

**HIDDEN STORIES,
ENTANGLED SPACES:
Contested Island
Heritage and
Contemporary
Art Curation**



Edited by Ana S. González Rueda and Karen Brown

Hidden Stories, Entangled Spaces:
Contested Island Heritage and Contemporary Art Curation

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**Introduction:
Hidden Stories, Entangled Spaces:
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Ana S. González Rueda

In her poem ‘To Island’ (2022, p. 127), I-Kiribati and African American scholar, poet, and activist Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa proposes turning ‘island’ into a verb, finding the noun form too vulnerable. She urges us ‘to island’ the world – to embrace a way of living as if we were all islanders. Teaiwa even conceives of Earth itself as an island within the solar system, finite in its resources and space. Islanders, she writes, know that ‘to live long and well, they need to take care’ (line 6) of others – humans, plants, animals, soil, and water. Importantly, she insists that islanders are ‘awakened from the stupor of continental fantasies’ (line 8) and sees ‘making island’ as ‘a way of living that could save our lives’ (lines 14-15). This volume takes up Teaiwa’s provocation, asking what it might mean ‘to island’ in contemporary art curation. It explores how an urgent, connective, sustainable, and caring mindset informs exhibition-making today. Emerging from the *Transnational Island Museologies* conference (2024), co-organised by ICOFOM and the University of St Andrews as part of the *Shared Island Stories* research project, the volume foregrounds contributions examining oceanic travel and entangled histories. The chapters trace how contemporary artists engage with contested island heritage to tell lesser-known transnational stories and shed light on obscured historical undercurrents.

Oceanic and archipelagic curating

The book contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussion on oceanic curating. Art historians Pandora Syperek and Sarah Wade (2024) trace a growing curatorial interest in the ocean

not only as a subject but also as a method. Against the backdrop of ecological threats, they examine exhibitions that address ‘the impact of colonialism on Indigenous groups’ relationship to the sea, the legacies and imaginaries of the Middle Passage, migration routes as sites of cultural memory’ (2024, p. 685). Their research identifies a shift away from Wunderkammer-style displays of marine diversity that dominated a decade ago towards geographically grounded, politically charged exhibitions.¹ As a spatial and material mediating practice, they argue, curating can move across eras and locations to generate new perspectives on complex environmental and historical entanglements. Crucially, approaches that depart from dominant Western epistemologies and display conventions resist rational categorisation and linear narratives in favour of ‘process, site specificity, flux, and embodied or affective modes of knowledge’ (Syperek & Wade, 2024, p. 682). Delving into the oceanic influence on curatorial practice, curator Stephanie Hessler (2020) borrows the term ‘tidalectics’ from Barbadian historian and poet Kamau Brathwaite to reflect on the tides’ fluctuating movement as a metaphor for thinking about the entanglement of bodies, water, and meaning. In her reading, tidalectics offers curators ways of inhabiting history and uncertainty that privilege flux over stability and connectivity over isolation. It emerges as a timely framework for practitioners rethinking their methods in the face of global crises and the ongoing effects of colonial capitalism (Hessler, 2020). According to Hessler, rather than reproducing linear, cause-and-effect narratives, tidalectic curating invites holistic, situated, and relational modes of engagement where water functions as a connective rather than dividing element. This

1 Key examples include *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep* (Nottingham Contemporary and Tate St. Ives, 2013–14) and Mark Dion’s *Oceanomania: Souvenirs of Mysterious Seas, from the Expedition to the Aquarium* (Oceanographic Museum of Monaco, 2011) following the Wunderkammer approach. By contrast, more recent exhibitions such as *The Ocean* (Bergen Kunsthall, 2021) adopt geographically specific and politically engaged perspectives.

water-based way of thinking supports forms of world-making that are adaptable, fluid, and always in process (Hessler, 2020). The case studies gathered in this volume adopt such oceanic approaches while also reflecting the specificities of their island contexts and distinctive relationship with the surrounding seas.

Relational frameworks have significantly influenced oceanic and tidalectic curating. Some of the most prominent examples include *A Sea of Islands – Masterpieces from Oceania* (Wereldmuseum, 2021), which drew its title from Epli Hau‘ofa’s 1994 essay² and highlighted islanders’ resourcefulness and connection with the sea, and *The Inner Lives of Islands* (Te Tuhi, 2021), which explored Asia-Pacific storytelling practices and their links to diasporic identity and nationhood. In the Caribbean, Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation has been a recurring touchstone, inspiring initiatives such as *Poetics of Relation* (Pérez Art Museum, 2015), *Where Oceans Meet* (Museum of Art and Design, MDC, 2019-2020), and *The Shore, the Tide, the Current: An Oceanic Caribbean* (Museo Reina Sofía, 2024), each of which examined how permeable borders, diasporic flows, and creolisation have shaped cultural imaginaries. Most significantly for this volume, *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* (MOLAA, 2017–18) explicitly developed an archipelagic framework. Reflecting on their curatorial approach, Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens (2016) described the archipelago as an assemblage: not a collection of isolated sites, but a perspective that reveals outwardly radiating connections linking islands to each other, to mainlands, oceans, and distant diasporas. For them, visual art plays a crucial role in tracing such undercurrents and continuities. In contrast to totalising continental models, their notion of an ‘archipelagic cognitive map’ offers a particularly valuable tool for this volume, enabling us to attend to hidden,

2 Hau‘ofa, E. (1994/2023). Our sea of islands. Lagoonscapes. *The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.30687/LGSP/2785-2935/2023/02/002>

latent, or emerging connective undercurrents that flow beneath dominant mappings and narratives. Our approach similarly focuses on insularity as a vantage point for considering in-between spaces and shifting positions within colonially structured landscapes.

The curatorial emphasis on tidalectic movement and relationality also aligns with our transnational editorial approach, which treats memory as an expanded field that crosses artistic, geographic, and political boundaries (Huysen, 2003). We are especially interested in museological efforts to rethink memory as ‘comparative, multicultural, and diasporic’ (Delgado et al., 2024, p. 10). In her study of transcultural curating, Annette Bhagwati (2018) argues that sensitivity to contemporary art practices requires resisting homogenisation and instead working with cultural and local specificities. She calls for abandoning the ideal of total inclusiveness in favour of attentiveness to details, traces, and connections. Rather than aiming to control the entire map of global art, Bhagwati advocates a nodal approach: shifting from panoramic overviews to rhizomatic networks that highlight intersections, frictions, and exchanges. This perspective underpins our own editorial method. By tracing nodes and networks, we seek to foreground the complexity and uniqueness of diverse traditions while also situating them in relation to one another. Through this lens, the case studies in the volume bring together George Nuku, a Māori–Scottish–German artist exhibited in European museums; Yuki Kihara, a Sāmoan artist working in a UK institution; Cora-Allan, of Māori (Ngāpuhi, Tainui) and Niue (Alofi, Liku) descent, working in Aotearoa; Alberta Whittle, a Scottish-Barbadian artist exhibiting on a Scottish island; Pablo Delano’s work with Puerto Rican collections; and a group exhibition on Caribbean migration in Barbados. Collectively, these contributions reveal multiple interconnections across geographical and historical pathways, while remaining attentive to difference. As Astrida Neimanis reminds us, drawing on Rosi

Braidotti, “we” may all be bodies of water, but “we” are not all the same, nor are we all “in this” in the same way’ (2017, p. 15).

Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and spiralling time

Our volume engages with what Bruno Brulon Soares and Andrea Witcomb (2022) describe as the ‘ongoing and constantly evolving’ debates on museum decolonisation. These discussions confront the global effects of colonial history on contemporary societies: enduring social and economic inequalities, the marginalisation of particular groups, ongoing threats to Indigenous communities and their ancestral lands, and the persistence of institutional racism and sexism. In their *Museum International* editorial, Brulon Soares and Witcomb (2023, para. 3) stress that decolonisation remains an ‘unfinished and ongoing process.’ They avoid prescribing a single definition, emphasising instead the concept’s varied meanings across contexts: in Europe and Africa, it often centres on repatriation; in Latin America, on redistributing authority to marginalised communities; in Asia, on reinterpreting the material past; and in North America and the Pacific, ‘decolonising’ frequently overlaps with ‘indigenising.’ From a European perspective, theorist and curator Nina Möntmann (2023) further argues that museums, as institutions shaped by colonialism, cannot remain neutral in the face of today’s migrant crisis and its severe political, humanitarian, and moral implications. For her, decolonial processes demand a significant transformation of the public sphere, including anti-racist civic activism that demands accountability from museums, as well as new forms of knowledge and community. As Brulon Soares and Witcomb (2022) note, decoloniality cannot be reduced to a universal premise – such a gesture would itself risk a neocolonial imposition. Drawing on Catherine Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, they insist that decoloniality must be understood as relational, fostering meaningful dialogue between local histories and understandings of the concept. The chapters in this volume each take up this fundamental transformation of museum practice

in distinctive ways. Clémentine Debrosse examines George Nuku's critical reworking of museum holdings; Karen Jacobs the intersections of gender, climate change, and marginalisation in the work of Yuki Kihara; Cora-Allan reflects on landscape painting from a Māori perspective; Kaiden Waverley considers how Alberta Whittle confronts with the legacies of traumatic history; Amanda Guzmán recovers silenced local actors; and Allison Thompson examines artistic interventions within a historically charged museum environment.

While from a European perspective, Möntmann (2023) stresses that confronting museums' implication in regimes of coloniality remains a pressing task, Conal McCarthy highlights the emergence of Indigenous museologies as an 'urgent and dynamic expression of the global contemporary world [...] that demonstrates the continued relevance of the museum but in altered and novel forms' (2018, pp. 39, 48). Drawing from Sarah Carr-Locke's research, he defines Indigenous museology as museum work carried out with, for, and by Indigenous people. It encompasses Indigenous perspectives across all areas of practice and foregrounds processes of 'truth telling' that enable healing and reconciliation. For McCarthy (2018), the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's mana taonga policy offers a compelling example. Here, 'mana' refers to the power and authority rooted in cultural treasures or 'taonga'. This policy affirms Māori sovereignty over their taonga, challenging the conventional idea of museums as the sole custodians and instead placing Indigenous communities at the centre of museology. Communities are granted both rights and responsibilities, including active participation in the care, interpretation, and display of taonga. According to McCarthy (2018), although initially designed to empower Māori co-management within New Zealand museums, the principle of mana taonga has since expanded to foster collaboration with other communities, including non-Māori collections in New Zealand, and has increasingly been adapted in global contexts. In this sense, Māori museology is not confined locally, but

enacted through transnational networks of people, objects, places, and knowledge (McCarthy, 2018, 2025). The chapters by Debrosse and Jacobs, together with the interview with Cora-Allan, each engage with questions of Indigenous sovereignty in their own ways.

Through different perspectives, our case studies also explore alternative temporal frameworks, a crucial dimension of museum indigenisation. McCarthy (2018) argues that rejecting the supposed divide between the modern (Western) and pre-modern (Rest) periods – long embraced in museum history – opens up ways of seeing past, present, and future as interconnected. This shift makes space for multiple worldviews that unsettle Western certainties of space and time and allow museums to better serve diverse audiences. For McCarthy (2018), liberating culture from the constraints of Eurocentric museology creates new possibilities for reimagining the future of museums. Aware of the risks of overgeneralisation, he highlights a crucial point: while Indigenous peoples are often portrayed as oriented toward an idealised past, their focus generally lies on how the past shapes the present. Māori ontologies, for instance, move forward into the future while simultaneously looking back into the past. McCarthy (2018, 2025) emphasises how such paradoxical understandings of time are vital in addressing contemporary challenges – environmental crises, ethnic conflicts, and ideological tensions – that threaten institutions' collective futures alike. This future-oriented mindset is a thread that runs through the contributions in this volume.

Caribbean decolonial perspectives similarly question conventional temporal frameworks. For Michael Carrasco, Lesley Wolff, and Paul Niell (2020), this involves questioning, destabilising, and blurring the boundaries between past and present, fiction and reality. Reflecting on their exhibition *Decolonising Refinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié* (Museum of Fine Arts, Florida State University, 2018), they emphasise how the Caribbean – deeply marked by colonial plantocracies and the violence of

slavery – has become a symbol of resistance against a history fraught with injustices that continue to shape everyday life. In this context, decolonial strategies seek to break away from Western precepts by recovering subaltern voices, stories, and methods. For Carrasco et al., exposing epistemic, sensory, and ontological domination requires drawing on Indigenous and diasporic knowledge systems and sustaining an active dialogue between the past and the present, the visible and the invisible. Probing the past in this way illuminates how oppressive state-sponsored fictions have endured, while also revealing their entanglement with contemporary realities. The arts of the African Diaspora play a particularly vital role in this ‘archival shift,’ filling substantial gaps in the history of the Black Atlantic and highlighting its decisive impact on modernity and on mercantilist and capitalist Western exploitation (Carrasco et al., 2020). Distinct ways of problematising the relationship between past, present, and future resonate across our chapters.

The storm may be one of the most evocative ways of imagining an alternative temporal framework for Caribbean history – one that captures complex lived experiences and moves beyond the tension between past and present. Trinidadian scholar Marsha Pearce (2019) evokes the hurricane’s spiral shape and its twisting curve, which allows various points ‘to overlap, interact, and coexist, placing yesterday, today, and tomorrow in constant dialogue’ (2019, p. 48). The hurricane spiral resists the confines of linear time and instead remains open-ended. For Pearce, this form offers a mode of navigation: a way of facing obstacles and surviving adversity. ‘If the Caribbean is deep and wide, it is also a temporal storm, spiralling into the always possible’ (Pearce, 2019, 48). This ‘open-ended storm of time’ counters the carefree, idyllic images often projected onto islands and instead proposes a perspective that is ‘careful, mindful, attentive to what the future could hold’ (Pearce 2019, p. 50). Such radically imaginative ways of configuring temporality offer powerful tools for rethinking contemporary art curating. Having outlined the theoretical framework, the next section turns to the organisation of the

book and introduces the chapters that translate these ideas into practice.

Structure of the book

It may at first seem surprising that this collection, devoted to contemporary art curation, focuses so strongly on solo exhibitions. Yet our interest lies less in celebrating the curator as author or star, and more in considering exhibition-making as a relational practice shaped by multiple agencies – artists, curators, institutions, funders, designers, audiences, volunteers, and others. The chapters that follow examine artistic practices that critically engage with their museum settings, often through site-specific interventions. Each author develops distinct analytical tools suited to their case study, offering new perspectives on the possibilities of island curation.

The opening chapter by Clémentine Debrosse considers George Nuku's work through two recent exhibitions in European museums: *Voyage Autour du Monde: L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* (Musée Hèbre, Rochefort, 2021) and *Oceans. Collections. Reflections* (Weltmuseum, Vienna, 2022-2023). Debrosse explores Nuku's visual storytelling as a form of Māori wayfinding, drawing an analogy between the artist's collaborative approach to exhibition-making and the dynamics of a canoe crew. Both exhibitions focused on Nuku's reworking of voyage prints tied to the histories of their institutions, revealing connections between Aotearoa New Zealand and Rochefort and Vienna. By adopting the waka (canoe) as a metaphor, Debrosse reflects on Nuku's navigation of different local contexts and his adaptive, collaborative working style. Her analysis, enriched by reflections on her own volunteer involvement at the Weltmuseum, demonstrates how Māori wayfinding lies at the heart of Nuku's exhibitionary practice.

Karen Jacobs's chapter turns to the immersive art installations *Paradise Camp* and *Darwin Drag* at the Sainsbury Centre (2025) by Yuki Kihara, an artist of Sāmoan descent. Jacobs uses the concept of 'saltwater healing' as an analytical lens to examine

how the exhibition addressed climate crisis and marginalisation from a fa'afafine perspective – one of four recognised Sāmoan genders with which Kihara herself identifies. As Jacobs explains, these gender identities and ecological balance were destabilised by the imposition of colonial binaries, leaving fa'afafine and fa'atama communities particularly vulnerable to climate injustice. The exhibition challenged the colonial gaze on Pacific bodies and environments, notably through tableau photographs that re-staged some of Paul Gauguin's Tahitian paintings and videos that 'camp-fully' unsettled dominant historical narratives. Alongside these works, a Vārchive documented the research process, drawing on the Sāmoan concept of vā –the relational, in-between space. Jacobs also highlights the inclusion of Gauguin's original works, siapo (Sāmoan barkcloth), and the new commission of *Darwin Drag*, where Kihara explores Darwin's suppression of research on non-heteronormative fish to comply with conservative Victorian mores, staged within a Sāmoan fale. Together, Jacobs shows, these components entwine issues of gender, climate change, and marginalisation in a powerful curatorial statement.

The third chapter takes the form of an in-depth conversation between Cora-Allan, an artist of Māori (Ngāpuhi, Tainui) and Niue (Alofi, Liku) descent, curator Chloe Cull (Kāi Tahu, Aerani, Ingarani), and myself about their travelling exhibition *Encountering Aotearoa* (2024). The show presented a new body of work by Cora-Allan that considers the whenua from the vantage point of the moana. Our conversation explores the significance of land and ocean in shaping identity and belonging in Aotearoa, as well as institutional responsibilities for engaging with First Peoples' relationship to the sea. Cora-Allan reflects on adopting the ocean as an extension of the studio, travelling with her pāpā, presenting the show at Waitangi Treaty grounds, and researching Tahitian navigator Tupaia and his apprentice Taiata who journeyed on Cook's *Endeavour* voyage in 1769. She also discusses the political nature of working with whenua pigments and her practice of soaking hiapo cloth in seawater to

capture the mauri – the spirit of the ocean. Cull adds insights into her strategies for incorporating the processes of making into the exhibition.

Kaiden Waverley’s chapter examines Scottish-Barbadian artist Alberta Whittle’s exhibition *Under the skin of the ocean, the thing urges us up wild* (Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, 2024). Waverley begins with a guided tour of this site-specific project, highlighting how the works responded to the distinctive architecture and histories of the site. Central to their analysis is Whittle’s notion of ‘wayward curation,’ which Waverley interprets as a methodology of decolonial collective care. Waverley analyses the exhibition by tracing Whittle’s artistic and discursive ‘genealogical tree,’ drawing attention to the artist’s ‘network of accomplices.’ Whittle’s new body of work explores wildness in relation to Black womxn’s bodies, drawing on Afro-Caribbean spirituality, recurring snail motifs, and interspecies relationships. Through an interview with the artist, Waverley delves into her strategies for engaging with the legacies of slavery ‘steeped within the building,’ the notion of ‘weathering,’ and her efforts to balance confronting traumatic histories with fostering care towards her audiences. Ultimately, Waverley reflects on the tensions and possibilities of critical artistic intervention in museum spaces, situating Whittle’s practice within the broader debates on museum decolonisation in Scotland.

Amanda Guzmán’s chapter turns to Puerto Rico, examining the role of the unincorporated US commonwealth within transnational island museologies. She expands the relational concept of assemblages to consider island collections through archipelagic frameworks, arguing that Puerto Rico provides not only a vital museological case study but also adaptable models for museums grappling with power imbalances and difficult histories. Focusing on Pablo Delano’s ongoing site-specific installation series *The Museum of the Old Colony*, Guzmán analyses his strategies for recovering silenced local actors and interprets his work as a ‘critical provocation around

the US-Puerto Rico relationship through the institutional space of the museum as artistic setting and metaphor. For Guzmán, archipelagic thinking requires embracing complexity, difference, and ambiguity, challenging traditional ideas of museums. She also addresses the difficulties of balancing economic sustainability with community engagement in island contexts and shows how archipelagic relationality can disrupt disciplinary boundaries and organisational hierarchies that structure museum work. Her engagement with Delano's practice underscores a renewed vision of assemblages unfolding across transnational itineraries.

In the final chapter, Allison Thompson reflects on the challenges of curating a Caribbean art exhibition within the region and for a Caribbean audience, using her case study *Arrivants: Art and Migration in the Anglophone Caribbean World* (Barbados Museum and Historical Society, 2018). Co-curated with Veerle Poupeye, the exhibition was inspired by Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* trilogy and brought together the work of 25 artists to investigate migration as a defining feature of Caribbean identity as part of the EU-LAC Museums Horizon 2020 research project. Thompson situates the curatorial focus on the cultural impact and political significance of migration in the Anglophone Caribbean from the early twentieth century to the present, which resonated strongly with the Windrush scandal at the time. She reflects on how to reimagine exhibition models to connect Caribbean artistic practice with the global art world while articulating decolonisation as a transcultural project. Importantly, Thompson also examines the charged setting of the exhibition – the Barbados Museum, housed in a 19th-century military prison in the Garrison Savannah area – by providing detailed accounts of site-specific commissions and works integrated into the museum's existing displays and the context of British colonial history. Migration, Thompson argues, emerges here as a critical curatorial strategy to rethink exhibition-making and to engage Caribbean as well as international audiences.

Together, the chapters offer provisional answers to what it might mean ‘to island’ contemporary art exhibitions. Through situated, reflective, and fluid methodologies grounded in relational frameworks, they trace pathways towards museum decolonisation and Indigenisation. Across these case studies, curating emerges as a form of care. Elke Krasny and Lara Perry (2023) describe curating ‘with care’ as an ethico-political approach that resists the historic violence of imperial and colonial collecting practices that entrenched racist and sexist structures while excluding marginalised voices from the museum’s epistemic frameworks. They call for reimagining institutions not only in relation to collections and histories, but also in relation to audiences and their bodily, intellectual, and emotional needs. At the heart of this practice lies an acknowledgement of interdependence: recognising vulnerability and responsibility towards each other as fundamental to curatorial work. As Krasny and Perry write, it is an ethics that ‘thinks, feels, analyses, and works with the complexities and contradictions that economically, emotionally, epistemologically, materially, and technologically present themselves when aiming to align “caring about” with “caring for”’ (2023, p. 8). The authors in this volume exemplify such caring curating – striving to respect the dignity of all life, to affirm the rights of both humans and nature, and to envisage museums as infrastructures capable of supporting anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-sexist futures. ‘To island’ contemporary art exhibitions, then, is not only a connective endeavour but also a caring one.

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Chapter 1: George Nuku's Museum Seafaring: A Visual Storytelling of Wayfinding

Clémentine Debrosse

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My name itself sums up and epitomizes who and what I am. My surname, Nuku is perhaps one of the oldest and most widespread titles in Oceania. There are many islands that bear the name Nuku, as well as several countries and other places. In every island group in Polynesia my surname is my genealogical passport. The definition varies from Nuku or Nu'u, to describe a hamlet or village; it also implies movement or momentum. The most powerful description to date is one given to me by the Tongans, to whom Nuku is the undersea volcano which rises from the seabed and bursts through to the surface to create an island. Within this context the molten magma erupts and spews forth from rents and fissures, displacing enormous energy; the very lava itself pillows out and, in contact with the water, fights to give itself form. My surname in this context is at the very root of creation.

George Nuku¹

George Nuku is a contemporary artist of German/Scottish and Māori (Ngati Kahungunu/Ngati Tūwharetoa) descent who has dedicated his life to the making of artworks and exhibitions in museums across the world. Based on sculptures made of plastics (Perspex, polystyrene and single use plastic), Nuku's practice is characterised by his collaborations with cultural institutions. For Nuku, working with plastic is not only a way to address the pollution that is characteristic of our time but also a means to represent that it is everywhere and, in this way, equivalent

1 Nuku, G. (2011). Perspicacité: The art of George Nuku. *World Art* 1(1), 68.

to wood, which was the primary material of his ancestors (Jacobs, 2009). He uses plastic both as a material to create new sculpted material as well as to 'repair' incomplete Māori artefacts kept in museums, showing the continuity in Māori carving despite a change in material (Stable, 2012). In all his projects, he combines Māori ancestral knowledge and practice with contemporary materials and methods as a bridge to the Māori life, culture and environment embedded in the taonga (treasures) kept in these institutions' collections. Furthermore, his work is defined by the support of volunteers in the making of all exhibitions' elements, whether they are museum staff or recruited participants. This collaborative approach is part and parcel of Nuku's practice, and essential for the generational transmission of methods, concepts and techniques.

