

The first encounter with Lisa Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [infected] (iPOVi)* (2015-2017) (figure 1) was unplanned. As was the second. One time stepping in from the dusty gravel into the New Zealand pavilion in Venice to escape the heat, the other spared from the weather inside the Queensland Art Gallery. Each time I remember blinking, allowing my eyes to adjust, as I stepped into the dark rooms ahead. The prestige of these events – the Venice Biennale and the Asia Pacific Triennial – informed my expectation of excellence. On my left, brightening the faces of all the onlookers sporadically seated in the darkness, was a multipaneled video installation. Twenty-five metres long, four metres high, Reihana's sixty-four minute video *iPOVi* commanded the attention of the room. Audiences lingered, perhaps absorbed by the scale, or the slow mumble of the characters situated within the panorama that slowly pulled itself from left to right. Set on an animated backdrop of Joseph Dufour and Jean-Gabriel Charvet's *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique [The Savages of the Pacific Ocean]* (1804-1805) (figure 2), audiences watched sixty-five vignettes of human interactions. Irregularly scattered throughout the landscape, these vignettes present instances of first contact between European colonisers, their crew and the First Nations people of the Pacific and speak to the complexities that this entails. The array of moments, varying in significance, illustrate the hybridisation of knowledge that follows first contact (QAGOMA, 2015, ¶11).

The continual conveyor belt of animated human encounter positions us in the era of colonial European exploration as sailing ships and canoes float past each other heading in opposite directions foreshadowing the imminent disconnect between cultures. The work's soundscape incites attention as the mumbles become more audible with each passing vignette. What is said is not as significant as the ambience the murmur creates. The shore is full of movement, one vignette showing a group of First Nations people performing a skit to a laughing crowd of Islanders and crew. The drama sees one man give birth to another, yelling to the audience's delight. Later gender roles are further challenged when Cook's character has his breeches pulled down from him by an Indigenous person to check for the presence of his genitals (Smallman, 2018, ¶11). A wide selection of vignettes show instances of cultural significance where characters perform the hula, the haka, sing and mourn. Contrastingly, Western cultural practices appear more awkward as a European painter struggles to apply the paint, occupied by swatting insects, whilst two British soldiers stand back-to-back afraid of what lurks behind the palms. The unfamiliarity and displacement of the Europeans within their environment not only evident in their actions, but in the scene's colouring which highlights the differences between the colonisers and the First Nations people. The bright red of the British Army's uniform punctuates the subtle pastel and more earthy tones of the landscape and First Nations peoples' attire (Bear, 2019, p. 14). Later, these colours are hoisted to mark the landscape as the Grand Union flag is raised to the salute of Redcoats. And yet the narrative continues to shift from peaceful hula dancers to a First Nations man tied and held at gunpoint, to yet another group of dancers, to the piercing sound of the whip hitting another First Nations man's back. It is a jarring, but poignant juxtaposition that demonstrates how normal life in the Pacific had been interrupted, sent into a state of flux by the arrival of the European colonisers and crew.

Now, a bit over a year since my most recent encounter the specifics of *iPOVi* may be blurred, yet the work remains front-of-mind as Australia's post-colonial narrative continues. As institutional discrimination and prejudices are brought to the attention of the

mainstream media in the wake of George Floyd's death in the United States, similar instances of racial injustice in Australia are largely ignored despite formal investigations into the issue dating back to the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody (Higgins, 2020, ¶11-6). Reihana's work all the more memorable because of its focus on the Pacific region's collective experience of colonisation. Albert Wendt, an influential Sāmoan advocate for the Pacific, describes Oceania as an ever evolving region that is the source of imagination and spirit to the many people and nations that inhabit it (Wendt, 1976, p. 49). It is familiar with racism and the indignation of the repression of its First Nations people (Wendt, 1976, pp. 50-51) at the hand of the various European colonisers who voyaged to the region in pursuit of empire and who remained to exploit their natural resources (MacLellan, n.d., ¶17). Wendt calls for an understanding of the impact that these colonisers had on the First Nations people of the Pacific and the lasting effect it has had on their ongoing culture (Wendt, 1976, pp. 50-51). *iPOVi* produces a history where these lasting effects are made visible through adopting a broadened perspective which facilitates reflection and mourning. More broadly, *iPOVi* fits into the current art movement, which Wendt called for in his 1976 article (Wendt, 1976, pp. 57-59), promoting Indigenous voices to facilitate cross-generational healing and "genuine decolonisation" (Wendt, 1976, p. 60) to create a New Oceania based on the celebration of living cultures (Wendt, 1976, p. 53). *NIRIN*, Brook Andrew's 2020 iteration of the Sydney Biennale, embodies Wendt's vision on a global scale giving voice to First Nations people from across the world. Similarly, *iPOVi* "present[s] possible moments of historical negotiation" (Bear, 2019, p. 14) and redirects scrutiny away from the First Nations people to the colonisers (Bear, 2019, p. 14). In returning the colonial gaze, Reihana and her collaborators embody their ancestors and further contemporary art's decolonial discourse (Creative New Zealand, 2017).

