flip through all 60 pictures, examining them in detail.

To compare these 18th century illustrations to the 19th century decorative wall covering is a lesson in the glamorization of history for profit. Like romantic movie interpretations today of past events, "Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique" recast authentic scenes and remade characters to describe them in terms that would be predictable and attractive to its paying audience — as pastoral idylls populated by noble savages, rather than as interactions of real and complex human beings.

They cavort under the palms, collect the abundant fruits, gather in conversation. There is no hint of the British explorers anywhere (even if their costumes are decidedly more classical than tropical), no reference to Cook and his men's interactions with the islanders, or to the captain's ultimate fate in a violent argument with them.

The final work of the three, also a recent acquisition, shared with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is the centerpiece of the exhibition. "In Pursuit of Venus [infected]" is the work of Lisa Reihana, a Maori British artist who represented New Zealand with a well-received version of the work (there have been several

"Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus [infected]": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m., Tuesday-Sunday. Through Jan. 5. \$6-\$15 (free on Saturdays for S.F. residents). De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. 415-750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

variations) at the 2017 Venice Biennale. The de Young show is the first in the U.S.

Like Dufour's mural of more than 100 years earlier, it is a visual and technical tour de force. Projected here at a width of 68 feet, 10 feet high, it is a filmic installation — actually five seamlessly joined videos shot in ultra-high definition with state-of-the-art sound (set a bit too low in volume on the morning I visited).

Vivid in color and detail, it is a complex mix of animation and live action that required six years of detailed research and production, enlisting more than 100 crew and actors and as many as six dance troupes.

In a radical act of reclamation, Reihana constructs her own abundantly more plausible narrative of first contact between South Pacific and European cultures than that proposed by the wallpaper mural, inserting figures and

action into the mural's landscape images. Meticulously researched dances and games alternate with speculative enactments of interaction between the native islanders and their British visitors.

There's a mysterious sense of panoramic time, as well as space, in the piece. The long image itself might be read, in modern American culture, as a temporal progression from left to right. Within, a series of individual stories take place in their own time, like separate video vignettes contained by the larger panorama. A third progression is suggested by the slow pan of the image, passing by those secondary dramas, dropping scenes off the left edge of the frame, picking up new ones at the right.

All this, and the looping 64-minute cycle of the piece, simulate in a modern vocabulary what a wall text points out is the traditional Polynesian concept of time-space, called Ta-Va. We can't pretend to know the full sense of that worldview, but the work is an aid, I think. It is less something one *watches* than one *experiences*, carried along by a dreamlike stream.

And just as space and time fold back upon themselves, so do the human interactions

depicted in the piece. I found little in Reihana's masterful unfurling of events that might pass for judgment. Buttoned-up Europeans and grass-skirted islanders each display their own pride, each act out their own rituals of power. Customs of medicine, science, art — even dance — are equally observed. There is curiosity and misunderstanding on both sides, thievery and punishment to go around. Even the conflict that leads to the death of Cook is observed almost incidentally and quickly forgotten, of no more consequence than a passing storm.

The Reihana work is a fantasy, of course. Undoubtedly, the Pacific Islanders encountered by 18th century British explorers were sophisticated in ways the makers of the "Les Sauvages" mural were incapable of knowing. Time did not begin when Cook and his men landed, nor has it yet seen an end. But neither of the worlds described in these two great tableaux, if they ever existed, survives today.

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