Although Nuku's practice with taonga and museums has been ongoing for over 20 years, it is only recently that he has been engaging with visual retellings of Aotearoa New Zealand's colonisation through exploration voyages' prints in large scale exhibitions.² First in 2021 in France, at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort in *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville*, and later in 2022-2023 in Vienna (Austria), at the Weltmuseum Wien in *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections*, Nuku has used these prints as central elements. Both exhibitions, though containing taonga (old and new), were curated around the reworkings of voyages prints by Nuku that were tied to the local history of the museums and specifically revealed the historical ties between Aotearoa New Zealand and Rochefort and Vienna. In both cases, Nuku reworked voyages' prints and drawings to transcribe the environment of Aotearoa New Zealand (both geographically and societally) through visuals and to testify to the Māori's long-lasting culture. By focussing on these two exhibitions, I wish to present Nuku's practice as rooted in history yet with

2 Albeit at the beginning of his career in 1993, Nuku used some exploration voyages prints in a small installation at Strange Cargo Gallery in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

a skill for adaptation to his local environment, like the waka (canoe) at sea which adapts to the currents and tides throughout its voyage. To continue the metaphor, I will introduce the collaborative aspect of Nuku's exhibition as akin to the social organisation of a waka *en route* for ocean voyaging. First, I will look at Nuku's exhibition in Rochefort, which focused on Dumont d'Urville's voyages to Aotearoa New Zealand and their depictions through illustrations and collected artefacts. Then, I will look at his Viennese exhibition, both as a visual segue of the first exhibition through the reuse of illustrations but also as an adaptation to the local context. This will also be the occasion to see how Nuku took the opportunity to tell the story of a 'reversed exploration' of two Māori men visiting Vienna in the second half of the 20th century. Finally, by relying on the waka as the first element of Māori genealogies, I will consider how Nuku's collaborative practice reflects the history and organisation of Māori wayfinding. Thus, this chapter aims to reveal how seafaring and wayfinding are intrinsic to Nuku's practice of museum exhibitions, both visually and in the method.

From Rochefort to Aotearoa

Taking as point of departure the city of Rochefort which was an important port during the 19th century, the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville*, open between 19 May and 28 August 2021, told the entangled stories of voyages and relationships of contemporary Māori artist George Nuku and French naval officer Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville (1790-1842) alongside those of voyage artists Pierre-Adolphe (1805-1888) and René Primevère Lesson (1794-1849) (both originating from Rochefort) as well as curator Claude Stéfani. Between 1826 and 1840, Dumont D'Urville led three voyages on the *Astrolabe* and *Zélée* ships which all travelled to the Pacific Ocean, with artists onboard to make visual recordings of the explorations (Collins, 1991; Hemming, 2005). In 2010, George Nuku travelled to France, where he has been living since. In 2015, the

parallel relationships of Pierre-Adolphe Lesson with the city of Rochefort and between Nuku and Stéfani led to a collaborative project on the collections that Lesson brought back from his exploration voyages, now held at the musée Hèbre. By bringing together Māori artefacts with prints depicting Aotearoa from the Dumont D'Urville voyages that stood as "tangible witness" (Mack, 2011, p. 16) to the so-called discovery of Aotearoa, Nuku retold the encounter of Māori people with French explorers through a Māori lens and his feature style of plastic sculpting and carving.

Taking place in one large room, the scene was set through a covering of the walls with enlarged and coloured versions of plates from the *Atlas historique du Voyage de l'Astrolabe* (1826-1829) realised by Louis Auguste De Sainson (1800-1874), official artist aboard the *Astrolabe*. In a smaller adjacent room, originals of the voyage prints and drawings were exhibited in a *cabinet d'art graphique*.³ In collaboration with Studio Ludo, a French company specialised in photography and digital printing, Nuku made a life-size version of the *Astrolabe* atlas by creating coloured and negative versions of plates 38, 45, 46, 48, 49 and 52. The enlargement of these scenes depicting the maritime encounter between Māori and Europeans brought the environment of Aotearoa New Zealand to Rochefort. They enabled a contextualisation of the musée Hèbre's artefacts for the visiting public thanks to visual representations of the characteristic landscape where the mountains meet the sea as well as the depiction of the lives of Māori people. The change in scale enabled for the visitor to be immersed in the pictures but also for the people being represented to be life-size, or close to life-size, therefore creating a more real and relatable feel to these images that escaped the atlas pages. Akin to a wallpaper, these illustrations of the in-betweenness of the location encapsulated in the island (where the sea meets the land) and situation

3 *A cabinet d'art graphique* defines both a collection of works on paper (drawings, prints) as well as the space in a museum where this collection is displayed.

(the colonial encounter) were foundational to the exhibition, enabling the display to open a window into the Māori world.



Figure 1: George Nuku after Louis Auguste de Sainson, *Baie Houa-Houa. Naturels exécutant une danse à bord de l’Astrolabe*. 2021. © Musées-municipaux Rochefort 17, cliché S. David/CARO

At the same moment, our two canoes were returning from land, and the decision I took was undoubtedly the safest.

There remained on board about fifteen natives, including five or six women, who had let their pirogues go, intending to spend the night with us. They were very worried at first and were tormented by the [fear] that we might want to take them away. I hastened to reassure them by explaining the reason why I was forced to leave the anchorage so abruptly: they then regained their former confidence, gave us performances of their dances, and cheerfully spent the night on board. (Dumont D’Urville, 1830-34, t. 2, pp. 105-106)⁴

This written account from the Dumont D’Urville voyages of the *Astrolabe* testifies to the encounter between Māori people and Europeans at Uawa in Tolaga Bay in February 1827. Yet, when taken out of its publication context, it is only tied to an environment (on a boat) as opposed to a precise localised geography (Uawa, Tolaga Bay, Aotearoa New Zealand). While

4 Author’s translation from French to English.

the visual conveys that the scene is set aboard a ship, it is only by reading the other textual elements on the page that the precise location is mentioned. Indeed, islands are unique in their in-betweenness of land and sea where the coast acts as a middle-ground and the beach stands as “an unresolved space where things can happen [and] be made to happen [, ...] a space of transformation [, ...] a space of crossings” (Denig, 2004, pp. 16-17). It is the vocabulary used in this extract that hints at this environment, merging maritime with terrestrial worlds, which is symptomatic of island and coastal environments: “canoes”; “land”; “on board”; “pirogues”; “anchorage”. The excerpt focusses on the back and forth between land and sea/ship of D’Urville’s team, accompanied by locals of the ‘Houa Houa Bay’. Unlike the whole of D’Urville’s written accounts, this episode was special enough in the re-telling of the voyage for it to be supplemented by an illustration, plate 48: *Baie Houa-Houa, Naturels exécutants une danse à bord de l’Astrolabe* (Houa Houa Bay, Natives performing a dance aboard the Astrolabe). Yet plate 48 is only representing the last part of the excerpt: ‘they then regained their former confidence, gave us performances of their dances, and cheerfully spent the night on board.’ At the centre of the picture, a haka is being performed by a group of women, men and children onboard a ship, signalled by a slipway on the foreground as well as the various boat masts, ropes and pulleys and flag floating in a cloudy sky. Apart from the lively central scene, four men – two Māori men and two shipmen, one of which seems to be a naval officer, possibly D’Urville himself, and the other a sailor – stand still looking at the performance, indicative that they need not to worry about the ship. They are anchored close enough to land. While the text highlights all these elements that situate the scene, Louis Auguste de Sainson chose to record the event which was so striking to him that he wrote a detailed description of it in his personal journal (Collins, 1991, p. 27). In an interview for the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, Nuku talked to how De Sainson’s illustrations

capture not only the physical life of the people
but they manage to capture the character of

the people, and all the nuance that goes with it. In particular for me [Nuku], they capture a people that is not intimidated by the Western world. The only superiority they feel under is a technological superiority. But they feel strong and proud and know exactly who they are. (Nuku in Ville de Rochefort, 2021)

By choosing to rework plate 48 of the Dumont d'Urville's atlas, Nuku went against the narrative of colonial superiority of the Europeans and presents his ancestors full of life and strength as a testament to the long-lasting Māori people and culture.



Figure 2: George Nuku. *L'Astrolabe*. 2021. © Musées-municipaux Rochefort 17, cliché S. David/CARO

Exhibited alongside the voyages' prints and artefacts brought back by Lesson, Nuku made two large sculptures in plexiglass that bridged the voyage histories of Nuku, D'Urville and the first people of Aotearoa New Zealand. *Voyage autour du Monde* (2021) and *L'Astrolabe* (2021) are two circular works, one in the shape of a globe, the other in the shape of a disc, both hung across the space slowly rotating. With *Voyage autour du Monde*, Nuku used the kowhaiwhai Māori carving motifs to represent the currents of air and water, as well as the longitudes and latitudes that are all key elements for navigation. Their curved and hooked shapes echoes that of the rolling waves. Surrounding these is a continuous rim that symbolizes all

exploration voyages, whether European or Māori. As for *L'Astrolabe*, it is named after D'Urville's ship, but also first and foremost takes the form of the eponym navigational tool used to understand the positioning of the stars. Only, Nuku's version contains his own moko design in place of the usual celestial coordinates, referring to his whakapapa (genealogy). In both works, Nuku intertwined European forms with Māori motifs, emphasizing how central the ocean and navigation were in the voyages of Europeans to the Pacific, but also for the people of Aotearoa New Zealand, during their first voyage from Hawaiki – the mythical originating place, today believed to be located in Central Polynesia.

The ancestors of Māori Invented blue-water sailing. As they sailed across the Pacific, stars, comets, clouds, the sun, the moon and birds appeared at different heights in the heavens. At night, successions of stars rose up in the sky, guiding them on their voyages. As wind blew and waves and swells slapped against the hulls of their canoes, it seemed that they stood still in the ocean while islands floated towards them. (Salmond, 2018, p. 1)

Around the beginning of the 13th century (Kirch, 2017), the ancestors of Māori departed from Hawaiki in “a deliberate search for new home islands for settlement and safety” (Hohepa, 1999, p. 184). The settlement of populations in Aotearoa New Zealand took place over a century or over two or more generations (Walter & Reilly, 2018). Although it is often mentioned that people travelled across the Pacific in canoes, sailor and scholar David Lewis argues that because of their size and ability to carry large crews, these waka should rather be qualified as ships, as “some were longer than Cook's Endeavour” (Lewis, 1994, p. 53). Aboard these vessels were a Rangatira (Captain) and tohunga (mission specialists) who all had assigned tasks in order to ensure the safe journey of the waka through Te-Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, the Māori name of the Pacific Ocean (Te Punga Somerville, 2017). Though European

voyages relied on navigation tools for their journeys, Pacific voyaging relied on wayfinding, an ancestral practice based on a “sensory experience of movement, the movement of the maritime environment and the movement of a vessel within that environment” (Mack, 2011, p. 116). Moreover, these voyages were accompanied by the chanting of people onboard which acted as “the chart of a long and important sea route [...] that identified sequences of landfalls between points of departure and final destinations” (Hau’ofa, 2008b, p. 73).

As an ancestral practice, wayfinding is rooted in the mythical and foundational stories of Aotearoa. The Māori creation stories are based on the telling of how the world came to be with a range of variations existing across islands in the Pacific. The Māori oral tradition not only records the first settlement in Aotearoa (“a land of a long white cloud” named as such for its appearance (Te Punga Somerville, 2012, p. XVIII)) but also tells how the archipelago now known as New Zealand emerged. Māui – often referred to as a demigod or a trickster – is known to have “fished up not fish but islands [...] with hook and line” (Helu, 1999, p. 46). The two main islands of Aotearoa are known to be either the different parts of Te Ika a Māui (the Fish of Maui) or the fish and canoe of Māui, forming “simultaneously a vessel and a fish” (Couper, 2008, p. 8) in place of the North Island (Te Ika-a-Māui) and South Island (Te Wāhipounamu, the place of greenstone). In time, the impact of how Māui fished Aotearoa was so great that it is believed it led the great Māori explorer Kupe to search for the fish of Māui when he needed to escape Hawaiki due to his amorous exploits.⁵ After his successful journey to Aotearoa and exploration of both islands, Kupe returned to Hawaiki, successfully transmitting the seaways to follow in order to find this southern land. Generations later, the ancestors of Māori “left on large, safe, double-hull voyaging catamarans, sailing old pathways and then creating new ones,

5 Another story recounts how Kupe and his family left Hawaiki, and found Aotearoa while pursuing an octopus (Te Punga Somerville, 2012, p. XVIII).

searching for a land already fished up by another ancestor, or, more accurately, a fish landed by another ancestor of another time” (Hohepa, 1999, pp.184-185).

I mentioned before how in his exhibition in Rochefort, Nuku presented a reworked version of an illustration from D’Urville’s atlas showing Māori people performing a haka aboard a French ship as well as two plexiglass sculptures referring to the art of navigation. Alongside these, two other plates from the atlas (plate 38 and 49) were enlarged, tinted with a blue hue and printed on the wall, framed by golden polystyrene Māori carvings. Respectively, plate 38 was depicting a *Vue from Wangari Cape (New Zealand)* and plate 49 a *Village at Astrolabe’s Cove (New Zealand)*. While these illustrations were used in the atlas to convey specific geographical locations in Aotearoa visited by the crew of the *Astrolabe* – as shown through their titles – their purpose in the exhibition was different. Plate 38 depicts two waka: one which just left the shore with several people aboard and the other still on the beach but being pushed onto the sea. As for plate 49, it shows Māori people at sea on a waka with, in the background, the island of Aotearoa and a European ship in the top right corner. The blue colouring of the prints was one way to directly echo the maritime theme found both in the geographical environment of Aotearoa and in the seafaring activities depicted. Furthermore, transferring the pictures into a world of colour shifted their status of images of and from the past to a present reality, arguing for how the past is “an important and pervasive dimension of the present and future”; known as an “ever-present now” (Hakiwai, 1996, p. 53). In front of both prints, a large plexiglass waka sculpted by Nuku allowed the visitor to “understand this dynamic sense of movement of a waka at sea, or of a waka pushed in the water by the people”⁶ Represented across the exhibition, but specifically in this part, the waka “surfaces as a transcultural icon of oceanic crossing” (Syperek & Wade, 2023, pp. 16-17) and of ancestral wayfinding, aided by the visual superposition of the sculpture with the

6 Personal communication with the artist, 23 June 2022.

image as backdrop, creating a true oceanic feel and an almost bodily experience. Though Nuku chose these pictures for the detailed artistry of De Sainson and the veracity they capture beyond the artist's gaze, he truly appropriated and transformed them. Indeed, in the digital reworking he did with Studio Ludo, Nuku removed all forms of texts (author, number, title) from the original drawings and atlas plates to only keep the image. In this way, he broke the interdependency between image and text inherent to voyage retellings (Douglas, 1999). Through the change in size, colouring and removal of text, Nuku intervened on the history of these prints, acknowledging a veracity in them and thereby giving them a contemporaneous feel. The images once linked to an exploration text and depicting a period and place in time (the encounter of d'Urville's crew with the Māori people of Aotearoa New Zealand in 1827) are not testaments to the so-called discoveries of d'Urville and his crew anymore. Rather, they have become representations of Māori people, their craft and ties to the sea and navigation for all to see, conveyed thanks to their museum display. But equally, in our world of image, they stand in place of oral history and convey a familiar feeling as can be found in family photo-album of something we know took place but are *seeing* for the first time. Thanks to this reframing of the exploration imagery, Nuku turned its purpose upside down. These illustrations are not outsider images anymore but representations of Māori people in the past for Māori people in the present and the future. Arguably, the visual and formal alterations carried by Nuku undid the "prevailing conception of Indigenous people as static 'images' perceived by a dominant" (Douglas, 2014, p. 17) to reframe them in new temporalities where the people and the stories attached to them are from the past, the present and the future all at once.

While the Euro-American conception of time is linear with the past set behind us and the future ahead of us, the Māori conception of time is circular with past, present and future being interconnected and interdependent. Because things that

are known to oneself are either things that have been previously learnt, taught or experienced, it is believed that the past is in front of us, what we can see and experience, as exemplified by this Māori proverb: "*Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*, I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past" (Rameka, 2016).

Historian Greg Denning argues that "knowledge of the past is cumulative and kaleidoscopic" (Denning, 2004, p. 55) which echoes this Māori interconnection of times. Yet, it is not only the different times which are connected but also the sense of place. Indeed, Tongan writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa (2008a) as well as Denning explain how the reading of the landscape and seascape, but also its experience, is essential for the reading of history. In Nuku's work, the juxtaposing of reworked 19th century voyage prints with a Māori waka carved in plexiglass exemplify this multi-temporal experience of Māori voyaging. As argued earlier, Nuku's alteration of the prints has already shifted how the visitor experiences them, but when combined with the waka, this is enhanced. Placed in front of the prints, the waka seems to be coming out of the picture but also to be coming from the future or an other-worldly realm because of the transparency of its material. This dialogic display of Nuku's Perspex waka hanging, almost floating, in front of the prints highlight the sense of place and belonging conveyed by the waka.

An emblem of seafaring, the waka is the first element of the genealogical history of Māori. A smaller unit is the iwi, which stands for both the name of the group and their territory, named as such after the buried bones (iwi) of Nukutawhiti – one of the first people to travel to Aotearoa after Kupe, which happens to have the same name as George Nuku. As such, Māori linguist Pat Hohepa says that "bones became icons; the metaphor became the group name" (Hohepa, 1999, p. 189). In this way, Māori introduce themselves through their waka, their iwi and their hapū, a subdivision of the iwi. Furthermore,

the voyaging canoe [...] embodied the people of the place. [...] It] was a map of the whole temple congregation or political unit. In its name was a heroic ancestry. Its voyaging was always epic. Its launchings and arrivals were always larger than ordinary, always celebrations in places of power and significance, always occasions of memory and rite. (Denning, 2004, p. 176)

As a vessel that has continuously been used to travel distances across time, the waka encapsulates the relationship between time and space in a similar way as the sea does. In its encapsulation of whakapapa and as the precursor to the marae (ceremonial space), the waka enacts the sense of belonging conveyed through place and genealogy as understood in the concept of *tūrangawaewae*: “where an individual can say, ‘I belong here. I can stand here without challenge. My ancestors stood here before me. My children will stand tall here’” (Mead, 2003, p. 43). In the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L’aventure māori de Dumont d’Urville*, the sculpted waka, but also the various voyage prints as well as the *Astrolabe* and *Voyage autour du monde* sculptures, showed the multifarious ways in which Māori life is tied to wayfinding and seafaring. Though the point of departure for this exhibition was the voyages of Dumont D’Urville and the material they gathered (artefacts) and created (illustrations), Nuku did not tell a story of Māori people through the European lens but rather a Māori story through and through. In this exhibition, Nuku adapted existing visual material from the colonial period for the purpose of a Māori storytelling that intertwined wayfinding, mythical storytelling with the local history of Rochefort, thus serving a double purpose of anchoring the exhibition in Māori principles and local ones.

From Aotearoa to Vienna

Similarly to how Māori people migrated to Aotearoa with knowledge of “sequences of landfalls between points of departure and final destinations” (Hau’ofa 2008b, p. 73), Nuku’s

various exhibition projects have anchored in many museum institutions. His most travelled series is *Bottled Ocean*, a modular exhibition concept started in Taiwan in 2014 where Nuku creates sculpted installations that alert the viewer of ocean pollution and the ecological crisis by creating a futuristic sea environment filled with marine creatures and Māori sculptures made from single use plastic, plexiglass and polystyrene. In several of these installations, a Māori waka made in plastic was at the centre of the installation, referring at once to the ancestral practice of Māori wayfinding and to the necessary voyage into the future – a hundred years from the time of the installation – to become fully aware of what a world filled with plastic would look like (Jacobs, 2022). After stops across France, Aotearoa, Indonesia, New Caledonia, the Netherlands and Switzerland, *Bottled Ocean 2122* was installed in the Theseus temple of the Volksgarten in Vienna alongside the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections* at the Weltmuseum Wien (23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023).

The exhibition, like that in Rochefort, was based on a storytelling of voyaging, both Māori and European (Austrian in this case), through illustrations, plexiglass and polystyrene sculptures and Māori artefacts, but this time from the Weltmuseum Wien collections to adapt the exhibition to the local history and context. Curated by Reinhard Blumauer, curator for Oceania and Australia at the Weltmuseum Wien, the exhibition consisted of a succession of six rooms, each presenting a different theme: 1. *Te Moananui* (The Big Blue); 2. *Hunters and Collectors*; 3. *Te Aonehebe* (The Natural World); 4. *Intrepid Voyagers*; 5. *Te Rarohenga* (The Underworld); 6. *Te Ao Marama* (The World of Light). Throughout these rooms, the visitor was taken on a journey, at sea and on land, in Aotearoa, onboard European ships and in Vienna. Characteristic to Nuku's practice, the codes of the European museum institution – frames, pedestals, vitrines and window adornments – were used alongside that of the Māori world, epitomised by the various Māori artefacts as well as Nuku's own carvings and illustrations rooted in his

ancestral practice. When entering the first room, the oceanic feel was unquestionable. The walls of the room were painted in blue, an impressive polystyrene-sculpted whale was hanging from the ceiling, voyage illustrations were hung on the wall, as well as a series of marine-creature drawings made by Nuku, and three waka were displayed across the rooms.

As mentioned earlier, the ocean, *Te Moananui*, is the place where everything started for the people of Aotearoa, but, generally, it is a common denominator for peoples across Oceania. Indeed, as put by Epli Hau'ofa, for “ocean peoples” the Pacific Ocean does not consist of “islands in a far sea” but rather as “a sea of islands”; where “people raised in this environment were at home with the sea” (Hau'ofa, 2008c, pp. 31-32). Furthermore, Hau'ofa stresses that “for us in Oceania, the sea defines us, what we are and have always been. [... It] is our single common heritage” (Hau'ofa, 2008d, p. 54). As the place and means of all voyages and creation stories, the ocean and the waka share similarities; they are both essential elements of Māori identity. Nuku spoke in these words of the waka: “When we introduce ourselves, we name the waka on which our relatives travelled from Hawaiki to Aotearoa, so they know our whakapapa [genealogy] and they know who we are” (Nuku, interview, 2006, as cited in Jacobs, 2022, p. 219). According to poet Alice Te Punga Somerville, this voyage across *Te Moananui* a Kiwa testifies to the fact that “Māori once were Pacific” (2012, p. XVI), therefore acknowledging the intertwinement of Māori people and the Pacific Ocean.

Starting the exhibition in Vienna with *Te Moananui* is therefore a statement by Nuku of the role of the ocean in the genealogical history of Māori people and of Aotearoa. He shows this genealogical continuity through the three waka on display which “represent the past, present and future: one comprised of customary materials, one from a fusion of old and new, and one made entirely from the ever-present plastic” (Blumauer et al., 2022, p. 28). In the following room, Nuku tells the story of the SMS *Novara*, an Austro-Hungarian ship which sailed to the Pacific Ocean between 1857-1859. Similarly

to his retelling of the Dumont D'Urville voyages in Rochefort, Nuku used voyage illustrations to create “a nineteenth-century study room” which “pays homage to the voyages of the Novara expedition” and “feat of global exploration in the name of science” (Blumauer et al., 2022, p. 40). After the third room in the exhibition dedicated to the natural world, the fourth room, *Intrepid Voyagers* was dedicated to another maritime travelling story. In 1859-1960, Wiremu Toetoe Tumohe (c. 1827-1881) and Te Hemara Rerehau Paraone (c. 1840-1895), two Māori men, went on a journey from Aotearoa to Vienna, aboard the *Novara*. During their time in Vienna, they worked in the printery of Emperor Franz Joseph where they learnt how to print with a printing press. However, they did not only come to Vienna to work for the empire; they were the guests of the emperor and were showed around the city: “We saw the buildings where they brew beer, make wine and distil spirits ... nothing was hidden from me, neither the theaters nor the buildings where they put away the apparel of their kings of old” (Te Rerehau Paraone, 1958, p. 21).



Figure 3: George Nuku. *Oceans. Collections. Reflections. Intrepid Voyagers*, Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna, 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse

On 16 February 1860, Wiremu Toetoe Tumohe and Te Hemara Rerehau Paraone met with Emperor Franz Joseph I and Empress Elisabeth (Sissi). Before their return to Aotearoa, Archduke Maximilian asked the two men known in Austria as Wilhelm Toetoe and Samuel Rerehau what gift from Austria they would

like to take home. Their answer was simple: a printing press. By the time they went back home, they used the printing press to produce the first te reo Māori⁷ newspaper entirely made by Māori people, *Te Hokioi o Nui-Tireni, e Rere atu na* (War Bird of New Zealand in Flight to You). In each of the nine issues of the newspaper printed between 1862-1863, appeared the following mention: *Te Perehi aroha noa o te Kingi o Atiria* (The press given with affection by the King of Austria) (Diamond, 2021, p. 51).