Reihana, as a female artist of British and Māori descent challenges the traditional gaze of the white colonising male, contributing previously suppressed perspectives to the re-enactment of first encounters. Although based on Jean-Gabriel Charvet and Joseph Dufour's woodblock print *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, *iPOVi* takes a more contemporary approach to historical truth-telling in presenting multiple perspectives. Charvet's wallpaper design emerges out of second-hand imagining of the beauty of the Pacific from European imperialists (Thomas, 2017, pp. 22-23). It idealises and exoticizes the Pacific to be "palata[ble] for an early nineteenth-century European gaze" (Bear, 2019, p. 8). Dufour visualised Pacific bodies as objects of desire, crafting them as whitened neoclassical figures (Bear, 2019, p. 8), a theme carried throughout colonial empires when later primitivized by Paul Gauguin's ethnographic works produced during his voyage to the Pacific (Eisenman, 2005, p. 12). Reihana upholds Wendt's suggestion that just as no national culture is homogenous (Wendt, 1976, p. 54) – contrary to the imaginings of such European wallpapers – neither is that of an entire region. Wendt's describes New Oceania as filled with a plethora of unique living and evolving cultures where art is used as an enabler for healing and humanity. In *iPOVi*, Reihana's alternative reality no longer caricatures the Pacific body as 'dusty madiens' or 'noble savages' (Bear, 2019, p. 13), instead celebrates it by including characters from Hawaii, Sāmoa, Tahiti, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the Cook Islands, Nootka Sounds and Bora Bora (Bear, 2019, p. 9). In collaborating *kaneohi ki te kaneohi [face to face]*, individual participants are able to tell their stories and embody the voices of their ancestors (Bear, 2019, p. 20). Reihana and the actors collaborated to the extent that the performers became authoritative voices within the project (Bear, 2019, p.

20). Moreover, Reihana engages with other working practitioners within the field to maintain current information sharing. Her inspiration for *iPOVi* came after viewing the original wallpaper (QAGOMA, 2015) and later reading Vivienne Webb's catalogue on *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, continuing Webb's assessment that the wallpaper highlights the recent changes in European colonial perspectives (Bear, 2019, p. 13). Ngarino Ellis, a Māori historian interested in multidimensional history and Māori understandings of time (Bear, 2019, p. 12), also critically engages with Reihana's work, meaning that her work is picked-up across different disciplinary fields in their joint plight against misrepresented colonial histories. In reviewing *iPOVi*, Webb then emphasises the impact shifting perspective has on understandings of encounter (Webb, 2015, p. 21), whilst Ellis focuses on Reihana's artistic methodology "as orchestrator...of a myriad of experts...that reflects a Māori way of working as part of a collective" (Ellis, 2015, p. 91). This exchange between peers is important as it builds a network of practitioners actively pursuing similar goals, working synchronously to continue the Pacific model of shared leadership.

In shifting the perspective and gaze upon the colonisers, Reihana emphasises the need for education and more open historical interpretation (Bear, 2019, p. 21). As *iPOVi* crosses the world visiting locations touched by colonisation, different moments will stand out to individual audience members depending on their own heritage, context and dominant histories (Bear, 2019, p. 19). Reihana explains how she imagines, that British audiences experiencing the work at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, will not feel guilt at the presentation of the brutalities of colonialism (Smallman, 2018, ¶24). Maybe because their worldview was framed by the empire's triumphs. Instead she hopes to create a sense of empathy and bring awareness to a broader history (Smallman, 2018, ¶24). Similarly, Venice, a city emblematic of the Old World full in Biennale years of art tourists, would presumably receive the work differently than in Brisbane at the QAGOMA. Either way *iPOVi*, unlike other video works, does not see audiences impatiently bounce in-and-out of the exhibition space. Audiences sense a collective need to take a prolonged pause in joint contemplation and relearning. Mesmerised, I found myself amongst these viewers, normally exasperated at entering halfway into a video work and not understanding the context. However in Reihana's video, the work loops, featuring several significant events, but without a definite end. This further challenges the European understanding of linear temporality (Bear, 2019, p. 19) instead adopting a First Nations understanding of time wherein any one moment encompasses the past, present and future (Bear, 2019, p. 12).

Perhaps ironic for a work concerning first encounters, *iPOVi* has remained in my consciousness since my initial viewing. Its imagery conveying a message that is more pertinent today than ever, as decolonisation continues to pick up greater public momentum leading us to what will hopefully bring a season of immense social change. In sixty-four minutes Reihana has created a haven wherein traditional Western histories and temporalities are challenged and rethought whilst furthering the post-colonial discourse in the Pacific region. Her work contributes to Wendt's vision of New Oceania, in taking agency to express First Nations cultural and creative practices that emphasise the plurality of the region. In recognising Pacific temporalities and oral histories, Reihana transforms what was once a European's imagined landscape into a historical re-enactment of the realities of everyday life, resulting in a much truer representation of the lived experiences of the First Nations people of the Pacific. Furthermore, her practice highlights the hybridisation of

knowledge between colonisers and First Nations people, both past and present, producing a final work that acts as an educational device turning the colonial gaze away from First Nations people, towards their region's colonisers.

## Figures

Figure 1.



*In Pursuit of Venus [infect]* (2015-2017) Lisa Reihana  
Venice Biennale 2017

Image sourced from: <http://www.inpursuitofvenus.com/venice-biennial/p2b08im0vwx2iygch2mnufwg9ukade>

Figure 2.



*Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique [The Savages of the Pacific Ocean]* (1804-1805) Jean-Gabriel Charvet and Joseph Dufour

Image sourced from: <http://www.inpursuitofvenus.com/about>

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