One hundred and sixty years later, this story was told where this encounter first took place, in Vienna, at the Hofburg imperial palace where the Weltmuseum Wien is located. In the room *Intrepid Voyagers*, George Nuku played with the imperial codes, by using gold paint for his sculptures, sculpting the imperial coat of arms in a plexiglass sheet, and creating eagle sculptures referencing directly the imperial eagle, emblem of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also nodding to the title of the Māori newspaper created by Toetoe and Rerehau. Painted in an ivory white colour, the room was adorned with the portraits of Toetoe and Rerehau, Alois von Auer-Welsbach (director of the Court and State Printing Office), Thomas Russel (protagonist during the invasion of the Waikato province), Te Wahanui Reihana Te Huatare (protagonist of the Māori King Movement), King Tawhiao, Patara Te Tuhi (editor of *Te Hokioi*), George Grey (Governor of New Zealand), Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria and Empress Elisabeth of Austria which Nuku wrapped in golden polystyrene frames that he adorned with Māori carving motifs. At the centre of the room, a large gold polystyrene sculpted eagle was hung with its claw looking like it was holding a printed sheet of paper, a facsimile of the front page of *Te Hokioi o Nui-Tireni*. Across it was a video screen showing the documentary film *The Flight of Te Hokioi* (2009) produced by Māori director Tearepa Kahi about Toetoe and Rerehau's voyage to Austria. With this room, Nuku not only reenacted the meeting of Wiremu Toetoe Tumohe and Te Hemara Rerehau Paraone

7 Te reo Māori is the indigenous language of Māori people.

with Emperor Franz Joseph I and Empress Elisabeth, but he also placed them with the portraits of people they met and worked with, therefore recreating the context and environment of their time in Vienna. Furthermore, the addition in this room of King Tawhiao and Te Wahanui Reihana Te Huatare's portraits creates a direct royal parallel with the emperor and empress. Based on black and white photographs, these portraits are brought to life with colouring added by Nuku so that they meet eye-to-eye with the imperial portraits. This visual parallel-positions both Māori and Austro-Hungarian nations as equals, ruled by royal leaders. This dialogue between Aotearoa and Austria, though particularly represented in this room, was present throughout the whole exhibition. Indeed, while several of the prints used in the exhibition came from the voyage of Dumont D'Urville, many paintings and illustrations used at the Weltmuseum Wien came from Viennese or Austrian collections and were made in the first place during Austro-Hungarian exploration voyages like that of the *Novara*. While in Rochefort the artefacts on display came from the musée Hèbre collections, the numerous natural specimens and Māori taonga on display in Vienna came from the collections of the Weltmuseum Wien or neighbouring institutions in Vienna.

In many ways, the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections* was an adaptation of the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* to the Viennese context. While in Rochefort the exhibition told the story of Dumont d'Urville's voyages and its ties to the city of Rochefort, it mostly put the illustrations in the service of a Māori storytelling. The same was true in Vienna for the French and Austrian prints used in rooms 1. *Te Moananui*, 3. *Te Aonehehe*, 5. *Te Rarohenga* and 6. *Te Ao Marama*, but a special focus on the Viennese and Māori encounter took place in rooms 2. *Hunters and Collectors* and 4. *Intrepid Voyagers*. This difference in treatment, signified by the titles of the rooms being in Te Reo Māori as opposed to English, revealed how prevalent the local context was for the construction of the exhibition in Vienna.

Aboard Nuku's waka

So far, I have presented different aspects of Nuku's work: his sculpting in polystyrene and plexiglass; the merging of his creations with museum collections; his reworking of voyage illustrations; the ever-presence of Māori history and mythology in all his projects. But there is a final aspect that is intrinsic to George Nuku's creations: collaborative practice. Regardless of the size of Nuku's projects, they are always collective endeavours which gather or rather recruit all the available and willing people around. For certain projects, this collective is mainly formed of museum teams, Nuku and his wife and creative partner Mathilde Denniel Nuku. However, for large projects like the one in Vienna, Nuku calls for volunteers to join him in the making of the exhibition:

I am reaching out to you artistic people,
young and old, to please come and collaborate
with me on this project. I can guarantee you
an unforgettable experience and, as I said,
the whole philosophy around the project is
all of us working together to realise a vision.
(Weltmuseum Wien, 2022)

For three months prior to the opening of the exhibition, the public was invited – after signing a waiver – to join Nuku and the museum team to bring his vision to life. It is in this capacity that I joined the enterprise a week prior to the opening to conduct fieldwork for my PhD thesis. When I arrived at the Weltmuseum Wien, I was welcomed by Felix Abrudan, who was Nuku's assistant and artistic coordinator of the workshop set up inside the museum. In the time I spent as a volunteer, I met people who had been coming to the museum every day of the week for the three months of volunteering. I met young and old people who came either because they had a personal tie to Aotearoa New Zealand and Oceania for the one-in-a-life-time experience of not only working with an artist but being a part of the creative process of a large-scale exhibition, or for a fun

moment of creating alongside an artist. The assignment in tasks was based on people's specific knowledge and need at the time:

easier tasks for the newcomers and more advanced jobs for the veterans. Some volunteers specialized in one activity and could soon train new arrivals. [...] Soon we were working together with art students, parents and their children, pensioners, travellers, makeup artists, engineers, doctors, opera singers. The volunteers came from Austria and from abroad. Everyone was welcome. (Abrudan, 2022, p. 110)

Because I joined the team nearing the opening time, many of the regulars had been trained and entrusted with more advanced tasks. Though my relationship with Nuku was special as we had met previously and he knew of my coming with my researcher hat on, I quickly joined the making process and the stapling and arranging of plastic bottles rapidly became the task that I was entrusted to carry throughout several of the rooms. This repetitive task allowed me to meet with people of different horizons and create friendships which have lasted to this day. I recall one time when Nuku, who was exhausted from the physical and psychological labour of the past three months, came to lie down next to me while I was continuing my installations of plastic bottles and tarpaulin. This small moment of rest and quiet for Nuku really encapsulated this interdependency between Nuku and the volunteers, his "slaves of love" (Nuku, 2022, p. 97).

The very first day we were not that many people, maybe ten. We met George Nuku, and he told us his vision. Then he immediately gave us a lesson in carving. So being introduced to polystyrene, having it all over my body and not being able to get rid of it was my very first day. It's something I will remember forever. (volunteer Selina Wagner in Abrudan, 2022, p. 113)

In her essay *The Classroom as a Metaphorical Canoe: Cooperative Learning in Pacific Studies* (2021), I-Kiribati and African-American scholar, poet and activist Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa argued that the social organisation of the canoe – as seen before with the different roles assigned to people for the success voyaging aboard a waka – is helpful to understand the interdependency of the lecturer, the tutor and the students in building a successful teaching experience. I would like to use Teaiwa’s metaphor to further explain the model developed by Nuku throughout his career of collaborative exhibition making. In her metaphor, Teaiwa compares the lecturer as the chief of the waka, the tutor (or teaching assistant) as the coxswain and the students as the crew. Transposed into the volunteer-based organisation in Vienna, it is easy to see that the roles of the captain and of the coxswain were respectively held by Nuku himself and Felix Abrudan. As for the crew, it was composed of – across the three months of pre-exhibition preparation – more than 200 volunteers and teams from the Weltmuseum Wien. Because this exhibition’s endeavour was so big, there were more than one coxswain: the exhibition making was also led by curator Reinhard Blumauer and several registrars and conservators. As put by Teaiwa, the chief and coxswain relationship can be paralleled with “the master-apprentice model of navigation” (2021, p. 6) where Nuku knows how and what there is to do, but he needs to rely on his trusted team and crew for a successful outcome. Like the chief and coxswain of a waka “[need] to be attuned to the environment as well as [their] crew’s strength” (Teaiwa, 2021, p. 8), the volunteers’ roles were assigned based on each person’s knowledge, skills and capacity. Furthermore, similarly to how chief and coxswain have to pay attention to each crew member’s strength, the required “mutual commitment” (Teaiwa, 2021, p. 5) for ocean seafaring is expected of the crew too: “if the chief or navigator of the oceangoing vessel is not at peak performance, the coxswain and crew of the outrigger canoe have to work harder” (Teaiwa, 2021, p. 5).

In this logic, if Nuku needed some rest, all the other members of the exhibition endeavour had to power through to keep the waka going. However, “if the chief or navigator of the oceangoing canoe is unfit, the lives of his crew are endangered” (Teaiwa, 2021, p. 5). Therefore, although the volunteers, museum team and Nuku were all relying on each other, Nuku can take some rest but physically needs to be able to lead the project until fulfilment. This responsibility is part and parcel of Nuku's duty as a guest at the Weltmuseum Wien:

I am hosted by the institution, and in this they are bound to do their utmost to provide for and take care of my needs. I, in turn, as the invited guest, am bound to respect their position by giving my utmost effort in the performance of my duty. (Nuku in conversation with Blumauer, 2022, p. 103)

Thus, the reciprocity of the host/guest relationship acts similarly to the mutual commitment and tacit pact of the various people aboard a waka. In an interview with the curator of the exhibition, Nuku speaks of his role in these terms:

Tohunga is a label that fits me better than artist or artisan because of the theological or religious aspect of both Māori art creation and its function. I have to perform this role as artist-priest, artist-poet, artist-warrior; I have to be an intermediary between both temporal and spiritual planes or worlds. [...] I come from a long line of people who walked this path, stretching back over a thousand years. I am merely a continuation of this larger story. But as I said, I bring to the story my way of seeing, doing, and being. *Tohunga* signifies a specialist, but *tohu* means ‘sign’ or ‘potent,’ and *nga* signifies plural. I create signs, I read signs, in a sense I am a sign. We all require signs for direction or else we lose our way. (Nuku in conversation with Blumauer, 2022, pp. 98-99)

Tohunga was the name used for the mission specialists aboard the waka. By associating his role and practice with that of tohunga, Nuku testifies to the transfer of these roles from the past to the present, showing the continuity in Tikanga Māori, the ‘Māori philosophy in practice’ and ‘the practical face of Māori knowledge’ (Mead, 2003 p. 7).

Though the metaphor of the waka is helpful to conceptualise Nuku’s collaborative practice, it is not exclusive to his work. Indeed, already in 2005, during the preparation of the landmark exhibition *Pasifika Styles: Artists Inside the Museum* (5 May 2006 – 23 February 2008) – in which Nuku took part – Amiria Salmond and Rosanna Raymond used the framework of the waka for the “defining [of] the structure of how the exhibition space within the museum might flow” (2008, p. 8). Due to the importance of the waka historically and in Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), it is suited to transformation into methods and frameworks for the purpose of exhibition-making. When thinking of Nuku’s practice, we have seen that, as a tool for wayfinding and a symbol of whakapapa, the waka is ever-present and revealed through sculptures and illustrations.

Conclusion

In the opening quote to this chapter, George Nuku tells the meaning of his name. It is deeply rooted, in time and space, in the history of Aotearoa, but more broadly in the history of the Pacific Ocean, as a name that can be found across Oceania. As explained throughout this paper, Nuku’s ancestral link to the migration story of Māori people to Aotearoa is inherent and his art is riddled with references to this voyage. Like the “tide never returns to the same spot twice, and its movement is affected by several forces that themselves continually change” (Hessler, 2018, p. 33), and as shown through his exhibitions in Rochefort and Vienna, Nuku’s work is adaptative to its localities. It navigates the different historical and geographical contexts of his host institutions in order to create a truly Māori narrative, guided by ancestral principles akin to wayfinding. Finally, I argued in the last part of this chapter that his practice is not

only a storytelling of ancestral voyaging but rather embracing it by putting in practice a collaborative methodology which mimics the social organisation of the waka. Thanks to it, his dedication and power of persuasion, Nuku's waka has sailed across the museum-sea and told a visual story of Māori people voyaging to and living in Aotearoa, alongside the narrating of his own personal voyage from Aotearoa to France where he lives today. In Vienna, thanks to the knowledge, dedication and skills of such a large crew, Nuku's waka reached its destination at the time, the opening of the exhibition on 22 June 2022, similarly to how the ancestral waka left Hawaiki to go settle in Aotearoa thanks to wayfinding. Since then, Nuku's museum seafaring has been ongoing, surrounded by family, friends, museum staff and volunteers.

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Chapter 2: **Saltwater healing: Yuki Kihara's *Darwin in Paradise Camp***

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In recent decades there has been a surge in ocean-themed exhibitions. Together with the increasing awareness of the poor state of the Earth's oceans, a rising number of exhibitions have centralised the ocean as a natural and cultural entity. Focusing on oceans' material and metaphorical surfaces and depths, their boundary-transcending qualities, their fluidity and potential for connection and mobility, their ecological devastation and the ways oceans influence histories, identities, politics and economies, these exhibits are organised in contexts ranging from maritime and natural history museums to temporary art exhibitions and contemporary art festivals. These exhibitions are "necessarily transdisciplinary, transhistorical, transgeographical and even trans-species" (Syperek & Wade, 2020, p. 160). The so-called "Oceanic turn" (Winkiel, 2019, p. 1) in exhibitions reflects the shift towards the ocean by scholars from different disciplines who introduced frameworks such as the "blue humanities" (Alaimo, 2019; Mentz, 2009), and "tidalectics" (Hessler, 2018). However, in her essay "Where Oceans come from", Māori scholar Alice Te Punga Somerville demands a space for people from Oceania in this scholarship and an engagement with "those who have not needed a 'turn to the sea' because we were already there" (Te Punga Somerville, 2017, p. 28).¹

1 This is a summary of an emerging scholarly field that cannot be summarised here, but see Santos Perez (2020), amongst others. Te Punga Somerville's plea to include Oceanic or Pacific voices has been echoed by Blue Humanities scholars (Smith and Mentz, 2020) as well as Indigenous people from the region (Santos Perez, 2020).

Taking the 2025 exhibition *Yuki Kihara: Darwin in Paradise Camp* at the Sainsbury Centre as a main case study, this chapter reflects on Kihara's artwork as one of these voices from the region. Yuki Kihara is an artist of Sāmoan descent, whose recent work demonstrates how climate change has caused the Pacific Ocean to become a threatening metaphor as well as an empowering one in Sāmoa. The exhibition featured as part of the Sainsbury Centre's exhibition season theme *Can the Seas Survive us?*² In this season, Kihara's exhibition was juxtaposed with the exhibition *A World of Water*, which looked at the human impact on the sea by British and international artists from the last 250 years.³ Kihara's exhibition differed from its adjacent exhibition because of its focus on gender as well as the environment, reminding us that all is connected. In other words, she takes a true oceanic perspective, one that is characterised by a "fluency with fluidity" (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2018, p. 82).

Challenging the stereotypical and heteronormative representation of the Pacific as paradise, *Paradise Camp* was initially developed for the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022.⁴ The exhibition *Darwin in Paradise Camp: Yuki Kihara* (15 March-3 August 2025, Sainsbury Centre; 3 October 2025-1 March 2026; The Whitworth Gallery, University of Manchester) shows *Paradise Camp* together with a new commission entitled *Darwin Drag*. The exhibition

2 In 2023 the Sainsbury Centre relaunched with a new concept, *Living Art Sharing Stories*, which introduced an approach to programming in which all exhibitions and public programmes in a six-month period address a single question of global relevance. For more information, see <https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/whats-on/can-the-seas-survive-us/>

3 Curated by John Kenneth Paranada, the *World of Water* exhibition ran simultaneously with *Darwin in Paradise Camp: Yuki Kihara* (15 March – 3 August 2025), curated by Tania Moore with the author as Curatorial Consultant. The *Can the Seas Survive Us?* season was later expanded with the exhibition *Sea Inside* (7 June – 26 October 2025) curated by Sarah Wade and Pandora Syperek.

4 Curated by Natalie King, see <https://www.nzatvenice.com/>; <https://paradisecamp.ws/>.

counters the colonial impact on Sāmoan gender identities and addresses climate disaster and a threatened ocean through offering a fa'afafine perspective. Kihara herself is fa'afafine, one of the four cultural genders in Sāmoa, thus was assigned male at birth but identifies as transgender. Literally translated as 'in the manner of a woman,' fa'afafine's counterpart is fa'atama ('in the manner of a man'). Sāmoan society is traditionally based on the collaboration of the four culturally recognised gender identities with their environment, but this harmony has been disturbed by colonialism and its imposition of binaries on people and their environment. This resulted in the marginalisation of fa'afafine and fa'atama communities who suffer more from climate injustice as a result.

In their book *Understanding climate change through gender relations*, Buckingham and Le Mason (2017, p. 3) explain how gender inequality is linked to climate change and "is an outcome of distributed power relations which are systematically gendered". They argue that climate change often has a higher impact on women, which is gradually being recognised in scholarship, but there is still an overall need for acknowledging gender sensitivity (Buckingham & Le Mason, 2017). The growing discourse of queer ecology challenges the gender binary as well as the binary between human and non-human nature (Harcourt et al., 2015), which is what Kihara does in her work. Indeed, people living in Oceania feel a deep connection with the Pacific Ocean. Oceanic cosmologies demonstrate how natural and human histories are inseparable (Kabutaulaka et al., 2017). As Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (2018, pp. 82-83) reminds us, fluidity in perspective "can be useful in helping to reimagine settler colonial ways of structuring human relationships to land".

This chapter introduces the idea of saltwater healing as a framework for analysing Kihara's work and the multiple issues that it raises. With a focus on relationality and connection, this analysis focuses on the way the exhibition challenges the colonial gaze on Pacific bodies and their environment, while

defying gender-based and racial prejudices, and how these lead to climate injustice. Drawing on the healing properties of the water of our salty oceans as well as the need for fluid perspectives and the necessity to look after the health of our oceans, the chapter discusses the potential of the exhibition as a space for healing. Gradually museums have adopted new roles in order to become institutions that better serve their communities (Golding & Modest, 2013; Peers & Brown, 2003), promote social justice (Gonzales, 2019; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012), address colonial trauma for Indigenous groups (Peers, 2013; Lonetree, 2012; Onciul, 2015; Fischer & Reckitt, 2015) and encourage healing (Cowan et al., 2019). Based on conversations with the artist and an analysis of the exhibition, the focus is here on Kihara's revelation of the impact of marginalisation in an ocean environment.

Ocean as entangled space – not so hidden stories

Yuki Kihara's 2013 photographic series *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* (2013) shows Kihara dressed in a fictitious character of Salome visiting significant places in Sāmoa to reflect on the aftermath of colonialism, developmentalism and climate change, while simultaneously highlighting Sāmoans' resilience. The persona of Salome was inspired by a photograph entitled *Sāmoan Halfcaste* (1886) taken by New Zealand colonial photographer Thomas Andrew. Kihara often draws on colonial photography to challenge mainstream and mainland perceptions of islands being isolated, peripheral and remote, and to unfold untold narratives (Kihara, 2021). Of particular significance to this chapter is the photograph in this series *After Tsunami Galu Afi, Lalomanu* (2013) which shows Salome facing the calm ocean.⁵ She stands as a silent witness to the destructive impact that the ocean had when the tsunami

5 The image is available on the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū website: <https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/collection/2017-063/yuki-kihara/after-tsunami-galu-afi-lalomanu-2013>, last accessed 9 July 2025.

hit in 2009. This image captures her and her community's connection to the ocean as well as their vulnerability to the impact of the ocean. She does this dressed in a Victorian-style mourning dress to emphasise the legacy of colonialism on her environment and people. This image inspired the multiple nature of the concept of saltwater healing that is employed in this chapter as it articulates that our health is intimately linked to the health of the ocean; the image refers to the need for fluid, oceanic perspectives as well as the need to look after the health of the ocean and its inhabitants.

The entangled space that this chapter thus focuses on is the Pacific Ocean. Covering one third of the world's surface, the Pacific Ocean (known in Oceania by different local names) is larger than all the continents' landmass grouped together. Yet while vast in terms of ocean space, Oceania or the Pacific region is considered the smallest in surface land area. Consequently, Euro-American conceptions of Oceania have historically drawn attention to small islands in a vast ocean, a conceptualisation of the ocean in terms of land (Mack, 2011, p.75). Consequently, the notion of the 'island' has historically been equated with insularity and isolation (Perry, 2024) and the islands in Oceania received their fair share of Euro-American explorers and scientists who were attracted by this insularity as well as an urge to map and classify the boundlessness of the region. As Rod Edmond (1997, p. 8) has argued "mutually reinforcing" projects of "[m]apping and the classification of human species on evolutionary lines" have been used to bring the European fear of the Pacific's "incalculable space under control".

It was in this tradition that people such as the British evolution biologist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and French post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), the two protagonists in Yuki Kihara's artwork in focus, were born. From 1835 to 1836 Darwin passed 127 days sailing across the South Pacific Ocean aboard HMS Beagle, of which 54 days were spent near island environments, including Tahiti in the Society

Islands and the Bay of Islands in Aotearoa New Zealand. He recorded and collected data and species that would inform his main evolution theories published from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Armstrong, 2022, p. 69). Gauguin would have been aware of these theories when he travelled to Tahiti in 1891 to seek out the insular island lifestyle that he imagined Tahiti to offer.

Rather than a series of small, isolated entities, Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa proposed in his essay "Our Sea of Islands" (1994) to view Oceania as an assemblage of islands connected by the ocean; an ocean that acts as a linking pathway rather than a separating boundary. A pathway that is reclaimed by people today by celebrating the impressive navigational skills that their ancestors had used when settling the islands. These ancestors considered their homeland "comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it" (Hau'ofa, 2008, p. 31). By considering the ocean space as part of their homeland and by emphasising historic and ongoing mobility in the region, Hau'ofa defies the label of isolated periphery and demonstrates that "Their world was anything but tiny" (Hau'ofa, 2008, p. 31). Other scholars from the region also emphasise the common relationship with the ocean for the people living in the region (Wendt, 1982; Teaiwa, 2014; Lopesi, 2018).

Today, the Pacific Ocean is threatened by global warming and associated extreme weather events, rising sea levels, acidification, overfishing, pollution, coastal erosion and species extinction. The focus on land and the colonial division of Oceania into separated regions not only informed subsequent Euro-American representations that highlighted Oceania's isolation, but it equally informed the choice by post-Second World War nuclear powers to conduct atomic testing in the Pacific Ocean, with disastrous consequences for the ocean and its inhabitants. Today, the same reasoning informs the response by Western nations to the climate crisis (Maurer, 2024). However, as Jaimey

Hamilton Faris (2019) has observed, the problem of climate change is not simply the submersion of the islands but the equal submergence and invisibility of the communities who reside there. Artists from the region have challenged this by emphasising their resilience (Jacobs, 2022).

Kihara focuses on the impact on Sāmoa's most marginalised communities. Her work demonstrates that the colonial boundaries imposed on the ocean were also extended to the bodies that inhabit the islands. Following missionisation during the German colonisation of Sāmoa (1889-1914) strict gender binaries were imposed, disturbing the social gender equilibrium and resulting in the discrimination of fa'afafine and fa'atama communities. This continued when Sāmoa was under a joint British and New Zealand colonial administration, when the introduction of the New Zealand Crime Ordinance Act in 1961 targeted the fa'afafine community because it enforced laws that banned males impersonating a woman in public and a ban on homosexuality.⁶ Today, fa'afafine and fa'atama communities "are used as scapegoats by religious leaders" and are blamed for reigning issues such as HIV/AIDS and climate change (Kihara, 2018, p. 1-2). Sāmoa is impacted by increasing heat causing drought, rising rainfall resulting in floods and the growing force of cyclones and tsunamis. While Sāmoa consists of a group of high islands, approximately 70% of Sāmoa's population and infrastructure is in low-lying coastal areas making them vulnerable to rising sea levels and coastal erosion (Lancet, 2024). Kihara argues that now is the time that Sāmoa's gender equilibrium needs reinstating; she advocates restoring community solidarity and stewardship for the environment (Kihara, personal communication, 2025).

6 Sāmoa became independent on 1 January 1962. The law was continued under Sāmoan government but was repealed in 2013 as a result of the 2007/2008 Sāmoa Law Reform Commission.

Paradise Camp – for gender and climate justice

Since its showing at the 59th Venice Biennale in Venice in 2022, Yuki Kihara's work *Paradise Camp* toured the Powerhouse Museum, Gadigal land Sydney, in 2023. In 2024 it was on view at the Saletoga Sands Resort and Spa in Upolu Island, Sāmoa, before opening at the Sainsbury Centre, UK, in 2025. While *Paradise Camp* has been expanded and adapted to each location, each iteration consisted of three core elements: twelve large-scale photographs, two videos and the Vārchive.

The first part, consisting of 12 staged tableau photographs, reimagines and reconstructs Paul Gauguin's paintings created during his time in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands between 1891 and 1903. Kihara was inspired by an essay by Māori scholar Ngahua Te Awekotuku in which she wrote that Gauguin's models "are familiar to me: they're reflected in the women of my own extended family, in the 19th-century postcards of my grandmother, a popular model, and others too" (2022, p. 45). From the late 19th century onwards, a booming market developed in postcards based on studio photographs in places such as Aotearoa New Zealand and Sāmoa. Photographers such as Thomas Andrew, John Davis and Alfred John Tattersall operated studios in Apia to take photographs of Sāmoan people. They were not necessarily concerned with accurately representing Sāmoan culture, instead they used a set of profitable themes that were regularly repeated, including portraits of women portrayed as "exotic" "South Seas Belles" (Webb, 1998; Blanton, 1995). While Te Awekotuku's essay reminds us that the women portrayed are someone's daughter, mother, grandmother, sister, wife or aunt, the postcards of anonymous women have travelled ubiquitously and continued a tradition of misrepresenting and sexualising the Pacific female body (Jolly, 1997; Tamaira, 2010; Taouma, 2004). It has been argued that the objectified, exoticised and eroticised compositions and poses of the young women against lush vegetation in Gauguin's paintings were also painted for a European audience and their expectations

of a Pacific paradise (Eisenman, 1997; Welten, 2015). Gauguin's work refers to a paradisiacal myth that he expected to find and which he exaggerates in his *Noa Noa* book.⁷ The book discusses his love affair with Tehura, a character based on Teha'amana, a 13-year-old girl Gauguin disturbingly described as his wife. The fact that she was not Tahitian but Rarotongan shows the interchangeability of a prototypical Pacific woman created in the paintings and continued in tourist advertisements for the region (Teaiwa, 1999).

However, in her essay, Te Awekotuku (2022, p. 45) raises other important questions about Gauguin's models: "Who were they? And sometimes, I ask myself, what were they? He wahine, he tane ranei? He mahu, pea? Either gender? Or the one in between?" With these questions, Te Awekotuku challenges the long-assumed idea that Gauguin only portrayed young Tahitian women and considers his paintings portraits of māhū (third gender in Tahiti). Was Gauguin tricked, she wonders, or "did he choose to sustain the humour, the theatricality of it, and play a trick himself, on his audience, his prospective buyers, the jaded bourgeoisie so far away?" (Te Awekotuku, 2022, p. 46). These questions instigated Kihara's extensive research which uncovered that Gauguin's paintings also represent Sāmoans, including members of the Sāmoan fa'afafine and fa'atama communities. While Gauguin never visited Sāmoa, Kihara exposed that he drew on photographs taken by Aotearoa New Zealand photographer Thomas Andrew, who lived in Sāmoa from 1891 to 1939. After finding Gauguin's signature in the 1895 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki visitor book, Kihara suspects that it was then and during his visit to Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira that Gauguin collected photographs of Sāmoa taken by Andrew – some of which were

7 Teresia Teaiwa (1999, p. 250) unpacks Gauguin's *Noa Noa*, which he wrote as a promotional text for his Tahitian paintings for his return to Paris in 1893. Produced in collaboration with poet Charles Morice, there are three versions of *Noa Noa*, published in 1896, 1901 and 1908 respectively.

found in his *Noa Noa* journal – and referenced these in his paintings of Tahiti.

Based on this research, Kihara's photographs upcycle specific Gauguin paintings. Eleven photographs were shot on location in Sāmoa with a large local cast and crew. The models are Sāmoan members of the fa'afafine and fa'atama communities who pose in the same stances in lush surroundings that Gauguin painted. The colour of their outfits is arranged to represent the rainbow colours, not merely symbolising the LGBTQI+ community, but referring to nuanua, the rainbow, perceived as a bridge to the ancestors. One of these photographs, Kihara's *Spirit of the Ancestors Watching (after Gauguin)* (2020), upcycles Gauguin's 1892 painting, *Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao tupapau)* which features Teha'amana. Kihara recreates the composition by featuring Cindy of Sāmoa, a renowned fa'afafine Tina Turner impersonator, who looks into the camera with a defiant and confrontational facial expression making viewers aware of their own gaze and provoking them to re-evaluate their perceptions and preconceptions.



Figure 1: The fale with Kihara's **Darwin Drag** (2025) video work, **First Impressions** (2018) on the right and the series **After Gauguin** (2020) on the oceanscape wallpaper in the background. Exhibition still from *Darwin in Paradise Camp* (2025) by Yuki Kihara curated by Tania Moore presented at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia, Norwich. Exhibition supported by British Council and AHRC Impact Acceleration Account administered by UEA. Photo by Kate Wolstenholme. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara, Sainsbury Centre and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

The photos are displayed on a wallpaper image of the shoreline of the South Coast of Upolu Island (the Manusina Beach Fale in the village of Saleapaga part of the district of Aleipata). While the image might at first sight resemble popular oceanscapes used in the tourism industry, the village of Saleapaga was one of the worst hit villages during the 29 September 2009 tsunami, which killed 189 people and destroyed 20 villages, forcing people out of their homes. The slow recovery from the tsunami is affected by rising sea levels that cause salinisation of the soil (Kihara, 2023, p. 184). Dead trees, killed by this salinisation process, can be seen on the beach in the wallpaper image. The paradise portrayed in Gauguin's paintings is impacted by extreme weather events caused by climate change as well as gender discrimination. One of the photographs shown on this wallpaper is *Kihara's Fa'afafine with Children (after Gauguin)*, 2020, which upcycles Gauguin's 1901 painting Tahitian woman and two children. Kihara recreates the composition of a devoted mother with her children by showing Tiara Tu'ulua with her son Joshua and daughter Blessing. As a midwife, Tiara helped deliver her children and adopted them yet is described as the 'father' on the children's birth certificate. The photograph refers to the traditional role of fa'afafine as carers in Sāmoan society. A range of models in Kihara's photographs are members of the Aleipata Fa'afafine Association, who were amongst the first to volunteer to help following the tsunami, but they felt excluded from emergency shelters.

The 12th photograph, *Paul Gauguin with a hat (After Gauguin)* (2020), was made in Aotearoa New Zealand after Kihara took on Gauguin's persona using prosthetics, costume, moustache and wig. This photograph refers to a single-channel video work that forms the second part of *Paradise Camp*. The video work, *Gauguin and Sāmoa* (2020-22), shows a conversation between Kihara and Gauguin/Kihara as Gauguin during which Kihara confronts Gauguin with her discovery that he drew on colonial photography of Sāmoan people. The role reversal allows Kihara to command her own space within art history. As

inspiration for the performativity of this project, Kihara refers to the faleiatu (house of spirits) sketches performed for high chiefs as disguised ways to express village concerns: “Those who performed in faleaitu were regarded as local activists who, in the space of the play, effectively defied authority with humour and disguise to better their own social conditions” (Childs 2022, p. 114). As such, Kihara takes on the role of activist for her community and their environment. In a second video work, *First Impressions* (2018), members of the fa’afafine and fa’atama community return Gauguin’s gaze by wittily commenting on his paintings. Following the format of a TV panel game hosted by Anastasia Fantasia Vancouver Stanley (Queen Hera), the five discussants critique the paintings as well as raise questions about the identity of the sitters, echoing the ambiguity that Gauguin’s paintings raise (Thomas, 2024, p. 384).⁸

In her work Kihara reframes hidden stories and redresses misrepresentations while showing vulnerability, which are prerogatives for creating a space for healing. While museums have gradually opened up towards social inclusion by presenting exhibitions that discuss discrimination, trauma and grief, such a curatorial approach must aim to avoid unintentionally perpetuating the controversies that they are intending to address or to impose healing on audiences (Huhn & Anderson, 2021, p.352; Fuhrman & Mannitz, 2025).⁹ This is why humour is important for Kihara (Kihara, personal communication, 2025). She camp-fully challenges dominant narratives to promote a counter-hegemonic understanding of historical events and offers a space where the audience can go to engage with what needs healing.

8 The video was initially commissioned by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Amongst the discussants are Charlize Leo, a winner of the Miss Samoa Fa’afafine contest, and Vanila Heather, the president of Fa’atama Samoa.

9 See also the trauma-informed practice which Wright and Laurent (2021) put forward for archives to avoid pervasiveness of trauma and re-traumatisation.

The third part of *Paradise Camp* consists of the Vārchive, an assemblage of archival photos and news clippings, which shows the research process behind the artwork. In the Vārchive Kihara aims to create a sense of Vā, indeed the Vā in Vārchive. In Sāmoa the concept of vā is “the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates” (Wendt, 1996, p. 42). Watched over by four portraits of late fa’afafine to honour their lives and contribution to Sāmoan society, the Vārchive, brings together seemingly different themes to draw attention to the needs of Kihara’s community. Kihara shows evidence of Gauguin’s encounter with Thomas Andrew’s photographs, photographs of her museum and archival research visits, reproductions of the artist’s passports showing her different gender according to nationality as well as photos of sex-changing fish, blurring the boundaries between the human and natural world. In other words, the Vārchive shows Kihara’s fluid oceanic perspective. Through the images, Kihara links sexual discrimination resulting from colonialism to a threatened ocean resulting from the ongoing effects of colonialism. She demonstrates that these “can no longer be seen as isolated incidents but as a vast interconnected sea of islands” (Yu & Steinbock, 2023, p. 598).



Figure 2: The prosthetics and moulds used for Kihara’s transformation into Darwin with the Vārchive in the background. Exhibition still from Darwin in Paradise Camp (2025) by Yuki Kihara curated by Tania Moore presented at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia, Norwich. Exhibition supported by British Council and AHRC Impact Acceleration Account administered by UEA. Photo by Kate Wolstenholme. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara, Sainsbury Centre and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Darwin in Paradise Camp – queering ecology and fale alofa

In addition to the three core components described above, *Darwin in Paradise Camp: Yuki Kihara* at the Sainsbury Centre (15 March-3 August 2025) was the first iteration of Paradise Camp that included original works by Gauguin, such as *Bathers in Tahiti* (1897). Four woodcuts created by Gauguin for *Noa Noa* were shown alongside 19th-century studio photographs of Sāmoans, to show the inspiration behind his stereotypical images. The exhibition also included Kihara's triptych *Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman* (2005) in which Kihara presents herself in three almost identical images reclining on a Victorian-style couch referencing 19th-century studio photographs. In the first image, Kihara appears as the dusky maiden of European fantasies, wearing a fibre skirt. The second image shows Kihara without skirt and with a dead-pan facial expression, gazing provokingly back at the viewer. In the third image, Kihara reveals her fa'afafine identity expressing she is secure and empowered in her gender while critiquing impositions of binary gender constructs (Wolf, 2010; Jacobs, 2019).

Two *siapo* (Sāmoan barkcloth) were included. These were decorated by students at the London Missionary Society-founded (1892) Papauta School for girls in Sāmoa – an institution that emphasised gender binary imposition and clearly gendered tasks.¹⁰ In addition, the book *Old Samoa: or, Flotsam and Jetsam from the Pacific Ocean* (1897) by Reverend Stair, a British missionary who lived in Sāmoa between 1838 and 1845, was on display. While the book reveals Stairs' denigrating perspectives on Sāmoan society, Kihara wanted to show how

¹⁰ Research has shown that conversion and evangelism were not limited to transforming religious beliefs, but also implied changing family and gender roles, transforming work practices and body politics (Eves, 1996; Jolly and Macintyre, 1989). Between 1954 and 1968, the Papauta school in Sāmoa was run by Marjorie King, who was originally from Norfolk in the UK and donated the *siapo* to the Robert Sainsbury Library at the University of East Anglia.

he recorded Sāmoa's creation story. This narrates how two men went fishing but one was injured by a fish, dies and was brought back to life as a female. The two then become parents to the human race. For Kihara, this demonstrates that gender fluidity is at the heart of Sāmoan culture.

The main addition to the 2025 iteration was *Darwin Drag*, a newly commissioned artwork based on Kihara's research at the Natural History Museum in London. *Darwin Drag* explores how Charles Darwin might have withheld his research on non-heteronormative fish because it did not comply with the conservative values of the time. The scientific research of Darwin transformed how Europeans understood the natural world. In his 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin argued that all organisms descended from a single common ancestor and that species modify by a process of adaptation to environmental conditions that he labelled natural selection. Both Alfred Russel Wallace and Darwin are credited with the theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwin arrived independently at his conclusion, but Alfred Russell Wallace's work prompted the publication of his work after years of research and delaying publication (Waters, 2009). In his overview of historical controversies surrounding Darwin, including with members of the Church of England, historian of genetics David Depew analysed the different reasons biographers of Darwin's life employ for stalling the publication of his evolution theory and concludes:

Whether Darwin's reasons for delay were dominantly personal, public, or technical, one thing is clear. He expected resistance. The underlying reason is that Great Britain had long placed the argument for species fixity by intelligent design at the center of an ideology that was at once political, religious, and scientific. (Depew, 2010, p. 331)

Darwin's 1871 book, *The Descent of Man*, in which he furthered his concept of sexual selection, directly inspired *Darwin Drag*. It

is in this book that Darwin created a universal narrative in which females are often selected as mates based on aesthetics, and males display aggressive behaviour to gain their mates. Recent research by scholars such as Joan Roughgarden (2013) and Ross Brooks (2021) complicates this and demonstrates the biological advantages to sexual diversity. Roughgarden challenges Darwin's portrayal of males as universally promiscuous and females as always choosy and coy and, instead, suggests a new theory of "social selection" that allows for variation in gender and sexuality. Brooks focuses on the way Darwin negotiated his awareness of "intersexualities, transformations of sex and non-heteronormative sexual behaviours" in a stiflingly conservative Victorian culture, where discussing these subjects in print had legal and social repercussions (Brooks, 2021, p. 326). Darwin recorded hermaphroditism in his notebooks but downplayed it in his publications and suggested that queer occurrences in nature were outside of the norm, while they are prevalent amongst many species.

In the single-channel video work, *Darwin Drag* (2025), Yuki Kihara reflects this research and confronts imperial systems of knowledge in a playful and camp way. A prosthetically transformed Kihara as Charles Darwin confides in renowned Sāmoan drag queen BUCKWHEAT (Lealailepule Edward Cowley), dressed in a fish costume, his disappointment about keeping "a secret about the queer animal queendom because I was afraid of being cancelled by the Victorian establishment" (Kihara, 2025, *Darwin Drag*). BUCKWHEAT wittily answers that she can help him give the confidence to talk about anything he likes. What follows is a transformation of Darwin into drag, dressed up in bright orange glittery fabric referencing a clownfish. Confidently glammed up and situated in a coral reef, Darwin explains different types of hermaphroditism in the ocean, including the protandrous (the ability to change from male to female, such as the Tu'u-lumane or Pink skunk clownfish, *Amphiprion perideraion*), and the protogynous type (the ability to change from female to female such as the Fuga or

Globehead parrotfish, *Scarus lepidus*). Other drag queens, Rita Menu (Shayden Taylor) and Tess Tickle (Mizac Hotere), dressed in peach-and-gold-ruffled goby fish-inspired dresses, join in the fun and conversation and Darwin proceeds to explain the bi-directional and synchronous types of hermaphroditism. They all end up doing a dance, happy that this knowledge came out of the closet at last.¹¹

The prosthetic mask that Kihara wore to transform into Darwin was displayed in the exhibition amidst the moulds used to cast the contours of her head. Here, Kihara puts Darwin on display as a collected specimen to critique the authority of imperial scientific knowledge systems. However, the imprint of her own head and features reminds the viewer that Kihara presents her own perspective on Darwin's knowledge and the need to allow for diverse views. Nearby, a display case adorned with orange fabric ruffles, the same fabric used in Darwin's makeover, exhibits a range of fish specimens to highlight issues of Victorian natural history collecting and the overwhelming nineteenth-century drive to catalogue nature according to values that ignored queerness in nature. The displayed fish specimens all have characteristics of hermaphroditism and can be found in the Pacific Ocean. One specific specimen of a Fuga (Globehead parrotfish, *Scarus lepidus*) was collected from French Polynesia by Darwin in 1835. Darwin believed that the colours of animals mattered, and he recorded detailed descriptions of the live colours of the specimens that he collected, using colour-coded charts for accuracy (Pauly, 2004). The once colourful parrotfish is now bleached in chemical solutions in a glass jar. Similarly, cyclones break and bleach the corals in the Pacific Ocean that many fish species depend on for their survival.

11 Dan Talaupapa McMullin (McMullin and Kihara, 2018, p. 7) uncovered that one of the few nineteenth-century references to fa'afafine is in the Samoan dictionary of 1862-1911 by Reverend George Pratt of the London Missionary Society, who translates fa'afafine as 'a hermaphrodite'.

Kihara wanted to include what she termed the ‘Fa’afafine aquarium’ to balance the beige-looking displays of fish specimens with an animated, colourful reef scene. The aquarium’s form was to be inspired by a Sāmoan fale or house and would feature a variety of sex-changing fish found in the ocean surrounding Sāmoa. Many of these are being threatened by global warming as some change sex according to ocean temperature. Kihara wanted the fish to swim among national landmarks, such as the Eiffel tower, capturing a post-apocalyptic scene of when the world has been immersed in the ocean as a forewarning to what could happen if the climate crisis is ignored (Kihara, 2024). In Oceania, people express a deep connection to the ocean, which is articulated in the well-known quote by oceanic scholar Teresia Teaiwa: “We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood” (Teaiwa in Hau’ofa, 2008, p. 41). However, expressing a connection with the ocean does not equal control. The Pacific Ocean in Oceania is acknowledged as an uncontrollable entity, made more challenging by climate change. Kihara wanted to express this by including an aquarium, a quintessential European invention that aimed to domesticate the ocean. Ironic as this might be, she warns that the flooded world might not remain contained in glass.

Including an aquarium in a temporary exhibition – which involves displaying living animals in captivity – requires careful ethical consideration. The Sainsbury Centre did extensive consultation and research and managed to find a solution to all potential risks and ethical issues. However, what eventually hindered the inclusion of an aquarium in the exhibition was the need, and cost involved, to feed the fish at times when the building was closed (Cartwright & Elliott, 2024). Limiting the display of fish to dead specimens contradicts the request to preserve them but raises questions about the connections between evolution, extinction and the museum as an institution dedicated to preservation.



Figure 3: Fish specimens from the Natural History Museum, London, and Kihara's **First Impressions** (2018) on the wallpaper image of Upolu Island. Exhibition still from *Darwin in Paradise Camp* (2025) by Yuki Kihara curated by Tania Moore presented at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia, Norwich. Exhibition supported by British Council and AHRC Impact Acceleration Account administered by UEA. Photo by Kate Wolstenholme. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara, Sainsbury Centre and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand.

The *Darwin Drag* video was shown in a Sāmoan fale. Usually a fale is an open-walled house with a domed, thatched (in coconut or sugarcane) roof and wooden posts, lashed together with coir binding, but the latter were not present, and the inside of the roof was decorated with ruffles made of the orange fabric used for Darwin's drag costume instead. As such, Darwin is invited into an architectural space that reflects Sāmoan social organisation. In a Sāmoan village setting, different fale can be placed in meaningful ways that reflect social interaction, up to the point that, as Refiti (2015, p. 11) writes, "Architecture acts as a cosmogram of the Sāmoan world, the material manifestation of the ancestor gods, which structures the way in which Sāmoans carry out their affairs in the world".¹² The fale is a reflection of

12 This chapter can only hint at these social cultural complexities of the fale and the Sāmoan village, but see Allen (1992, 1997) and Refiti (2015). Fale have changed over time, merged with colonial architecture and are also built as tourist accommodation (Schnoor, 2016).

the intricately-bound nature of Sāmoan society and, as such, has been considered as a symbol for the need of collaboration at community ground level in climate change adaptation strategies in Sāmoa (Suaalii-Sauni and Fatu Lefale in Benson et al., 2021; Newell, 2018). However, the fact that the genders of fa'afafine and fa'atama are not legally recognised implies that their views and their actions for climate justice are not included in data collection that informs climate policies (Kihara, 2023).

Kihara has taken a range of initiatives, beyond *Paradise Camp* and *Darwin Drag*, to address this. In 2021 she helped organise a series of workshops with the support of the Sāmoa Fa'afafine Association (SFA) and the Pacific Climate Change Centre (PCCC) with the aim to empower the fa'afafine and fa'atama community with knowledge and understanding about climate change and build resilience. It was then that Maliana Mulipola Heather of The Rogers Fa'atama Sāmoa Club painfully questioned the place of her community in times of climate disaster: “Where do we go (after the crisis) especially people who have been banished from their villages and their families. They're homeless. At times of crisis where do they go?” / (<https://paradisecamp.ws/videos-2921/>).

In their discussion of climate change in Sāmoa, Suaalii-Sauni and Fatu Lefale (in Benson et al., 2021, p.75) argue that “the most powerful motivator to mitigating and adapting to climate change lies in the imperatives of love (alofa): a love for fellow person, for family and for home”. They state that the environment is a living, breathing entity that shares a genealogy with humans and is to be looked after as one would care for family. Similarly, each element in the *Darwin in Paradise Camp: Yuki Kihara* exhibition expresses Kihara's alofa for her community and their environment. Kihara uses the plight of non-heteronormative fish as a metaphor for the fa'afafine and fa'atama experience. While the sex role-reversal allows the fish to be resilient, the species are now at risk of becoming endangered by global warming. The societal pressure to conform to heteronormativity

implies that fa'afafine, fa'atama and sex-changing fish all have the same fate of discrimination and climate injustice whether imposed by missionaries, colonial officers or scientists. Kihara states that re-establishing the gender matrix is essential for rebuilding Sāmoan resilience when dealing with climate change (Kihara, personal communication, 2025).

Conclusion: Saltwater healing

This chapter introduced the notion of saltwater healing as a framework to analyse Kihara's exhibition, which was an oceanic voice within the surge of ocean-themed exhibitions. However, Yuki Kihara's *Darwin in Paradise Camp* was not just an ocean exhibition as it also dealt with colonialism, gender discrimination and the role of the artist in addressing social injustice and trauma through a lens that focuses on connection and relationality. The ocean is the earth's salty womb, its life support system. Being immersed in saltwater can help heal wounds, while being in healthy ocean environments can restore our wellbeing. Tidally recursive the ocean has no "singular starting point or origin" (Te Punga Somerville, 2017, p. 28), as such it forces fluidity and interdependence. Kihara particularly emphasised the correlation between gender and the environment, the harmony of which has been disturbed by colonialism and climate change. When binaries are imposed, everything outside of that frame becomes different and non-standard. Kihara challenges heteronormative assumptions related to the human as well as the natural world and offers alternatives related to her oceanic perspective.

For Kihara and her community, the consequences of gender binary imposition and colonial representations are deeply personal. In her artwork Kihara re-uses, recycles, and upcycles these to retell herstory with an intimacy of lived experience. She is not trying to rewrite history but exposes personal stories. Equally, the consequences of climate change are deeply personal for Kihara and her community, yet evoke a sense of responsiveness to, and responsibility for, the surrounding world in the exhibition viewer. Kihara's work reminds us that our

health is inextricably linked to the health of the ocean. Showing this kind of vulnerability in an exhibition, and in the museum, can lead to more authentic interactions and an increased sense of belonging (Brown, 2023). Now that museums highlight and embrace complex and meaningful issues such as colonial violence and climate change, they are creating spaces that highlight and respect diverse voices. As such, they create a space that can initiate healing or at least engage with that which needs healing. Indeed, Kihara measures the success of her exhibitions by the conversations that they generate and whether they can provide a reflective space for marginalised communities.

Ultimately, Kihara's story is an oceanic one, it is one of connection. She draws on the Sāmoan notion of *Vā fealoa'i* ("to nurture the space between people; and between people and nature") by drawing together issues of gender, climate change and marginalisation. "And remember: reduce, re-use and recycle, because no one likes a trashy queen. So let's keep our oceans clean" (Kihara, 2025, Darwin Drag).

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Chapter 3: Encountering Aotearoa

Cora-Allan and Chloe Cull in conversation with Ana S. González Rueda

Cora-Allan is a multidisciplinary artist of Māori (Ngāpuhi, Tainui) and Niue (Alofi, Liku) descent, originally from Waitākere in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. In recent years, she has focused on reviving the Niue tradition of barkcloth known as hiapo. She is credited with revitalising this “sleeping artform”, which had not been practised in Niue for several generations. Her exhibition *Encountering Aotearoa* (13 April – 25 August 2024, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū) is one of several exhibitions in the gallery’s recent history that looks to elevate the perspectives of Māori and Pacific peoples on land, migration, and navigation, including *Te Rā: The Māori Sail* (2023), *Edith Amituanai and Sione Tuivailala Monū: Toloa Tales* (2024) and collection exhibitions *Te Wheke: Pathways Across Oceania* (2020 - 2022) and *He Kapuka Oneone: A Handful of Soil* (2024 – 2027).

In 2022 the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū established the new position of Pouarataki Curator Māori, formalising its commitment to Māori leadership within its curatorial team. In 2023 Chloe Cull (Kāi Tahu, Aerani, Ingarani) was appointed to the role and *Encountering Aotearoa* was her second exhibition at the gallery.

In the following conversation, the artist and curator discuss the exhibition, which featured a major new body of work by Cora-Allan that considers the whenua from the vantage point of the moana. They share insights into the process of creating the work and shaping the exhibition, reflecting on the artist’s relationship with landscape and the project’s significance

within her wider practice. Our conversation took place online on 28 February 2025.

Ana González Rueda: I would like to start by discussing the exhibition's institutional context and asking Chloe about her role at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū. Could you speak about this curatorial position and how the exhibition relates to the gallery's larger programme?

Chloe Cull: I'm the Pouarataki Curator Māori at the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū. My role is relatively new; I've been in it for two years, and it's the first time there has been a specialist Māori role at the gallery, which is a significant development. We accepted Cora-Allan's *Encountering Aotearoa* as a touring exhibition; it had previously been at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. I approached it as an existing, pre-packaged show. However, what made it unique was that it was being toured by the artist, which allowed for a much closer relationship with Cora-Allan than I had anticipated. I mean that entirely positively – it was an absolute pleasure to work with Cora-Allan and think about how to restage *Encountering Aotearoa* in a different context.

The timing of this exhibition within the gallery's 2023 programme is quite important. Earlier that year, we opened an exhibition called *Te Rā: the Māori Sail*. Te Rā is the only remaining customary Māori sail in existence and was (and still is) on loan to Aotearoa from the British Museum. That exhibition centred on navigation and weaving innovation, cross-ocean relationships and how histories are communicated over time. We also recently opened an exhibition called *He Kapuka Oneone – A Handful of Soil*, which explores the relationships between people and land through Aotearoa New Zealand's art history. I consider those two projects as bookends to an important period at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, with Cora-Allan's project connecting them through

her focus on both the moana and the whenua and the way Indigenous identities are deeply embedded in both.

In Aotearoa, the land and ocean are fundamental; they inform a strong sense of identity and belonging for all New Zealanders. But I believe galleries and artists play a crucial role in drawing attention to the nuances of that relationship and acknowledging those who have maintained those connections in Aotearoa New Zealand – Pacific peoples in relation to Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa Pacific Ocean and Māori as the first peoples of Aotearoa. Cora-Allan's exhibition was particularly appealing to our audiences because it captured that sense of identity and belonging many Aotearoa New Zealanders feel towards our oceans and land while acknowledging the special nature of the Māori relationship with both. The gallery loved hosting it as it was an exceptionally well-received exhibition.

AGR: Cora-Allan, would you like to share your thoughts on the origins of the project or the idea of turning it into a touring exhibition? Perhaps you could explain how it aligns with your practice and trajectory.

Cora-Allan: I wanted to make an exhibition that started a wider dialogue and a more extensive conversation as part of my art practice. After doing the Parehuia residency at McCahon House, the ocean space became so important, like a studio extension. I had the show first at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, but I feel, as Chloe mentioned, that the restaging was where the spirit of it became what it was; this isn't to say that the other gallery didn't show it beautifully, but I think it grew as the tour continued with different perspectives from curators and designers, new audiences, more conversations. This was one of the most significant conversations I've ever put out there from my art practice.

It was a very physical exhibition to make, but it also provided an important opportunity to work alongside my father, my pāpā, while travelling around. The experience of the Pacific diaspora,

especially the Niue diaspora, being a first-generation-born Niue person, really shifts your relationship to the ocean. Even though this is home to him, he has another motherland. When we were on the ocean, we were talking about these opportunities of being on the boat and travelling through the moana, being in a space before our ancestors came, but at the same time, being in a space where the Māori community, the Māori language, and being Māori was created.

Chloe delivered the exhibition in a way that made me feel proud and happy; my family felt the same, and they are notoriously harsh judges and straight shooters! It showed me that this is the standard of exhibition I want to put out and tour. I have experience as a curator and a technician. Being my first touring exhibition, it was scary and challenging, but I knew that I had the necessary skill set, and I needed curators and their spaces to believe in it as much as I did. So, I was genuinely grateful for Chloe's support and the team's efforts. Christchurch Art Gallery has a passionate community who attend all the talks! Therefore, you want to put your best foot forward. This show opened that conversation in my practice that started fully at the gallery.

CC: Cora-Allan is right, we do have an amazing, very committed and engaged local audience. They attend all of our exhibitions and public programmes, have great relationships with our staff and consider the Gallery an essential part of the Ōtautahi Christchurch. But something I have been really interested in doing is growing our Māori and Pacific audiences. While our regular audiences feel a strong sense of belonging at the gallery, I'm not sure that our Māori and Pacific communities feel the same. Exhibitions like Cora-Allan's that look to core aspects of Indigenous identities, while also being overtly political, make a really important statement not only about what Cora-Allan values, but also what the gallery deems as being important to say and share with audiences.

Something I enjoyed talking to Cora-Allan about in the development of this exhibition was the way her relationship with the land and the moana reflects the duality of her ancestry – being from this land and another – and how the ocean links those two lands. This serves as an essential starting point for the exhibition.

CA: When I went to Niue, someone asked if I felt at home. Being Māori, I've never not felt like I was home – Aotearoa is home. However, they have a different heritage and whakapapa. It's a show where all of myself is in one place, and as Chloe mentioned, navigating spaces of duality and multitude can be challenging because people tend to split me up. I don't necessarily do that myself; currently, I'm taking Vagahau Niue language lessons, and speaking Māori has surprisingly made it much easier to learn Vagahau Niue, which I hadn't expected. I'm excited to learn and have both mother tongues.

AGR: Where else did the exhibition travel?

CA: It travelled to Ōtepoti Dunedin, Ōtautahi Christchurch, and then up to Waitangi, to the Treaty grounds. Someone has asked me to do it in Tāmaki-Makaurau, Auckland; I'm just sitting on that idea at the moment.

CC: Was it a different feeling showing it in Waitangi? Because Waitangi is an incredibly important place in Aotearoa New Zealand's history. How did that affect the project?

CA: It allowed me to see the greater importance of what it means to be in the space where the Treaties were signed, where whenua was split up, and where land is always political. It's a space of unrest; the conversation there never stops.

I felt like it was a nice perspective from a Māori and Pacific view of the whenua in a reflective way. I also had such a good response from the staff; they would walk in and feel calm.

People don't consider the staff and their experiences of daily life working at Waitangi on treaty grounds.

I went to take a photo of the three hiapo flags that are in the exhibition, out on the Treaty grounds. As I was walking to photograph them, security started running after me telling me I couldn't have flags on the treaty grounds. I replied, "They're artworks, not flags". This is a space where eyes are always looking, and the staff try to ensure they're politically "neutral". The exhibition brought a lot of emotion and tears from some guests due to their sense of attachment to the whenua. Many were deeply affected by the politics of the time, namely the Act Party's Treaty Principles Bill, and were bawling their eyes out!¹ That happens particularly when people encounter the large-scale painting in the show, *Ko ao, ko ao, ko Aotearoa!* (2023). People find it very moving.



Figure 1. Cora-Allan, *Encountering Aotearoa* (installation view), 2023. Courtesy of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

1 In November 2023 New Zealand elected a right-wing coalition government comprising the National Party, ACT Party and New Zealand First. Some of their first priorities as a new government included the prioritisation of English over the Māori language within government departments; the disestablishment of the Māori health authority; and most significantly, the introduction of the divisive 'Treaty Principles Bill'.

AGR: Earlier, you mentioned your residency at the McCahon House Trust. Was that the first time you decided to take the studio to sea?

CA: Yes. I thought I would copy the artist Colin McCahon, get a little dinghy and row out. And when I did, I saw the whenua, the land, from a different perspective. It changed me, and it also made me aware of the ocean. After the little rowboat, I got my skipper's license and learned how to use a motorboat to go further. And then I wanted to see all of Aotearoa by boat. That's how the big trip came about. The patrons and community supporting the McCahon House Trust and Parehuia Residency came behind me and helped fund the beginning of the journey. It was an exciting period for me since I hadn't been taken out on a boat when I was younger.

Being in that space is addictive – that's all I want to do now! When I go to Scotland very soon, I'm going out on a boat because that is the only thing I want to do in that oceanic space. I think about the moana as a site of connection and going in between; I feel that when I'm on the water and making, I imagine the calls that ancestors made as they landed on the whenua. That's always playing in my head: the specialness of the space and the kind of histories that have been lived in the spaces. The Parehuia residency was a pivotal point in my practice.

AGR: I understand this was a two-week journey.

CA: Yes. It was from the bottom of Te Waipounamu South Island to Ipipiri at the top of the country, where I am from and where my grandmother is buried. There aren't any other boat trips that will take you on this particular journey. It took us to many different ports; I wanted to see as many ports around Aotearoa as possible.

AGR: You were there with your father and artist Emily Parr (Ngāi Te Rangi, Moana, Pākehā), who documented the journey. Can you tell me more about the experience you shared?

CA: My dad and I have a good rhythm – poor Emily! In our family, growing up, if you weren't in the car, you were left behind. Often, we wondered, "Where's Emily?" And we'd have accidentally left her! We were terrible people to film because we'd take off, completely forgetting the mission. However, midway through the trip, we started working more cohesively and a bit slower. We naturally have quite a fast pace. This was the first time my dad and I had spent that much time together, just the two of us. He fell off the bed the first night, and I pushed my bed next to his, giving him two beds while I slept on the couch. He's my elder – I'm going to take care of him. Although I was focusing on this work project, he was very good company, reminiscent of the kind of relationship that Tupaia, the Tahitian navigator on board the Endeavor, had with Taiata, a younger family member. My dad kept me anchored, allowing me to focus while keeping me company. Emily was lovely to have with us because Dad and I bicker a lot! She beautifully captured our relationship in the videos. Her slow pacing of the film and how she viewed the whenua embodied the spirit we wanted. This was the first time my dad had taken two weeks off for a holiday, and he's 60 now. He wouldn't have experienced anything like this by himself. As a daughter, sharing this experience was incredibly special and something I'll never forget.

AGR: You just mentioned the Tahitian navigator Tupaia. I know you have researched Cook's *Endeavour* voyage in 1769. Would you like to comment on how that research has informed your practice?

CA: I'm interested in Māori telling our own histories and stories and Tagata Niue being able to share our own experiences. I wanted to share Tupaia's story, knowledge and abilities and reflect on his drawings, which might be the very first by a Pacific person using Western tools.² It blows my mind! I visited

2 See, for example, Von Zinnenburg Carroll, K. (Ed.). (2023). *Tupaia, Captain Cook and the Voyage of the Endeavour: A Material History*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

Tahiti and saw some mourning costumes similar to those he had drawn, and all these little connections emerged. I'm also a tapa maker; I have a connection to cloth, so I noticed the cloth in one of his images related to the crayfish trade. These intertwining threads made me feel more connected through the ocean or through our shared experience of being on the ocean.

When I look at my works from the Parehuia residency and my landscapes now, compared to a map Tupaia drew when he was on board, they look the same. Our shapes look the same, almost like we're looking with the same eyes. I didn't think his story was well known, but I see that many people know how important he was to the communication between Māori and Cook's crew. I did a deep dive to find out everything I could about Tupaia. But his story has a sad ending.

CC: He got sick, didn't he?

CA: Yes, he contracted scurvy. Taiata had it first, and then a day or two later, he developed it too. Both died. I believe it occurred in Java, Indonesia. The next port was when they returned home and went back to England, so they weren't very far away.

CC: It's heartbreaking, but arriving in England would have undoubtedly opened them up to many other diseases.

CA: I actually heard something earlier today about Tupaia leaving something behind in Indonesia, so there's even more of the story to follow up on!

AGR: Going back to what Cora-Allan mentioned about looking through the same eyes and considering what Chloe said earlier about the ocean connecting different places rather than separating them leads me to reflect on ways of perceiving the landscape. I discovered some artwork you created for the poem "To Island" by Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa (Mana Moana, 2022), which conveys the idea of turning "island" into a verb.

Her poem suggests that “ocean” could also become a verb, offering a completely different conception. On the other hand, we have the commonly cited phrase by Charles Brasch (1948/2015), “Distance looks our way,” which reinforces the longstanding myth of Aotearoa New Zealand being wholly remote and isolated. Could you comment on the significance of documenting the landscape from the viewpoint of the moana?

CA: I’ve had people ask if my landscapes are clouds; I can see how they look like clouds because I don’t give them a horizon. I don’t give them any formal qualities that traditional Western landscape might have. I usually keep the space open and don’t provide the moana and then the sky, although I’ve started adding clouds, which suggests that. I know clouds are a symbol of land – that they form above land, which is something a navigator told me.

When fishermen see my work, they understand it because that is what islands look like to them, floating in a space of blue. All the fishermen we spoke to agreed that no lines divide the sky and the sea. While in Waitangi, someone mentioned that the blue colour I use behind my work reminded them of the point where the sky meets the ocean. That is precisely why I selected that colour; where the sky meets the ocean, the horizon disappears, becoming one space, all one realm. I always enjoy it when you’re in a plane, pressing your face against the window, and you’re amongst the stars in almost indivisible spaces. That is how I want my work to feel: it is indivisible between the whenua, the ocean, and the sky. It is all one kind of space of being.

CC: When you think about early Polynesian navigators travelling to Aotearoa, they would have had to know those three things so well. It’s not merely about knowing the ocean; to navigate you must know the sky, the land and the water and how these three realms relate to one another. You must understand the clouds, stars, birds, and ocean currents. I appreciate the idea that they are inseparable, and your work beautifully conveys this concept.

AGR: You mentioned the shade of blue you chose for the sky and the sea. I wanted to ask about your use of earth pigments. Kahu Kutia (Ngāi Tūhoe, 2023) describes whenua as “a highly localised medium; [she says] whenua is political, it is cultural, and it is sacred”. She understands it as “a political medium that evokes strong emotions in those of us who know how precious a handful of dirt is”, citing the whakatauākī (proverb), “give me a handful of soil so that I may weep over it”. Would you elaborate on the significance of whenua as a material in your artistic practice?

CA: That’s the title of the show, right, Chloe?

CC: Yes, the collection exhibition I mentioned earlier is *He Kapuka Oneone—A Handful of Soil*, inspired by that same proverb. Cora-Allan’s work will be featured in the second iteration of the exhibition.

CA: That proverb was also used in another exhibition at Waitangi. In World War II many Māori soldiers had put soil in their pockets from their homelands. For this exhibition people had brought soil from the locations where the soldiers had died and put it in this long display case. It had the proverb “he kapunga oneone”. When I saw that, I was all teary: you live on the land, you are the land, you are of the land, and the future is in the land, and the mokopuna, the grandchildren, and the next generations are in the land. When you speak of grabbing a handful, it’s not merely a physical thing; it’s the thoughts of the generations to come.

When I first began using whenua, I regarded it as a resource from a Pacific perspective. In a Māori realm, so much more spirit and thought are involved, as there are several protocols and a greater emphasis on questioning your connection when utilising it. In contrast, there is much less connection when I use it in Niue. We have lost many of the prayers or chants used before harvesting. In the Māori world, they are readily available; we recite prayers before we begin using the whenua. Therefore,

I offer a prayer or karakia before harvesting and at any point before even touching it. This is not to the Christian God but to Papatūānuku, mother earth, and Ranginui, sky father.

When you find the colour and the beautiful whenua you want, it feels like you've been gifted an amazing opportunity to create conversation. I have a shelf in my studio full of all these different whenua, which I took for granted for a few years until I realised that not everyone possesses this knowledge; and not everyone will take care of it either. I like to share the knowledge with children. When they listen and learn about the responsibility that comes with this knowledge, they don't approach it with any preconceived notions about how they might use it in their artistic practices, whereas some adults or contemporary artists tend to do so. The children simply use it to paint. Behind me is my archive of all the whenua. I collect little pots of every colour I acquire. In my practice, whenua paints involve more questioning – not rules, but a protocol regarding how and what I use it for compared to any other material.

CC: Kahu Kutia's comment that whenua is political, particularly for Māori artists using whenua pigments, highlights its intrinsic political nature. However, when you opened the exhibition at Christchurch Art Gallery, you included additional works, such as the haki (flags), along with a few others that made more overt political statements. Could you discuss your decision to incorporate these visibly political components in the second iteration?

CA: I was mad at the time about our new coalition government, and I wanted to use the best materials available to me, as well as the most meaningful ones. I aimed to incorporate the whenua and the cloth that I had beaten. For myself and many other Māori practitioners, the whenua represents the pinnacle of one's materials. Especially the red and black that I use; they are the most elite materials in my toolkit because they carry the responsibility associated with holding Māori knowledge. These works came out fast; they flowed from my hands because

it was the right moment to make a statement in my practice. I'm gonna do a performance work next year, and I spoke to the curator about it, asking if it would be appropriate for the space. She replied, "If it isn't okay now, when will it ever be? We want artists who want to take risks".

Using whenua is also fun for me because I know it well, and it's free. You get it outside, and people love gifting beautiful colours. It serves as a currency in the Māori art world. I don't believe I would have created those new political pieces for Ōtepoti Dunedin, but I knew they would work well in Ōtautahi Christchurch. I felt safer producing them with the existing body of work and because the exhibition was moving to a larger venue. This allowed me to create new pieces that I believed would connect strongly with the exhibition.

AGR: Would you also like to discuss hiapo, particularly the soaking of the cloth in seawater for some of the works in the exhibition?

CA: I recently spoke about how I managed to get the work soaked in seawater; one is not allowed to do that since you cannot board the boat with anything from the land or the ocean. However, I had a drink bottle, which I would fill with ocean water, shove the hiapo cloth into, and then carry as if it was just my drink bottle onto the boat, where I would beat it in my room. The intention behind those works was to capture the mauri, the spirit of the ocean. The specific areas where I did that were completely pillaged; botanists would be collecting frantically, and I didn't want to be extractive. I sought a way to retain the mauri of the space without taking from it, so I soaked the cloths in the ocean, the moana, then beat them out and placed them on the window to dry.

My dad made me a small set for making the hiapo that could fit in my backpack, allowing me to transport my tools around. I beat some hiapo on Ulva Island, right at the bottom of Aotearoa New Zealand. While I was beating, a small weka kept

approaching, being curious. I thought it was because it had never heard this tapping sound before – something so familiar to me – but it would probably be very interesting to these weka in this environment. At the time, using the hiapo was a form of play for me. However, it also prompted me to think deeply about the practice, where it's been and how far its sounds have been heard. The interaction with the weka reminded me that this is not a usual activity for people but a very special traditional craft to practise.

CA: People talk about hearing the sounds of tapping in the islands, and that's how one knows that house makes the tapa cloth. I've gotten used to making hiapo at a particular house in Alofi, a village in Niue, and people recognise it because all you hear is tapping at ten o'clock at night. Hiapo has become a restful space for me now. It wasn't always restful but being able to make my materials from start to finish is a beautiful nod to the craft and practices that still exist on the island and are practised every day.

AGR: The exhibition brought together artwork, pigments, diary entries, video footage, and a mural. How did these elements interact with one another, and what kind of experience did you create for the audience?

CA: The mauri series, where I was trying to capture the spirit through cyanotype and beating on the hiapo that I soaked in the ocean, featured the names of the places I collected water, made using whenua paint on the cloth. This was displayed next to cabinets that held various pigments and tools – everything I used to create the show, including a colour palette. The Gallery produced an epic, large-scale version of the palette so people could appreciate it without having to peer in. We also showcased our diaries and notebooks. At every port, I was drawing the landscapes, just lines. I sketched in a book and then transitioned from line drawings to large paintings. My dad kept a diary as well. Before our trip, I shared with him a book of diaries from different ocean voyages around the world

across various periods, and these records blew him away. He filled two books with Polaroids, cheesy stickers from dollar stores, and little drawings made with highlighters and felt tips; he went to town with his own visual diary, which was really cute! My journals and visual diaries were excellent references for the audience alongside the video works. And then we had the large paintings and the haki (flags). Finally, we included the long banner works. These materials assisted in seeing the artist's hand, a unique aspect of the show. I appreciated how the video works were arranged in the gallery, as they allowed the viewer to see both screens in the same space, which I believe was very effective. I truly enjoyed how one could enter and exit the exhibition at various stages of the conversation. What do you think, Chloe?



Figure 2. Cora-Allan, *Encountering Aotearoa* (installation view), 2023. Courtesy of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

CC: Your works don't require those additional materials for people to understand them. If you were to take any of your works out of the exhibition and present them individually, they would be beautiful and accessible. However, since the process of creating the exhibition is almost, if not equally, as important as the show itself, the materials were essential for that body of work, including the boat trip, the relationship with your

dad, the time spent at the McCahon house, and your process of building a palette and gathering drawings. All of this is so central to the development of that exhibition.

I was interested in uplifting the journey and establishing an equal playing field with the works, bringing the trip and the relationship with your dad and showing how they coexist alongside the art. The works are stunning in their own right. However, as part of that exhibition, those materials were incredibly important. For many Māori and Pacific makers, community is essential. The process of making, especially when family is involved, is vital. Drawing attention to that in an exhibition within a gallery context is truly valuable, as one does not exist in a vacuum. These works do not exist in isolation; they do not emerge from nothing. Our visitors greatly appreciated that context, as it allowed our audiences to develop a deeper understanding of the significance of whenua, not merely viewing it as an art material but grasping its depth.³ I came to appreciate that more as I spent additional time thinking about the show. These were not just props; they carried substantial weight and value.

AGR: I would also like to ask specifically about the framing of *Ko ao, ko ao, ko Aotearoa*, and its reference to James Busby and the Treaty of Waitangi. Could you comment on this meaningful display choice?

CA: I made the decision to reference a physical site on the Treaty grounds before I even knew that the exhibition would be travelling there. I took measurements of Busby's house and made a frame with those measurements, to support the biggest painting *Ko ao, ko ao, ko Aotearoa*. It meant that the Treaty remained at the heart of the exhibition – this document that we look back to all the time regarding our relationship with the land and our governing laws. Much of the conversation circles back to the Treaty and its context in relation to land ownership,

3 To learn more about whenua visit: <https://www.kauaeraro.com/>

the lack of ownership by Māori, and theft. When we went up to Waitangi, the measurements were incorrect; when we tried to hang it, it was too small by 80 centimetres. However, we were already in the place the wall was referencing, so we didn't need it. Instead, we used a kind of fence mechanism. In the end, as you mentioned, Chloe, you can pull the works out from the show, and they sit beautifully on their own. That one sat for the first time at Waitangi on a large white wall, and it wrapped around a corner, which reshaped the conversation around it, and I am pleased with that. The space of Waitangi itself brought to the forefront kōrero (conversations) about te Tiriti. I've been asked to return to create a whenua palette for the Treaty grounds. The show fostered a stronger relationship with the possibilities of whenua use in education programmes at Waitangi.



Figure 3. Cora-Allan, *Encountering Aotearoa* (installation view), 2023. Courtesy of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

AGR: Chloe, you mentioned how well the audience received the show. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the reception of the exhibition?

CC: Cora-Allan is an incredibly generous artist in terms of what she makes and how she discusses her work.

There is a particular series in the exhibition that documented all the ports where the boat stopped along the way – this attracted

people because they can stand there and see the places they are from. I heard many conversations of people asking, “Which one would you choose if you could have just one?” They would always select the one where they grew up or spent some time. The exhibition allowed people to celebrate their connections to land in Aotearoa New Zealand and reminded non-Māori to reflect critically on those relationships. It is a very generous gesture from Cora-Allan because there is no obligation for Māori to make non-Māori feel comfortable about their identity or sense of belonging in Aotearoa. That’s not Cora-Allan’s job. However, the exhibition proved very effective in encouraging audiences to think critically about their connection to the ocean and the land while celebrating what makes New Zealanders love this place. Our audiences loved it, and delivering talks about it was a genuine pleasure. We had lots of school and university groups. We even had people performing haka and waiata in the Gallery. It was a fabulous exhibition to host, and as a curator, it was a true privilege to work on.

CA: There was also a wedding in the show!

CC: That’s right, someone got married. And Byllie-Jean made a music video in it!⁴

AGR: Is there anything else you want to add about the exhibition that we haven’t discussed yet?

CA: I want to say that the works gave a scope of a Māori colour palette, as people traditionally think of it as simply red, white, and black. I received numerous comments from people who were surprised, for instance, by the use of yellow. Māori use all the whenua that we want, and there are many colours that you can find. In Tāmaki Makaurau, the Auckland War Memorial Museum has carvings covered in orange whenua, which no one had previously recognised. We’ve had discussions, and

4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiJea4Is1hs&ab_channel=RNZMusic

upon viewing my work, they began to realise this. I hadn't even noticed it, having seen it numerous times at different stages of my life. Now I recognise it as coastal whenua. I feel my eyes have been opened, and everyone who has visited the show stares at the roadside, trying to spot the various colours in the changing landscapes.

CC: I just want to acknowledge again how special it was to work on this exhibition with Cora-Allan, and how much the Gallery enjoyed hosting *Encountering Aotearoa*. Thank for the opportunity to talk about it with you both today.

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Chapter 4:
Wayward curating: Alberta Whittle's
Under the skin of the ocean, the thing
***urges us up wild* exhibition at Mount**
Stuart

Kaiden Waverley

If you follow the Firth of Clyde westward towards the open expanse of the Atlantic, you will come upon the Inner Hebrides archipelago. This collection of ancient isles is known for their rugged landscapes, diverse wildlife, and hidden sites of cultural heritage. One such site can be found on the Isle of Bute: a Victorian manor house that sits amidst rolling grounds boasting white sand beaches, forested paths, and manicured gardens with flora meticulously collected from all over the world. Built to resemble a palace, Mount Stuart's Neo-Gothic grandiose design heralds back to a Victorian world governed by Enlightenment ideals of classification and rationalisation, while also paying homage to the third Marquess of Bute's fascination with astrology and Western mythology. The resulting architectural wonder is gloriously ornate and richly detailed but ultimately rooted in a history and aesthetic that glamorises the imperialist exploitation of the Global South for the consumption of the industrialised Global North (Young, 2009). The Bute family themselves made their massive fortune through the acquisition of lands throughout the Welsh county of Glamorgan. By leasing the mineral-rich land and earning royalties through the extraction of coal, as well as by the dock earnings made to transport the coal, the Bute family became wealthier than the British royal family via a decades-long campaign of ecocide in Wales. The effects were immense: the environment suffered, the miners' attempts to have fair wages and working conditions were brutally suppressed, and the Bute family's income from coal royalties alone skyrocketed

from £25,000 in 1850 to £115,000 per annum by 1918 (UK Parliament, 2025).

Aware of these legacies of colonialism, the Mount Stuart Contemporary Visual Arts Programme offers space and resources for artists to respond to the historic house and its grounds by running two major exhibitions during the summer and autumn along with an Emerging Artist Residency focusing on socially engaged practice in the winter months. According to Curator of Contemporary Morven Gregor, their programme's focus is 'supporting artists, creating opportunities for artists, and giving a platform for reflection and interrogation of Mount Stuart in all its facets' (personal communication, April 11, 2025). It is this programme that commissioned artist-curator Alberta Whittle for the summer 2024 exhibition. The resulting site-specific exhibition, *Under the skin of the ocean, the thing urges us up wild*, brings together a plethora of multimedia works delightfully scattered across the labyrinthine estate. A diverse collection of sculptural works is found in the ante-hall and conservatory, plush tufted works in the marble hall, a triptych of screen prints in the upstairs gallery, and a bright yellow chattel house is just visible at the edge of a verdant lawn. Created over the course of two years, these works meditate on an array of themes – from our innate connections to waterways and land, to how we coexist within the seen and unseen worlds around us, to how we retain our autonomy while under duress from racist, patriarchal, and heteronormative systems.

Before hearing from the artist herself and weaving our way through an analysis of her work, the following section is a visual, lyrical tour with accompanying photographs to situate the reader within the context of this site-specific exhibition. Because these artworks speak in dialogue with the space, it is imperative to place ourselves within the confines of Mount Stuart.



Figure 1: Alberta Whittle, **Remembering Wildfire**, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow. Photograph Keith Hunter.

The ante-hall

The sandstone facade is an eclectic amalgamation of architectural styles, each more elaborate than the last. The entrance is vaulted, and a heavy wooden door swings open to reveal a grandiose staircase, pink light filtering through the stained-glass windows, white marble busts of nobility lining the hall. To your left in an alcove, there stands a bust of black jesmonite with gold leaf. The feminine face gazes ahead unwaveringly, balancing a heavy turban of bananas on her head. It is a self-portrait of the artist herself.

The marble hall

Climbing up the staircase, the space opens and reveals a cathedral-inspired hall bedecked in Italian marble with a vaulted ceiling of constellations soaring a dizzying 80 feet above. Corinthian columns reach for these painted heavens, supporting three tiers of Gothic arches. Surrounding the hall are richly coloured stained-glass windows featuring the signs of the zodiac. Two

walls are covered by ornate Scottish George V tapestries, one depicting a hunting scene in the Highlands and the other a scene of the Highland Games being played. In the middle of all this extravagance stands a gathering of five sculptural works, emulating the intentionality of a standing stone circle. These portals, as the artist calls them, have been created by ‘casting, painting, carving, tufting, embroidery and hand sewing as well as bearing gestures from private performances’ (personal communication, June 2, 2024). Each work is mounted in a wheeled frame of carnivalesque yellow and green and held in place by blue sandbags. The first three of these portals on the outer perimeter of the circle are made from doors. Each door is unique and nothing like its neighbour.



Figure 2: Alberta Whittle, *A knock, a kick and we grapevine*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow. Photograph Keith Hunter.

The first door you come to is weathered, all faded teal and rusted hinges. The same geometric design – a *vèvè*, a cosmogram of a specific *lwa* (spirit) honoured in Vodou – is repeated six times on the exterior. Here, the door is cracked open in silent invitation, a bronze cast ear listening at the threshold. If you walk around to the interior of the door, you are greeted with an oval portrait of Shaggy Bear, a favourite character of Barbadian *tuk* bands. The Shaggy Bear figure stares fixedly ahead in the portrait – is he bringing you, the viewer, good luck?

Unlike the first, the second door is tilted at a 45-degree angle. It is painted white that has worn over time and has nine panes of textured pink glass. A bronze foot, flexed in a moment of dance, is mounted to the exterior.

If the first two doors were weathered, the third and last door is badly battered. Planks of wood are missing from it, creating gaps. Mysteriously, you find a bronze snail at the top right-hand corner of the door, leaving a snail trail behind carved into the wood. The door is firmly closed; however when you move around to the interior, you are greeted by bells and netting. It appears as though the snail was back here as well, as its trails have cut a pattern resembling a map of Scotland organically into the wood.

The inner circle

Once you have walked round and round the doors, taking in their detail and questioning their meanings, you arrive at the innermost circle of this makeshift standing stone circle. Here towers two tufted portals, mounted on wheeled frames like the doors. They depict otherworldly underwater scenes, the deep indigo of a restless sea dominating the amorphous splashes of teal, lime green, chartreuse, and the occasional unsettling vermilion. Both works depict a twisting figure, the brown and black body disappearing and reappearing within its watery confines. The nebulous quality of the bodies makes it impossible to identify them apart from their environment. This purposeful structurelessness creates dynamic scenes where the bodies and the water are inextricably entangled. As you approach the works closely, you notice the myriads of materials used to create this shapeshifting dreamscape. Linen, silk, and wool can all be found, as well as a handful of small metal charms. On the reverse of these tufted works, a hopeful collection of seashells gathered from Barbados and Bute line the timber frame.

The upper gallery

The upstairs gallery resembles some architectural amalgamation of sombre mediaeval cloisters and an ancient mosaicked grotto. On your right are the Gothic arches that look down upon the marble hall, and on your left are warm wooden rectangular panels covering the walls, which open to gold-leafed windows of symmetrical circular designs. Centred at eye-level on these panels is a triptych of large brightly coloured screen prints hung in golden frames.

The first one is marbled red and black, richly layered with bubbles and waves. A thick yellow outline of a ‘gutter-perk’, the Barbadian term for a slingshot used for child’s play or deterring monkeys, hovers over the roiling sea. Whittle’s signature bubble text is laser cut into clear Perspex overlay on the screenprint and reads: “WHAT SOUND”.

The middle one has sharp zigzags of harsh yellow and green piercing the scene. The outline of a tuning fork is centred in the middle of a gutter-perk with its rubber band broken. Also laser cut into this piece are the words: “DOES THE BLACK”.

The last one melts a dark deadly green into a bright sickly green. Brown outlines of two amorphous gutter-perks dominate the scene. The last words read: “ATLANTIC MAKE”.

Conservatory

Blinding sunlight and the fresh smell of overturned earth overwhelm the senses upon entering the conservatory. It is a charming room with huge panes of glass covering the ceiling and walls that reveal the blue sky above and a wide array of greenery of every shape and size growing in terracotta pots. In the middle of the floor is the last of Whittle’s indoor works, titled *As above, so below*. A salvaged door lies prone on a green timber frame, a collection of frayed ropes peeking out from below. The door – or is it a raft? – is badly weatherbeaten and its original colour is unrecognisable. Seashells appear to grow out of it. In the keyhole, poised and ready, awaits a brass key.



Figure 3: Alberta Whittle, *An Assembly or a ting*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow. Photograph Keith Hunter.

Garden

Strolling down the path of the manicured garden just outside Mount Stuart’s manor house, you see there sits a cheerful yellow house with a green roof. This work, titled *An Assembly or a ting*, can be understood in multiple ways: as a traditional Scottish bothy meant to rescue travellers from inclement weather in the rough landscape or as a Barbadian chattel house, easily disassembled in case there is need to flee, or even as a ting, a Viking multipurpose gathering place. Whatever the interpretation, this cosy space now houses tea, books, chairs, pillows, and a last gesture from the artist in the form of hands painted in gold on the exposed timber wall.

With the conclusion of the visual tour of the exhibition, we turn to the artist’s own words to explore these topics of queer kinship, of ancestral love, and the histories hidden within these walls. To explore topics of this magnitude, Whittle employs a ‘wayward curating’ strategy that draws upon her own lived experience, a long history of diasporic writings and aesthetics, and a network of accomplices to reveal deeper meanings.

Wayward curating: Coexistence and decolonial care work

Coined by Saidiya Hartman, ‘waywardness’ focuses on the capacity for energetic, rebellious movement against constraints, an ‘untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive’ (Hartman, 2019). Whittle uses this philosophy of waywardness to critically engage with Mount Stuart and model a methodology of collective care work that becomes a form of alternative knowledge production revealing a reality not documented in official historical records. Her intentionality transforms curation into decolonial curatorial care work through a process of ‘more careful engagements, methodical thinking, equitable relationships, and collaborations among institutions and organisations or with independent curators and artists’ (Davis et al., 2017). Through years of cultivating relationships with institutions, performers, artists, writers, and others in her network of accomplices, Whittle has invested in building community with fellow practitioners. This mutually supportive way of being wherein Whittle welcomes a plurality of perspectives relies on the theoretical foundation established by ‘Black, People of Colour (PoC) and queer Trans Intersex People of Colour (QTIPoC) artist-curators [who] are working towards political and collective practices based on mutual care, friendship, rest and empathy’ (Whittle, 2019).

Whittle’s signature wayward curatorial approach has brought her international renown and was particularly attractive to Mount Stuart’s Contemporary Visual Arts committee. When asked how Whittle was chosen for this site-specific commission, curator Morven Gregor explained:

You get a feeling for somebody’s work if it’s got a synergy with the place. And that could be many of the facets, it could be the history, it could be the building, it could be the natural environment, it could be the island context. So, there’s that feeling: Whose eyes might we want to see the place through? To refresh the

familiar gaze. But also, to add something that's over a moment, over a time, and reflecting the world we're in. (personal communication, April 11, 2025)

In their search for an established artist to 'reflect and interrogate' Mount Stuart, Whittle's thought-provoking commentary told throughout her multimedia artworks was a natural fit.

Autumn leaves covered the footpaths on the day I spoke with Alberta Whittle about her exhibition at Mount Stuart. One of my first questions to her was about this infamous 'network of accomplices,' and how she envisioned this working model:

In some ways, in a lot of my work I see myself within a kind of genealogical family tree, whether it's artistic or research elders that I may have never met, but for some reason have really affected me in my work. So, it's very much within these ideas of like queer kinship and people who I've chosen to be my family. So, for me, Edmonia Lewis [19th century sculptor]. She can be an auntie.

I was stunned by the poignancy of this insight and the familiarity behind this network of accomplices. I decided then that mapping these relationships to give form to this genealogical tree would be my method for deeply exploring the exhibition. Connecting these affinities brings together the efforts of artists like Sekai Machache and Edmonia Lewis and writers such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Arline T. Geronimus, Paul Gilroy, Bessel Van der Kolk, and Peter Levine. Their insights add to the central theme of the exhibition, which Whittle describes as:

This is a new body of work where I really start to think about wildness in connection to gender to black womxn's bodies. This conflict between respectability as a supposed means of keeping black womxn, queer womxn safe. And actually, that's nothing you can rely on, and that wildness may be the answer. And my

friend Sekai Machache had an exhibition the previous year, and something which we spoke about a lot was this idea of wildness and the danger of being perceived as wild. Whether that's in terms of being fetishized or being seen as somehow anti-capitalist. That idea of wildness was really interesting to interrogate in a space like Mount Stuart, which is really somewhere where you'd almost think wildness could not actually survive, because everything is so manicured.

Whittle's openness about the influences and collaborations that have shaped the central theme of the exhibition is unusual for the art world. By naming Machache as a collaborator, Whittle subverts the pressures of a romanticised 'lone artistic genius' archetype to stand by her stated mission 'to practice in solidarity with others.' This is waywardness incarnate: Whittle's refusal to meet industry standards that have hidden the contributions of others to the art-making process puts her reputation as an artist in a precarious position. By situating herself as part of a collective, Whittle works to build a supportive space to 'shape-shift our gallery into a new incarnation.'

The plinth where Whittle's bust now rests is usually occupied by a bust of Christ, which was commissioned by the third Marquess of Bute and sculpted by Edmonia Lewis, a biracial Black/First Nation sculptor. Lewis's bust is now on loan to the Tate, giving Whittle the opportunity to interact with the space left behind. Whittle's sculpture, titled *Remembering Wildfire*, is so named after Edmonia Lewis's First Nation name, Wildfire. When asked about Lewis' legacy, Whittle said:

I was really curious about this statue by Edmonia Lewis and her chosen name "Wildfire", and what that meant for this black womxn from a hundred years ago to choose that name. Even if it may have been gifted to her by her Indigenous community, she chose to continue with it, and there is a very

deliberate decision in choosing wildness. And for me, it's very much an act of refusal, because it would have been seen as such. It would have been much more safe to conform ... she was brutalised and accosted and encountered so much danger throughout her practice and was constantly being rendered this Black savage, and that idea of savagery which is again akin to wildness in some ways, but also about being animalistic and how these are terms which can largely be seen as negative or derogatory. I'm really curious about looking at it from another lens, a lens of refusal ... I'm bringing her a gesture by exploring my own wildness.

Juxtaposed by its surroundings of classical white marble busts, *Remembering Wildfire* captures the eye and the imagination. Its deeply pro-Black presence draws attention to the people and histories not represented within the confines of Mount Stuart. Edmonia's sculpture, in its absence, has its legacy brought into higher relief within Whittle's creation. As Whittle herself says: 'I think of her [Edmonia Lewis] as a distant ancestor, it's interesting being able to represent myself through her legacy.' Their connection maps an affinity not lost by the distance of time between the two. However, this is not the first time Whittle has used her likeness to make an appearance in an exhibition at Mount Stuart.

Before her exhibition, Alberta Whittle first appeared at Mount Stuart as a performer in the film *Present Existence* as part of the exhibition *Svikiro*, created by Zimbabwean-Scottish visual artist-curator Sekai Machache. Both filmed and exhibited at Mount Stuart, the multiple films feature musical performance by Eyve Madyise, dance performance by Mele Broomes, and gestural performance by Alberta Whittle. Clothed in bespoke richly symbolic costumes, these performers act as the Svikiro, which in Shona culture means 'one who mediates between the spiritual and human world, receiving visions in dream, performs healing rituals and serves as messenger to the ancestors' (*Svikiro*,

2023). Their collective conjuring extends an alternative reading of Mount Stuart's history wherein Black subjects claim the opulent space and are not waylaid or erased. This alternative reality is experienced by not only the audience but, as described by Whittle, it was felt potently by the performers themselves:

Sekai's exhibition the previous year was really helpful, because I became a performer in her work, which also gave me a different insight into performance. Again, I was really thinking about respectability as a mantle that I didn't want to hold on to, and actually allowing, encouraging myself to refuse that very actively in my performance. I think that really laid the groundwork for me to really get sucked into my practice.

This thematic thread of actively refusing to be subjected to dehumanisation can be seen in both Whittle's and Machache's works as these artists reflect upon their positions within Mount Stuart by bodily inhabiting the space, whether through performance or sculptural works. When I asked about her sculptural works referred to as portals, Whittle explained the following:

When I worked on my own versions of these different doorways or portals – or in some ways my own creolized standing stones, which are portals – I wanted to bring the strangeness of these different linguistic or aesthetic forms into conversation with each other. Because when you go and see the standing stones, they're layered through human touch, but also human memory and the things which people want to state claim of ... There are all these different propping devices. I found these devices really curious, because sometimes I think of myself as someone who has quite a challenging perspective on museum collections in terms of my own desire to enjoy viewing them, but also how

that is in some ways challenged by this idea, that we should allow these objects just to rest and be themselves. And that is the strange conflict. When I see these standing stones being propped up and using these strange preservation tools, I'm really curious about what would happen if we just allowed them to fall down. Would the soil then just start to kind of seamlessly fuse over them? Would they just be absorbed back into the landscape? I'm very comfortable with that. I think in some ways the work which I made on Bute is about that strange tension between the comfort of allowing the land to absorb mankind and our quite futile gestures of claiming space and power. But also, being curious about what would happen if we actually understood ourselves as coexisting together.

This 'strange conflict' between struggling against the environment or embracing it is especially highlighted by Mount Stuart's own highly manicured environment, where a timeless aesthetic of geometrical order superimposes itself on this otherwise rugged island. This willing surrender of power that Whittle speaks of can be found by a closer inspection of the portals.

The portals, suffused with Caribbean hauntology iconography and spirituality, offer a distinctly anticolonial aesthetic within Mount Stuart's colonial paradigm. This can be understood by first understanding the brutal history between these islands: any enslaved peoples found practising African religion, spirituality, or folklore in the British-Caribbean during the colonial period were heavily persecuted. The term 'obeah' was invented by the British as a catch-all negative term for a myriad of diverse African practices and beliefs in the Caribbean. This term was then used to create anti-obeah legislation that suppressed ideologies considered by the British as 'savage, depraved, or debased.' The artistic reclamation of culture is an act of decolonisation and

has been termed the ‘aesthetics of decolonisation’ by curators of the *Life Between Islands: British-Caribbean Artists 1950s-Now* exhibition at the Tate. Director of the Tate Alex Farquharson further defined this decolonising methodology, citing its complex origin through the fusion of African and Caribbean Indigenous peoples belief systems:

Cultural decolonisation took the form of resurfacing and revalorising the repressed and fragmented African foundations of Caribbean identity which had survived with the folk culture of the Caribbean poor, alongside the evocation of the cosmology of the region’s indigenous peoples (the Caribs, Arawaks and Taínos) who had been virtually exterminated under the first colonisers, the Spanish.
(Farquharson, 2021)

By integrating this rich history of Afro-Caribbean spirituality throughout her exhibition, Whittle grounds her artistic practice in the reclamation of language and calls upon ancestral knowledge to subvert the imperialistic agenda.

Afro-Caribbean influences are not the only iconography that adorns the portals in the marble hall. There are also nods to Whittle’s own visual lexicon that course throughout her work: namely, slugs and snails. When asked about these recurring themes, Whittle’s eyes lit up:

Maybe snails and slugs will just always be with me, from a gender point of view. They’re interesting as having multiple genders. And how we think about mutations in the body. There’s all of this kind of misogynistic and kind of transphobic and queerphobic shame towards different non-cis, non-heteronormative bodies. Maybe it comes out in my interest in snails and slugs, because we have to be open to more ways of loving.

This preoccupation with snails has been a staple of Whittle's visual lexicon for years, with snails making appearances in several works where their trails 'interrupt' the narrative (Secreting Myths, 2019). Their appearance in this space speaks again to our relationship with the environment – do we resist or coexist? – and what it may look like to naturally surrender to the passage of time.

Moving onto the tufted artworks titled *Beneath the waves, we shapeshift (before I was a seal)* and *Beneath the waves, we shapeshift (before I was a whale)*, these two pieces are magnetic through their mastery of colour, texture, and form. When asked about her influences for these works, Alberta was quick to mention author Alexis Pauline Gumbs: 'Her work is so influential in terms of how she really speaks about these interspecies relationships, and that idea of really trying to honour the different species, and how we all coexist together.'

The ties between these works and Gumbs' Afro-futuristic speculation are easily identifiable in her seminal work, *Undrowned*. This collection of fragmented insights and anecdotes encounters the 'subversive and transformative guidance of marine mammals,' from which Gumbs interprets lessons of survival, grief, and humanity (Gumbs, 2020).

I am saying that those who survived [the middle passage] in the underbellies of boats, under each other under unbreathable circumstances are undrowned, and their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean, their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunted whale, their kindred also...Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism. (Gumbs, 2020)

This powerful statement is rendered visual in the tufted works by Alberta Whittle. Through Gumbs's lyricism, we understand these twisting amorphous shapes in a whole new light.

Rest as resistance: Weathering and the politics of the para-sitic agenda

The term 'Black Atlantic' was coined by Paul Gilroy in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. In his work, Gilroy explores the brutal history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which resulted in the development of a black consciousness in the Americas and in Europe (Black Atlantic). This fusion of cultures transcends a specific nationality or ethnicity, and the melding of the African diaspora and European modernity created a counterculture that arose from 'the polyphonic qualities of black cultural expression' (Gilroy, 1993).

To fully understand the depth behind the term Black Atlantic, we must turn to French West Indian psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon's affective sociogeny. In his seminal work *Black Skins/White Masks*, Fanon employs third-person and first-person narration to articulate his own lived experience of being perceived as a non-human by the imperial Other. In this way, Fanon's sociogeny works to acknowledge the psychological harm caused in relation to the social imaginary built upon racial hierarchies, and that 'becoming black is bound up with being perceived as black by a white person' (Mignolo, 2015).

This precarity of identities is echoed in Whittle's practice. When asked in a *New York Times* interview whether she felt she had reached the 'peak of the British art establishment' by contributing to the *Life Between Islands* show at the Tate Britain, Whittle replied:

Especially with the world being what it is right now, which is so disturbed and uncertain, it feels like every day I wonder when that time will come to just sit in a moment and enjoy, without worrying about

how much longer one will have a seat at the table, even if you do have a seat at the table.
(Ibekwe, 2022)

The uncertainty of opportunities stems from an understanding that ‘galleries, museums and the academy may interpret institutional critique as an act of ingratitude or a betrayal to upholding the status quo in particular for black, PoC and QTIPoC artist-curators.’ This acknowledgement and refusal of the anxiety created by ‘biting the hand that feeds you’ is central to both Whittle’s curatorial methodology and appears as a thematic thread interwoven throughout her artistic portfolio (Whittle, 2019).

In asking her audience ‘What sound does the Black Atlantic make?’, Whittle interrupts the glamour of Mount Stuart with a sombre reminder of the legacies of slavery steeped within the building. The outlines of gutter-perks, a word rooted in the Scottish ‘gutties’ for rubber, maps the linguistic history of colonialism from Scotland to Barbados (personal communication, 2024). These echoes, or hauntings, are made visceral in this triptych.

Entering the Conservatory and looking down at this mysterious door that appears to have been eroding on the seabed for years, my mind goes back to my conversation with Whittle and the greater understanding behind these salvaged, weathered objects.

I’m reading a book at the moment by Arline Geronimus that is blowing my mind. She speaks about weathering and the impact of oppression on our bodies. I’m finding it incredibly hard reading, but I’m also committed to it. It’s been a really interesting text, about not taking for granted the labour that each of us does in trying to dismantle the patriarchy or misogyny or white supremacy and how that actually really does take a toll on our health. Very, very humbling to read because the work I’ve been making recently is

so physical, and I am a disabled artist. So also,
it does really take its toll, and I have to think
about the cost of that.

Whittle's inspiration, *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*, examines the ways in which pervasive systemic injustice erodes the physical and mental health of marginalised people. Aware of the dangerous complications of bringing a scientific lens to the nexus of race, culture, and health, researcher Arline Geronimus delicately navigates the inequitable health outcomes in a U.S. context. Using 'weathering' to describe chronic stress brought about by discrimination, Geronimus' contronym carries dual meanings of both erosion and endurance. To Geronimus (2023), weathering: 'literally wears down your heart, your arteries, your neuroendocrine systems ... all your body systems so that in effect, you become chronologically old at a young age.'

As our interview drew towards its final few minutes, I asked a question that had been weighing on my mind since first encountering Whittle's works in 2020. How does she balance creating work that confronts painful traumatic legacies of colonialism and the current hostile environment created by the immigration policies, xenophobia, and racism, while also imbuing the works with a message of hope, entreating audiences to pause, reflect, and rest? As is so often the case, Whittle's answer drew upon her network of accomplices. She recounts a lesson learned from Levine and Frederick's (1997) *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*:

The writer speaks about a tiger ... It's knocked down or it encounters some form of assault. And as a way for that big cat to work through that injury it has to shake. It has to literally go through tremors so that it can work out that tension of that friction of that assault out of its body. And for me, working through this rage. this grief. this grief. My belly filled with bile, anger and sadness, and my face just covered

in tears. Sometimes it is through my work,
because that is my way of shaking through the
physicality of that grief.

Levine's work posits that trauma is an inherent part of our biology, and the threatened human (or non-human) must discharge the energy created in negotiating a threat or else the residual energy is left in the body and forms anxiety, depression, psychosomatic, and/or behavioural issues. Levine also clearly states that the legacy of trauma is 'fundamentally no different from that experienced by individuals – except in its scale' (Levine, 1997). By activating our physiology, we can renegotiate and transform our traumatic legacies held within the body. The book recommends somatic experiencing, exercises that can be done by groups, pairs, or individuals to reintegrate lost or fragmented parts of the self and call the spirit back to the body. The book *The Body Keeps the Score* also echoes these lessons and carefully outlines that: 'Sooner or later you need to confront what has happened to you, but only after you feel safe and will not be retraumatised by it' (Van der Kolk, 2014). This is what Whittle intends in her artwork: to confront the legacies of slavery without retraumatising her audiences. When considering her audience, Whittle says:

For me it is about balancing the rigor with
the rest. That is something that's really
important in the making of the work, but
also in terms of determining how that work
can be received. Because if I want the work
to be received, there has to also be a little bit
of give. There has to be a landing spot for
an audience, so they can process their own
trauma. But we need to work through these
ideas together. I can't make my work in an
echo chamber. Where possible, I work with
different audiences or do workshops. Because
I think sometimes you need to get out of a
silo...to work in an institution that is not
used to challenging white supremacy, because

those audiences are not used to having these discussions. I think that's very healthy.

Whittle's remarks touch upon the art world's inherent colonial paradigm. As Whittle herself has highlighted, many of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives introduced throughout the UK simply reproduce colonial top-down approaches to labour that result in tokenization and burn out. To genuinely work towards dismantling the harmful structures art institutions are built upon, there must be an investment made into the creation of a new system of operations that supports communities outside the majority. This creates a site of contestation as a multitude of political interests vie for the institution's legitimizing authority. An analysis of Whittle's wayward curatorial approach would not be complete without acknowledging this contradictory entanglement produced as socially engaged artist collectives work within and beyond dominant hegemonic institutions. In Whittle's case, as an artist commissioned by Mount Stuart, she has been invited into a site steeped in capitalistic extraction to share what can be described as her transformative para-sitic agenda.

Theorist Janna Graham's (2016) para-sitic agenda conceptualizes how a symbiotic relationship may be expressed between a contested parasite (the artist) and the resource-rich host (the institution). Their relationship is typically galvanized by struggle: the host seeks relevance while the parasite seeks resources. While this is a gross oversimplification, this framework is useful for its ability to illustrate the primary importance of how this relationship is negotiated. As Graham warns, the commissioned para-site must traverse upon a thin line between competing interests and their own capacity, with their artistic integrity often at risk:

While such cracks [in the institution's ideological composition] are a consistent feature of neoliberalism and have enabled workers of and communities involved with cultural institutions to articulate their own

agency vis-à-vis the issues of social justice, they have equally opened the doors to private interests and privatized modes of subjectivation. Invited para-sites can, for this reason, just as easily replicate hegemonic hierarchies and values – and therefore not be para-sites at all—as they can break with them.

This is the risk that commissioned artists face when they are invited to practice critique from within the existing structures of an institution. Does the invitation come with the funding, time, and organizational support necessary to enact genuine change? As a temporary exhibition, does *Under the skin of the ocean, the thing urges us up wild* impact end with its subverting critique of colonialism within a colonial space, or does it also act as a catalyst for institutional transformation?

Measuring impact: Mapping decolonial methodologies in wayward curation

To assess this temporary exhibition as a critical intervention within a colonial space, I will follow recommendations by the Arts Council England for measuring the social impact of creative initiatives by employing a mosaic approach, also known as triangulation. Collecting both qualitative and quantitative data allows for diverse evaluative strategies underpinned by constructivist learning theory and is best suited for illustrating the intangible experiential outcomes, revealing interconnectedness, and exposing built-in bias. Additionally, this research draws upon decolonial methodologies, which acknowledge that Western metrics of validity and legitimacy frequently undermine emancipatory knowledge production systems. The primary influences for this conceptual framework include Freire's 2012 conception of 'praxis,' Sylvia Wynter's 'decolonial scienta' (Mignolo, 2015), Santos's 'cognitive injustice' (2014), and Fanon's 'affective sociogeny' (2008) theories to address the limitations of empirical data in understanding the human experience. The information collected from this research will then be contextualised by two main areas of scholarship:

by process-focused writings on decolonial curatorial care work, which draw upon queer, feminist, and anti-racist theories and the critical analyses of institutional structures in relation to issues of representation and authority.

The anchor within this body of curatorial literature is “Biting the Hand That Feeds You” (2019) by artist-curator Alberta Whittle. Whittle’s reflections on the challenging self-advocacy necessary to navigate a hostile environment within hegemonic institutions, as well as situating her work within a long lineage of black scholarship, influence her signature ‘wayward curation’ approach. Embedded within this approach is Wenger-Trayner’s ‘communities of practice,’ wherein through sustained interaction, people form a social learning environment to create a shared repertoire of resources. There is also Bakhtin’s ‘dialogic discourse,’ which posits that any cultural expression built on multiple voices in conversation with each other can reveal deeper social truths precisely because it rejects a single, absolute authoritative voice. A vital expansion on this is found in Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez’s (2017) proposed ‘ecologies of care’ methodology, which calls for institutions to spend time and resources reflecting on how to adopt equitable ways of operating. However, this body of literature is limited to artist-led collective action conducted in alternative spaces and does not explore how internal transformation can occur from within historical house museums that glorify imperialism. To tease out the possibilities for curatorial care work within this setting, I investigated museological literature focused on transforming museums into sites of contestation and critique.

Key to this discourse is Bruno Brulon Soares’s *The Anticolonial Museum* (2023). Expanding upon the theories set forth by Paulo Freire and bell hooks, this book critically examines the compromised rhetoric of decolonisation and proposes a methodology rooted in deconstruction, reconstruction, and redistribution of authority to resist coloniality. Another Freirian edited volume, *Radical Imagine-Nation* (2018) expands upon the dangers of linguistic co-option and cites aesthetic

and visual languages as necessary tools for revealing obfuscated realities. “Co-Production: Towards a Utopian Approach” (Bell and Pahl, 2017) draws upon AHRC-funded contemporary research conducted by the UK’s Connected Communities programme. By acknowledging the constraints and co-option of co-production practices in the creative sector, this work asks researchers to critically evaluate how they are entrenched in colonial academic orthodoxies. A utopian methodology is proposed that operates simultaneously ‘within, against and beyond the [institutional] space opened up by the turn to co-production.’

Considering this intersection of contemporary curating and museum activism, *Under the skin of the ocean, the thing urges us up wild* is clearly a powerful critical intervention. It employed a pluralistic process rooted in resisting hegemonic coloniality, embraced the epistemological shift necessary for polyvocality, and disrupted the hierarchies of power that reinforce exclusionary operations. However, the institution may have fallen short in its efforts to preserve lasting change. For instance, Mount Stuart did not acquire any of Whittle’s artworks to interrupt the permanent collection or reinterpret their history through the insights provided by Whittle’s intervention. However, since the conclusion of Whittle’s exhibition, Mount Stuart has acquired new contemporary work for their collection to ‘join the conversation on collected performance work as a tool for broadening discussion on contemporary performance in the context of our historic house and locality’ (Edinburgh Art Festival, 2025). What this will mean for the future impact of temporary exhibitions at Mount Stuart remains to be seen.

Despite Whittle’s exhibition closing in August 2024, it is noteworthy that her bothy installation will stay open until at least June 2026 as ‘the artist’s invitation to the wider public to enjoy the space for respite and relaxation while perusing reading and drawing materials and potentially meeting new people’ (Mount Stuart, 2025). The flat-packed site has been utilized for many purposes such as group visits, creative activities, and yoga

practice. While the critical intervention's message of rest and recovery continues in this temporary outdoor installation, the institution may yet learn from Whittle's wayward curatorial approach.

Scotland's critical consciousness & Mount Stuart's transformative potential

Under the skin of the ocean, the thing urges us up wild exhibition by artist-curator Alberta Whittle was on display in Mount Stuart during the summer of 2024, yet its impact as a critical intervention serves as a powerful testament to the wider significance that experimental curatorial strategies have for prompting a new critical consciousness throughout the museological field.

Scotland's museological field has been especially interested in examining how cultural institutions perpetuate modernity ideologies and how they may instead integrate decolonial practices. This has been a key priority for several recent Scottish initiatives, as seen in the Facing Our Past campaign by the National Trust for Scotland in 2020, the Empire, Slavery, & Scottish Museums national consultation conducted by Museums Galleries Scotland and sponsored by the Scottish government in 2022, and the notable efforts made by university collections in Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St Andrews. However, these projects all offer different conceptualisations of 'decolonisation' and have focused on rethinking their relationships to past colonies, with many art institutions viewing repatriation as an end goal rather than the first of many steps towards the deconstruction, reconstruction, and redistribution of cultural heritage. The scope of this reform is confined by funding authorities through competition for the shrinking resources upon which the Scottish cultural sector relies and thus has created blindspots in how these legacies of colonialism continue to do harm in our contemporary society, as seen in the significant inequalities in health and social outcomes for Black and minority ethnic communities across Scotland. The current discourse, wherein institutions may provide 'concessions' to

marginalised groups yet ultimately retain their own authority, imposes severe limitations on the long-lasting impact these initiatives could have holistically on internal operations.

While Mount Stuart's private wealth has dispelled some challenges regarding funding, it still has room to grow in order to create long-lasting impact. Whittle demonstrated how to resist a colonial top-down approach by collaborating with accomplices, drawing upon a large body of decolonial theories and iconography, and integrating anti-racist, queer, and trauma-informed practices into the exhibition process from conception to deinstallation. Through integrating her wayward curatorial approach, receptive institutions could transform their operations. Institutions, such as Mount Stuart, who invite socially engaged artists to critique their institutions must take it upon themselves to ensure that temporary exhibitions are not ephemeral but support an ongoing reflective process of self-critique that translates into practice.

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Chapter 5

How museums remember: Charting a Puerto Rican object history

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Museums as sites of intercultural interpretations and Puerto Rico as a product of imagined representations have launched into national consciousness and contestation in the wake of renewed civil discourse about institutions, memory, and representation. Theoretically, this paper explores how we might begin to identify the role of the unincorporated U.S. commonwealth within a broader theme of transnational island museologies, specifically by expanding the relational concept of assemblages, beyond that of object groupings, and by contextualizing the island's collections within emerging archipelagic studies to provide explicit frameworks of coloniality. My research is grounded in the comparative analysis of Puerto Rican object assemblages acquired historically by North American museum institutions and continually appropriated today in contemporary art practice. It is argued here that Puerto Rico affords not only a significant case of discussion for museological studies, particularly as a site to interrogate structures of power, but also as a potential source of translatable models of disciplinary practice in materializing ongoing negotiations of difficult histories and the responsibility of museums.

The 60th International Art Exhibition by La Biennale di Venezia, or the Venice Biennale, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere* (2024), curated by Adriano Pedrosa, centered traditional spaces of marginality through an examination of artistic production in the context of otherness, challenging visitor notions of how we might define and locate who and what

we understand as foreign. Artist selection prioritized those who had never been exhibited by the Biennale as well as those from a range of underrepresented positionalities: the queer artist, the outsider artist, the folk artist and the Indigenous artist. The Central Pavillion at the Giardini showcased the archival-based conceptual practice of Puerto Rican artist Pablo Delano. His installation title, *The Museum of the Old Colony*, is described as a dual nod to “the complicity of museums and a US soft drink...highlighting how the power and presence of the US is grounded on colonial exploitation, social hygiene, and racial hierarchy.”¹ The centrality of the work’s presence in the visitor path together with its inability to exist otherwise in a national pavilion as a U.S. unincorporated territory crystallize its global museological significance and complex historical legacy.

This chapter will outline the implications and opportunities of positioning collections-based research in conversation with art practice. Specifically, I will ground my discussion on the case-study of Delano and his ongoing site-specific installation series, *The Museum of the Old Colony*. Interweaving largely 20th and 21st century historical imagery, found material, and digitized replicas, objects in his practice, as I have argued, demonstrate the interpretative capacity to recover, through creative strategies of discourse and display, the legacies of silenced local actors and agency amidst a current island’s climate of past disrepair and continued uncertainty (2023). I read Delano’s work as a critical provocation around the U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship through the institutional space of the museum as artistic setting and metaphor. While his fictive museum gathers materials by chance encounters in mediums like eBay, my research focuses on tracing the itineraries of collections to North American museums resulting from the intercultural dynamic that he problematizes materially.² A survey of the history, which

1 For the full Biennale interpretive label for *The Museum of the Old Colony*, see: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2024/nucleo-contemporaneo/pablo-delano>.

2 Delano’s work is a counterpoint to that of other Puerto Rican artists who mainly curate personal or family archives like Adrián

both assemblages contend can be outlined temporally and geographically as

a period of agrarian capitalism in which the U.S. military interests predominated (1898–1940); a labor-intensive export-oriented industrialization period in which the U.S. State Department’s symbolic interest were dominant (1950–70); a capital-intensive export-oriented industrialized period in which both the transnational corporations and military interests shared the dominant position (1973–90); and an era of overtly economic interests dominating all geopolitical interests. (Grosfoguel, 2003, p. 47)

The narration of my experience as a collections-based researcher of what has been described as “the will to collaborate” between anthropology and art will be presented alongside the contexts of Puerto Rican contemporary art and the Caribbean museum practitioner communities (Zitzewitz et al., 2022). This assemblage of works and practices seeks to consider the generative possibility of archipelagic relationality in/with institutional contexts that might interrupt and re-envision disciplinary divisions and hierarchies of labor that historically underpin museums. Indeed, the contemporary art of the Hispanophone Caribbean has been suggested as a form of hemispheric discourse that entangles the study of cultural objects, both housed in storage facilities and exhibition galleries in my view, in a wider sensibility to power dynamics across interconnected spaces of museum interpretation (Flores & Stephens, 2016).

Viajeo Román’s *Archivos Vivos* at the National Puerto Rican Museum in 2025 as well as artists who remix institutional collections like Sofía Gallisá Muriente and Natalia Lassalle-Morillo’s *Unruly Subjects* for the Making Home—Smithsonian Design Triennial at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian National Design Museum in 2024.



Figure 1: *The Museum of the Old Colony* at the 2024 Venice Biennale, © Pablo Delano. Photograph courtesy of artist.

Transnational island museologies: Puerto Rican assemblages and the imperial archipelago

Understanding Puerto Rico in archipelagic terms is to call for a shift from its traditional charting as a Hispanophone island, part of the Greater Antilles. Here, insularity as an island separate from Latin American discourse and regional difference according to imperial histories and linguistic traditions is decentered in favor of a Caribbean America that “holds in tension, and in relation, the points of fracture and fragmentation as well as connectivity and shared histories that organize the region” (Flores & Stephens, 2017, p. 21).

How might archipelagic thinking promote new forms of engagement with collection-based work whether situated in an ethnographic or artistic context? Indeed, it acts “to conceive human social formations and historical experiences in which irreducible differences become the norm instead of an exception that needs to be processed into synthesis, harmony, and consensus” (Stephens & Martínez-San Miguel, 2020, p. 5). Such a call for openness to complexity, difference, and ambiguity as a central mode of analysis in navigating museum spaces is in many ways at odds with the archetype of the museum and the island. The history of museums has been

characterized by “practices and technologies” that have shaped “how material culture has been framed, named, routinized, and valorized” (Turner, 2020, p. 193). When islands are understood “as antithetical to continents,” they have been historically framed “as laboratories of and for power” including for what has been termed as the “disciplinary-ideological: islands’ primary use in the arts, anthropology ... among other disciplines” (Llenín-Figueroa, 2022, p. 15). One strength of archipelagic thinking then is its use of assemblages beyond a traditional understanding of groupings of objects and the human networks that created, acquired, exchanged, displayed, and interpreted them towards broader conceptions of how such sets of relationships were often articulated as “knowledges produced and contained by communities” and were displaced to support “the primacy of ... disciplines of study” bridging museums and professional practice (Stephens & Martínez-San Miguel, 2020, p. 20).

A subsequent disciplinary acknowledgement of the legacies of coloniality has been evidenced by tracing the genealogy of bibliographical material and the dominance of the “metropolis” (Soares & Leshchenko, 2018). Archipelagic frameworks can, for example, challenge such traditional scholarly asymmetrical relations between places by first recognizing the consequences of these material relations in the creation of footnote islands, which results in the “subordination of island spaces to dominant continental spaces” with fellow U.S. territories like Guam relegated in relation to “the main text of the United States” and then by reconceptualizing islands and peoples on their own terms through creative practice (Santos Perez, 2017, pp. 99–100).

In the case of Puerto Rico, archipelagic thinking has materialized in two modes of analysis that are relevant to the arguments of this paper. First, the island has been described as belonging to what has been termed the “imperial archipelago,” which indexes both the historic context of the War of 1898 and a geographic relationship with the other island territories of Cuba, Guam, Hawai’i, and the Philippines that also faced subsequent U.S.

military and political domination (Thompson, 2010). Second, Puerto Rico has been framed as being historically narrated within specific “chronotypes” of a) “the abyss of the slave ship,” b) “the plantation ...that was at once oppressively structured and yet open to the wide world,” c) the island or the “creating and sharing language, cuisine, and music – in short, culture,” and d) the hurricane in its “rethinking of our historical reality with an intent to forge a more just future” (Thompson, 2020, pp. 125–127).

The questions arise then as to what narratives museums have presented about Puerto Rico and what narratives might museum scholars seek, in turn, to collect and construct themselves?

With the increased level of cultural and artistic exhibition of Puerto Rico in national U.S. and international institutions in recent years, broader critical museum dialogue is both necessary and timely in approaching questions as to how this Caribbean island might contribute a key area perspective to long established historical understandings of museums as sites of archival memory and public representation, mediated by transnational networks of exchange.³ More specifically, the context of its liminal political status and economic management by an appointed financial oversight board indexes the ways in which a discussion of Puerto Rico offers not only that of the particulars of its specific circumstances but also a larger museological centering of how collections may have been and are today assembled and curated by diverse stakeholders from traditional museum actors to local contemporary artists

3 I am referring here to case studies that include but may not be limited to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s 2018-2019 exhibition, *Taíno: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean*, the Whitney Museum’s 2022-2023 exhibition, *no existe un mundo poshuracán* (there is no post-hurricane world): *Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane María*, and Pablo Delano’s exhibit, “The Museum of the Old Colony” at the 2024 Venice Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*. The Whitney Museum exhibition title was translated by the author.

respectively as a result of and a response to past and ongoing relationships defined by asymmetrical power dynamics.⁴

Disciplinary origins, insular and American anthropologies, and the island museum

For historical context on trajectories of museum collecting in Puerto Rico particularly that of archaeological material that dominates U.S. institutions, many of the initial fieldwork projects and associated archaeological studies throughout the early to mid-20th century were conducted in the wake of War of 1898 by American colonial actors (Rivera Collazo, 2011). This pattern characterized the development of anthropological scholarship until the emergence of new, prolific discourses inscribed by insider relations to the material passed in the 2000s as opposed to the prior studies of a people and place, distanced from the researcher. With the later growth of local archaeological interest in part with the establishment of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP) in 1955 by archaeologist Ricardo Alegría (1921-2011) that began to define island heritage and direct its stewardship, there was a rise in amateur antiquarian organizations conducting ad hoc excavations alongside a migration of local students for overseas professional training and postgraduate degrees. Contemporary archaeology work today is often that of cultural resource management related to the ICP and the State Historical Preservation Office's federal enforcement of archaeological assessment of areas slated for development.

The dynamic between North American and insular archaeologists has been creatively framed and articulated with William Shakespeare's 17th century play *The Tempest* and the complicated relationships between its European noble and native inhabitant characters. This apt analogy highlights trends in how scholars analyze "their own land...redefining and rethinking

4 The Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico was created under the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act of 2016 and signed into law by former U.S. president Barack Obama.

the archaeology of their place,” “impose the theoretical models and definitions developed for mainland conditions and from European/American or colonizer discourse”; and/or a combination therein (Rivera-Collazo, 2011, p. 34). In this way, the past and present realities of who collected/s in Puerto Rico and how resulting object assemblages were/are acquired and interpreted are bound up in the U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship from the availability of training opportunities, the allocation of resources to the cultural sector, and the mandates of U.S. law.⁵

This is mirrored in the development of Caribbean museums in the Anglophone Caribbean, which were typically spaces based in former colonial buildings in the 19th and early 20th centuries, that were often later reimagined, if not abandoned, in independent nation-state contexts. Later European-influenced exhibits focus on technological progress and nationalist sentiment defined a post-independence museological landscape as postcolonial museum actors continued to be shaped by Enlightenment worldviews that are now beginning to give way to calls for “a hybrid between the traditional ‘tangible’ orientation of the European model and the intangible modalities of Indigenous, African, and Asian museums” (Farmer, 2024, p.176). Here a similar reference has been made to *The Tempest* and the unruly character of Caliban as a potential aspirational positionality for Caribbean museums as “awakened and rooted in a strong sense of self ... to overthrow the weight of the colonial stereotype of ineptitude” (Farmer, 2024, p. 174).

While the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted U.S. labor disparities in the museum field with the mass furlough and firing of front-line staff alongside public funding relief campaigns, the regimes of museum labor in the Caribbean

5 In January 2025, the president of Puerto Rico’s Senate, Thomas Rivera Schatz, introduced Senate Bill 273 which called for the elimination of ICP’s institutional autonomy and transfer of its functions to the Department of Economic Development and Commerce, thereby entangling the island’s cultural heritage with its economic interests.

carry particular historical legacies related to the archipelagic chronotypes of slavery and the plantation. Indeed, the term “island museum” has been reclaimed and designated as “a point of departure” for materializing a specific “ethos of Caribbean museum praxis” that works across temporalities and political configurations “whether in the past or present, pre-Columbian/post-Columbian, pre-emancipation/post-emancipation, pre- or post-independence” (Cummins et al., 2013, p. xii). Recent regional survey exhibitions like the *Tropical is Political: Caribbean Art under the Visitor Economy Regime* (2022), curated by Marina Reyes Franco from the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (MACPR), have replaced the term tourism with “visitor economy” to signal “a contemporary manifestation of the slave-plantation-metropole economy” in terms of continued power inequities, resource exploitation, and even the repurposing of the space of former plantations for “golf courses and resorts” (Reyes Franco, 2022, pp. 23, 25). In Puerto Rico, such unbalanced dynamics have produced starkly contrasting realities of a tax-haven “paradise for outsiders since the industrialization-by-invitation days of the 1950s” alongside “the brunt of militarism, austerity measures” experienced by local community members (Reyes Franco, 2022, p. 28). As central touchstones of the visitor economy, island museums navigate tense institutional self-fashioning in balancing interests in economic sustainability and community engagement that can exist at odds as “professionals often feel obligated to provide a neutral or romanticized narrative ... to make tourists comfortable which, in turn, alienates the community” (Monção & Carvalho, 2022, p.73). In the comparable oceanic context of Papua New Guinea, conceptualizing self and place through a “notion of smallness” becomes especially dangerous amid the stark disconnect between national decision-making institutions and everyday grassroots experience, as it forecloses the imagination of viable futures and constrains choice to enduring external dependence (Hau‘ofa, 1994).

Puerto Rican artistic response to relational island pasts and presents

Amidst multiple, co-occurring ongoing island crises of onerous debt, environmental precarity, infrastructural failure, and diasporic exodus to the United States, the state of the Puerto Rican contemporary art world, in turn, has been described as “a fluorescence of intelligent, engaged, and probing – if at times, leaning towards the absurd or bitterly humorous...in part motivated by both social inclination and the disintegration of the art market and institutional structures” (Roulet, 2017, p. 231). With a recent 21st century transition towards privatization in artistic support away from an earlier reliance on government and corporate-backed institutions including that of the Universidad de Puerto Rico and public museums, collective organizing in the form of collectives, artistic initiatives, and workshops has taken on a renewed critical function. This was paralleled in the Puerto Rican diaspora as Nuyorican art has been historically co-constituted around an alternative art space movement, alongside interrelated activist actions in the civic sphere towards other social institutions, including that of the school, health, and housing systems, in which Puerto Ricans simultaneously vacillated between the roles of artist, activist, and curator (Dávila, 2025, p. 418).

The Puerto Rican museum public, as it were, has expanded “beyond physical and conceptual borders” and “a binary fixation on the ambiguous, problematic relations with the United States” through the direct actions of independent Puerto Rican artists and cultural workers through social networks like the online art platform, DaWire (2009-2015) by curator Carla Acevedo-Yates, the establishment of a PR biennial initiative by M&M Proyectos to foster global networking and exposure, and experimental collective art organizing structures like Beta-Local that strive for horizontal governance as well as home-based displays rather than traditional exhibitions (Roulet, 2017, p. 232). In line with this sustained Puerto Rican local artistic practice advocacy for regional partnerships and

social engagement in alternative spaces since the 1980s, island museums like the MACPR have shared such concerns around the possibility of art's broader impact and consciousness as evidenced, for example, in the introduction to the catalogue for *The Tropical is Political* installation, discussed earlier, in which MACPR director Marianne Ramírez Aponte highlights an institutional commitment to both draw attention to “regional connectedness ... spanning Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and Latin American Art and its diasporas” and showcase “community groups, particularly those most vulnerable to displacement and climate change” (2022, p. 17).

This artistic and institutional social understanding of museums might be best summarized by ICOFOM – LAC, the regional subcommittee of the International Council for Museology dedicated to Latin American and Caribbean museology, that during the recent ICOM museum definition development process, asserted, “cultural inequity is one more equity ... the museum is not only a tool but also an ideal and unique platform to promote critical thinking [about] resistance, which is not found in other parts of society” (Monção & Carvalho, 2022, p. 76). Not unlike the social engagement of contemporary island art practice, their focus groups and publications were grounded in a participatory type of stakeholder involvement – setting a model for communities of practice grounded in explicitly authentic and legitimate group expectations and activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such intentional relationality from a community of Caribbean museum practitioners in an act of professional definition carries larger significance in the holistic archipelagic definition of relations between Caribbean communities as not excluded from the subjectivities “of autonomous, authentic subjects considering the horrors of the abyss and the plantation” but “as specific, embedded subjects” on their respective itineraries of “place-making, journey-taking” with capacity for resistance of the lived realities of an imperial archipelago (Thompson, 2020, pp. 124–125).

Not unlike archipelagos, museums are certainly spaces “that become permanent or remain ephemeral ... are not immanent or natural” whose community engagements can be both “painful and generative...as part of imperial/colonial undertakings” that can also warrant “loving reassembling” (Monção & Carvalho, 2022, p. 3). Bridging Caribbean models of artistic and curatorial practice around engaged practice with Delano’s conceptual series *The Museum of the Old Colony*, the installation has mostly been showcased in American university settings from New York University to Hampshire College and James Madison University but had a distinctly Caribbean start at National Gallery of Jamaica and Alice Yard in Trinidad and Tobago in 2016.



Figure 2: Installation view, *The Museum of the Old Colony*, 2024 Venice Biennale, © Pablo Delano. Photograph courtesy of artist.

Moreover, it has been on permanent display at the MACPR since 2017 as the physical center for multiple group shows – first as part of the exhibition, *Entredichos (In Question)*, which was a commentary only two months after Hurricane Maria’s devastation as artists “felt the urgency to respond ... to the broad interest generated internationally”, and currently as part of the exhibition, *(Re)conocer el Futuro (Reknowing the Future)* which features “Puerto Rican, Caribbean and Latin American artists of different generations” considering issues of “environmental destruction, social justice in labor, health, education, housing, and land ownership” (Ramírez Aponte, 2023, pp. 8-9). The installation thus holds flexibility in offering a historical

grounding across exhibition themes, especially as related to timely social issues and within wider geographic contexts. While Delano's practice is multi-media spanning stereographs, objects, and videos, MACPR's iteration is solely photographic, which indexes the installation's origins before the current juxtaposition of objects. The objective of this material selection of "images hung closely together and in several rows spanning much of the height of the wall" is intentional to "create an immersive and overpowering experience for viewers, who could not escape the discomfort in recognizing the moral misery that looking at these images produces" (Ramírez Aponte, 2023, p. 9).

Embodied (anthropological) subjectivity as positionality and assembling Puerto Rican objects

I arrived at a consciousness of Puerto Rican contemporary art and Delano's practice as such a viewer, though I was no stranger to object-based learning as an anthropologist. In the specific context of American museums and the field of anthropology, object collections were an essential component in the early formal training of the first generations of degreed anthropologists with the rise of university institutions including Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (1866) and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (1887) as well as city institutions in proximity to prominent anthropology programs like New York's American Museum of Natural History (1869) and Chicago's Field Museum (1893).⁶ These institutions formed the start of my own research itinerary throughout North American museums as I first began research to document the history of U.S. collecting of

6 Complementing object collections, paper collections and resulting archives, in turn, served to document the professionalization of the related fields of museums and anthropology with early institutional records including materials related to museum acquisitions, budgeting, exhibit planning, as well as the materials of individual anthropologists with field work notes and journals, photographs, professional correspondence and manuscripts.

the island. Exposure to and eventual collaboration with Puerto Rican contemporary art practice that engages archives as sites of institutional power and cultural representation, though, helped me to expand my emerging disciplinary considerations of the non-reductive ways in which we might study assemblages as more than “types” of an ethnographic cultural area of interest, the Caribbean, but instead as transnational “itineraries” of sites that are not limited to a cultural site of origin and the museum with an emphasis on local understandings of meaning (Greene, 2016; Joyce & Gillespie, 2015).

As a Puerto Rican diasporic material storyteller situated in the respective anthropological observation and curation of ethnographic contexts, I aim to locate, compare, and interpret the island’s object assemblages, ranging from archaeological assemblages to folk material, acquired historically for North American museums by a variety of 20th century collecting actors from anthropologists and government officials to sugar plantation owners and missionaries. Puerto Rican museum collections, as I’ve argued, tell the stories not only of a collector as the acquisition agent or of a collecting institution as an eventual site of deposition but also that of under-examined historically contingent networks of intercultural exchanges that have set the stage for lasting political and economic transformation of the island (2018).

When I first engaged formally with Delano on a catalogue piece for the James Madison University venue, curated by art historian Laura Katzman, an artwork entitled, *Museum Desk* particularly resonated with me in its imagining of the space of a fictive collecting force and use of different object types as visitor orientation to the wider histories on display in vitrines, on tables and walls throughout the exhibition (2023).



Figure 3: "The Museum Desk," **The Museum of the Old Colony**, © Pablo Delano.
 Photograph courtesy of artist.

Following the archipelagic chronotype of the island, one of the initial object assemblages that I analyzed was that of a 20th century militarized assemblage, acquired by an officer's wife following the War of 1898, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. (2018). I considered the tensions between U.S. women finding spaces for social agency as collectors in a period of national disfranchisement alongside their political complicity in supporting interventionist arguments by evidencing the economic boon that such a new island territory might bring to the mainland. These objectives materialized in the selection of collection objects and associated staged photography to donate as well as related participation in public lectures that presented popular visions of Puerto Rico as a rural, agrarian landscape to be acted upon. In considering how objects indexed broader forms of external consumption of the island, I also employed close-looking of a country house or bohío model to discern local maker values and agendas for a more balanced perspective that didn't foreground the museum gaze.

In relation to such collections-based research, I posit Delano's ongoing conceptual art installation series in contrast with the assumed permanency and security of museums that ground their historical claims as a reliable collections steward. The

lived political, economic, and social uncertainty of the Puerto Rican experience within an imperial archipelago frame parallels the liminality indexed by the display of materials not typically acquired by major cultural institutions and of Delano's ephemeral appropriation of ethnographic authority in replicating the museum space.⁷ Engagement with creative practice, thereby, allows not only for a critical approach in considering both the materials housed today in museum collections in terms of the collecting discretion or historical criteria that approved their institutional entry but also a larger call for reassembly of the marginal or that which never gained access – whether material object or immaterial knowledge and experience. Delano follows in an established tradition of artists, such as James Luna with “The Artifact Piece” (1987/1990) at the then San Diego Museum of Man and Fred Wilson’s “Mining the Museum” (1992-1993) at the Maryland Historical Society, who took up the context of an exhibit setting to interrupt audience expectations of object groupings, question museum practices around storytelling, and encourage an “ethics of care” with the communities on display (Held, 2006).

Embodied practice & writing Puerto Rico

Art-anthropology collaboration can be framed then beyond singular moments of discussion, label writing, or academic performance as “artistic creation, questioning, and the search for knowledge, and action are three modalities of the embodied subjects engaged in decolonial activity” (Maldonado Torres, 2017, p. 256). At the core of Delano’s practice, especially the scanning and reproduction of painful historical imagery, is a simultaneously defiant and mournful performative gesture of “visibility through an assigned (and assumed) forgiveness, visibility through stereotype, visibility through threat, visibility through cunning, visibility through eventual defeat” implicating the viewer in the complexities of the past (Rebollo Gil, 2018,

7 For the official website of the fictive museum, “The Museum of the Old Colony” which includes a complete venue list, see: <http://museumoftheoldcolony.org/>.

p. 52). This implication is central to decolonial aesthetics which refute the simplicity of “an achievement of a subject or community in isolation” in favor of the collective entangled in “the workings of sociopolitical and economic structures and their internal tensions and contradictions” (Maldonado Torres, 2017, p. 247).

As an exercise in thinking with and collectively learning from objects, below I have reproduced an object text label that I was later asked to write for Delano’s artwork, *Descendants of the Aborigines*. The artwork was on display in the spring of 2024 in a group exhibition entitled, *(R)evolution: Identity and Power in Puerto Rican and Diasporican Art*, at the St. Joseph University Art Museum in West Hartford, Connecticut. What is on display apart from the object itself in the text is my anthropological training, my personal investments, and my experiences with and in museum spaces. Following text label writing conventions, I begin my label by identifying each of this artwork’s component elements distinguishing different material types (i.e., photograph, stone, polylactic acid) and temporalities (e.g., historical v. found), while also noting visual parallels (e.g. repetition of faces across object types). While it is certainly important to educate especially in an exhibit context of a university art museum and the state of Connecticut with a sizeable historic Puerto Rican diaspora community tied to mid-20th century migrant labor in the tobacco industry, I resonate most with the concepts of reflection and knowledge sharing when I consider the recognized definition of museums by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). So, while I found it crucial that the audience gain historical fluency and appreciate, for example, that the photograph’s caption is original, what I hope to leave for them to engage with is the purpose and impact of such staged imagery in representing people in the past, specifically those from marginalized communities both in Puerto Rican society and in the subsequent American gaze. This perspective is shared by the MACPR, an ongoing exhibition space and eventual home for the larger installation, as its

director, Marianne Ramírez Aponte details Delano's role in institutional responsibilities towards "promoting visual literacy and critical thinking skills that ... are essential for creating awareness of centuries of colonization ... to be reckoned with and repaired" (2022, p. 9).

One of the disarming immediate impressions of this artwork is the set of three gazes looking out at you from those of the photographed group and the 3D printed archaeological replicas to that of the Eleguá statue. With the juxtaposition of historical image and contemporary found objects, Delano purposefully blurs temporality as he alludes to questions around the complexity of Puerto Rican identity and how Puerto Ricans, specifically indigenous and Black communities, have been narrated historically. It must be acknowledged that what is also on display is Delano's larger call for the viewer to directly confront difficult pasts of problematic cultural representation with his reproduction of not only a staged historical photograph but also its caption which when paired, contextualizes how such imagery participated in the promotion of racist, dehumanizing storytelling tropes. The artwork's title taken from the photograph's original caption speaks perhaps then to the weight of historical legacies in the present. As an anthropologist who studies and teaches with objects, this artwork compels me to consider the larger issue of ethics in our contemporary relationships with and use of historical material. How might objects enable tangible engagement with lived experiences beyond our frame of reference and in the construction of more inclusive narratives in/beyond art? (Guzman, 2024)

What is perhaps less immediately obvious from the object and associated text though is the way that the object reflects a larger collaboration between anthropological and artistic practice. The 3D printed archaeological replica originates from a scan of an excavated Puerto Rican pottery adorno, or decorated sherd, that environmental archaeologist Isabel Rivera Collazo, from the University of California, San Diego, recovered and made available on her lab's project website, DUNAS, for wider public accessibility.⁸ With the support of the digital scholarship library staff and space of my current liberal arts institution, I have often printed these replicas in different formats for class use to offer hands-on instruction around Caribbean archaeological material and prompt discussion about the complex ethical considerations of digital replication. What I originally saw as a pedagogical tool, Delano imagined as a compelling object for juxtaposition tying together in exhibition materialities of the past, present and future. That said, collaboration, while central to the infrastructure of museums, is not as straightforward as following the conventions of label writing.

While sharing a Puerto Rican cultural identity, Delano and I hold distinct experiences in our negotiations of life on the island and in diaspora, historically described with the phrase *aquí y allá*, here and there. I was raised in the New York Puerto Rican diaspora, an artifact of a major mid-20th century postwar labor stateside migration movement. My frame of reference to Puerto Rican cultural objects outside of family memories and our more intimate sorts of personal archives was sparse and inconsistent until I became a collections-based researcher and gained the privileged access to large-scale museum collections not typically on public view. Delano, in contrast, grew up in Puerto Rico with a close familial relationship to major institutional local players and institutions in the 1950s

8 Descendants United for Nature, Adaptation, and Sustainability is a collaborative research project launched after Hurricane Maria in 2017, and its 3D object digitization work relates to one of three core directives around protecting cultural heritage as part of coastal dune restoration: <https://www.climatesciencealliance.org/dunas-heritage>.

who were both coming to define the normative definitions of authentic Puerto Rican culture (Dávila, 1997) as well as North American counterparts whose representations of the island would have lasting consequences for the external imaginary of the island (Lloréns, 2016). Similarly, our disciplinary identities in the fields of anthropology and art gestures to sometimes very different standpoints on the necessity of legibility in our work across sites and the creative embrace of ambiguity allowing for different visitor experiences given local insider references.

Resulting moments of curatorial discussion amidst artistic production – variable in scale whether in considering an individual cultural object for inclusion, the assembly of constituent materials for a tableau piece, or the positioning of different exhibit thematic sections within a gallery – allow for a mutual deconstruction of how we materially think according to our training and reflection of how we come to this work in terms of our upbringing and familiarity with the cultural objects in question. Perhaps this relational process of translation rather than synthesis is best materially symbolized by the Eleguá figure atop Delano's pictured artwork as an Afro-Caribbean deity often connected to multi-temporal, liminal spaces of crossroads, and moments of communication.

The value of an openness to alternative spaces of knowledge systems and experiences beyond the scope of traditional academic scholarship has afforded me with a more holistic perspective of collections-based analysis that aims to reconstruct local contexts beyond just their representations in resulting official museum narratives from collecting documentation (e.g., ledger books, object catalog cards) to curatorial interpretation (e.g., exhibits, public programming, catalogues, and scholarly publications). Here, I'm reflecting on the scholar's role in the process of historical production in/with cultural institutions as storytellers, and the weight of ethnographic authority in curating public truth and memory during more specifically what has been classically termed in Caribbean scholarship as "the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives)" and

“the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)” (Trouillot, 1995, p. 26). Observation and participation in artistic acts of material activation of collections entails the introduction of units of analysis produced and narrated by local actors in less text-dominant modalities that respond to these larger histories of the 19th century emergence of American museums, collecting, and professional disciplines, including anthropology.

While I have distinguished the standpoints of collections researcher with that of art maker as a productive site of analysis, such a contrast is misleading as our associated practices broadly conceived are undeniably shared: the physical proximity to and regular handling of materials, the social interactions with varied cultural gatekeepers (both human and procedural in nature) of objects and spaces, the individual curation of what will be studied or what will be exhibited, and the resulting interpretative frameworks that culminate in an academic work or a public display.

These roles are rooted in the prescribed sites of possible human intervention within the seminal object biography framework in anthropology or tracing of the social lives of objects from birth or production to exchange and consumption to death or end by discard (Kopytoff, 1986). The extension of the archipelagic destabilizing of such a division of categories, of not just the ways in which we classify objects but also in how we reinforce hierarchies of museum roles, works to begin, perhaps, to re-entangle museums and communities, thus peopling museum spaces specifically with the communities who differentially navigate these institutions as sites of labor.

Implications of archipelagic practice: Caribbean experience, object learning, and mapping

To conclude, contemporary Puerto Rican art offers possible methodological models translatable for broader museum practice. Countering narrow visions of culture associated

with the archipelagic chronotype of the island, many existing analytical frameworks forego any uncritical acceptance of “an essential Caribbeanness” defined often by “a uniformity and ahistoricity” that is more reflective of “ideological interests and conflicts” materializing in “mystified tropes and discourses,” or in object typologies or ethnographic cultural areas in the context of museums, than of any singular local lived experience (Edmondson, 1999, pp. 2–3; 4). This centering of experience in opposition to the traditional primacy of scholarship foregrounds the “Caribbean people who build lives for themselves right where they are ... in quotidian, place-specific terms” (Agard-Jones, 2012, p. 327). Delano’s practice, though far from biographical, is undeniably intimate, shaped both by “his norteamericano parents, Jack Delano and graphic artist Irene Delano,” who were major figures in post-World War II photography and cultural expression on the island, and an upbringing which saw the behavior of tourists and military personnel “whose presence increased with the rapid development of the tourist industry in the 1950s and 1960s” (Katzman, 2023, p. 35). This archipelagic acknowledgement of and engagement with local ways of knowing “makes possible a whole new series of research questions that interrogate the primacy of ... several disciplines of study” to instead “think about how multisited, multifocal experiences contribute to...the articulation of historical, political, and symbolical imaginaries” (Stephens & Martínez-San Miguel, 2020, p. 20).

The disciplinary recognition of the generative potential of object-based learning in offering sensorial educational experiences and of art to engage and mobilize museum audiences specifically in relation to reconciling difficult histories is not an isolated finding (Graff, 2020; Miller, 2021). Explicit in Delano’s artistic practice, from object acquisition to curatorial design, is an ethical rebuke of museums which aligns with a larger disciplinary assertion that museums might de-emphasize objects in adopting “a sense of responsibility of being duty-bearers of the communities’ human rights present in their collections” (Cornejo González,

2019). The concept of responsibility and audience impact therein embroils museums in the antithesis of what for some might be an ideal of “a conflict-free, harmonious and stable interaction between society and museum ... to demand that museums ... make themselves vulnerable” (Thiemeyer, 2020, p. 15).⁹ Some of this thinking has started to be formally adopted in new institutional understandings of best practices, with North American examples, including but not limited to, protocols of ethical stewardship by Harvard’s Peabody of Archaeology & Ethnology in Cambridge, co-curation by the Field Museum in Chicago, and guidelines for collaboration by the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe.¹⁰ Museum scholarship continues to consider this agentic possibility of the museum site as a locus for social change in the reshaping of the participation of its publics alongside more critical documentary accounts of institutional histories of collecting and our current moment of public protest (Hicks, 2020; Murawski, 2021; Raicovich, 2023; Simon, 2010).

Borrowing again from archipelagic thinking and the concepts of chronotypes, the final and ongoing Puerto Rican chronotype of the hurricane is arguably as devastating as it is agentic in the ways in which disaster events “amplified and laid bare the precariousness and vulnerability,” while all the while provoking a recognition of “subjectivity and ethics” on a speculative path towards “social justice as a collective practice ... seeking alternatives to the current structures” (Thompson, 2020, p. 127). Such recent examples of collaborative models from alternative spaces linking Puerto Rican artists to global communities to Caribbean cultural practitioner communities contributing to

9 A discourse on building collective dialogue on and shared understanding of a contemporary definition of museums culminated in 2022 ICOM approved consensus after three years of consultations, proposal drafts, and discussion.

10 For links to these emerging understandings of institutional best practices, see: ethnical stewardship by Harvard’s Peabody Museum, co-curation by the Field Museum in Chicago, and guidelines for collaboration by the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe.

international museum dialogue and archaeologists addressing climate change through object digitization are predicated on a nuanced appreciation of complex lived realities across space and collective direct action towards the aim of imagining sustainable ecological futures. Art is one such stage for this work as it “has insisted openly that visual practice can also respond with reflective immediacy to the exigencies of the conflicted worlds that shape our collective experience” (Scott, 2020). These claims can be characterized as “a political praxis rooted in the idea of truly living in Puerto Rico – that is, living a life of dignity and respect that is free of degradation and violence” (LeBrón, 2021, pp. 19). Caribbean material reparative frameworks then represent continually emergent negotiations around the collective charting of museum spaces to re-imagine how they steward, in terms not only of objects but also of relationships and what they remember by the narratives that they tell and who are named as their would-be storytellers.

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Chapter 6

The Arrivants exhibition: Art, migration, museums and resurrections

Allison Thompson

For more than 25 years, since the quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean, there has been a growing interest in exhibitions that 'explore' Caribbean art. The majority of these shows have been presented in European or North American institutions, with only a few having reached the Caribbean.¹

1 Notable exceptions include the *Global Caribbean* shows, curated by Haitian artist Edouard Duval Carrie, and *En Mas: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean*, curated by Claire Tancons (Guadeloupe) and Krista Thompson (Bahamas). But in both cases, while the curators are Caribbean, these exhibitions originated in North American venues. The *Global Caribbean* exhibition was launched in 2009 by the Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance as part of Miami Art Basel's satellite programming and presented at the Little Haiti Cultural Complex's main gallery. It continued as *Global Caribbean /Borderless Caribbean*, featuring work of artists from the Caribbean archipelago and its surrounding land mass as well as its diaspora. The organisers have invited guest curators and other academics 'to formulate what a cultural production from the region could consist of [<http://duval-carrie.com/global-borderless-caribbean-xii-focus-miami/>]. EN MAS: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean opened at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans in March 2015. Another important and early exception is *Carib Art: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean* (1993), which was a travelling exhibition organised by the National Commission for UNESCO of the Netherlands Antilles. The exhibition opened in Curaçao, in 1993, and was exceptional in its efforts to include all countries in the region, regardless of size or artistic production. Reference should also be made to the regional biennials: the Havana Biennial, which began in 1982, the Santo Domingo Biennial, which began in the Dominican Republic in 1992, and the Jamaica Biennial, launched in 2014 as the successor to the Jamaica National Exhibition.

What is required to construct a more equitable global platform from which to articulate a discourse on contemporary Caribbean visual practice? What is required to curate an exhibition of Caribbean art first and foremost from a Caribbean perspective and for a Caribbean audience – an exhibition that is regional in its focus and its staging, able to travel first through the Caribbean but also internationally, as a counterpoint to those exhibitions that have gained wider international exposure in the past?

The exhibition *Arrivants: Art and Migration in the Anglophone Caribbean World* contemplated these questions in the early stages of its conception. Taking its title and its focus on ‘the journey’ from Kamau Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants* trilogy, this exhibition, which included the work of 25 artists from the Caribbean and the wider diaspora, explored the diasporic nature of Caribbean society as documented and interrogated through its artistic production.² Planned as part of the Horizon 2020 EU-LAC Museums and Migration project, the exhibition, which opened at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society in November 2018, sought to investigate the impact of migration and gender, and the resulting cultural diasporas, on the field of contemporary visual art and on curatorship in particular. This exhibition, curated by myself and Veerle Poupeye, cast its gaze on the issues represented from within the Caribbean itself, taking into consideration how such projects are negotiated in the Caribbean context.³

2 The artists were Ewan Atkinson, James Boodhoo, Karl Broodhagen, Ras Ishi Butcher, Eddie Chambers, Paul Dash, Stanley Greaves, Francis Griffith, Caroline Holder, Nadia Huggins, Leasho Johnson, Marianne Keating, Winston Kellman, Kelley-Ann Lindo, Hew Locke, Philip Moore, Kishan Munroe, Lynn Parotti, Keith Piper, Sheena Rose, Veronica Ryan, Simon Tatum, Aubrey Williams, Golde White and Cosmo Whyte.

3 The *Arrivants* exhibition was conceived in collaboration and co-curated with Veerle Poupeye. The concepts, ideas and explanatory texts that have informed this paper were developed jointly with her, and I would like to thank her for her scholarly and collegial

Kamau Brathwaite's *Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973), consists of three long poems – *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968) and *Islands* (1969) – that each deal in their different ways with journeys and a 'rediscovery' of Africa (Brown, 1995). Brathwaite, who originally left Barbados in 1949 to study history at the University of Cambridge, subsequently travelled to Ghana in 1955 to work as an education officer. While there, he witnessed Kwame Nkrumah's rise to power and the emergence of Ghana as the first African state to gain independence from Britain, two events that impacted his ideas about Caribbean culture.

Brathwaite later said of the transformative experience of his time in Africa:

Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, I came to a sense of identification of myself with these people, my living diviners. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantic and ancestor, homeland and heartland [...]. And I came home to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean. (Coombs, 1974, as cited in Morris, 1995, p. 118)

Brathwaite returned to the Caribbean in 1962 and the following year accepted a teaching post at the University of the West Indies Mona Campus in Jamaica, but a few years later, he returned to the UK to pursue a PhD at the University of Sussex. It was at this time that he, along with John La Rose and Andrew Salkey, founded the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), an important collective of Caribbean writers and artists. This fertile period spent across three continents formed

contributions. Alissandra Cummins and Karen Brown, as the leaders of the Horizon 2020 EU-LAC Museums and Migration project, provided formative and essential input. Jessica Taylor and Ewan Atkinson also provided valuable insights and assistance, as did Kelley-Ann Lindo and Simon Tatum who assisted with the exhibition install.

the grounding of the *Arrivants* book, which has been described as ‘a major document of African reconnection [that] [...] charts a set of overlapping psychic journeys to, from and within the New World and Africa, acknowledging achievement and some painful realities, examining self and community, past and present’ (Morris, 1995, p. 129).

Migration, both voluntary and forced, is and always has been central to the story of the Caribbean; as such, it is deeply embedded in the psyche of Caribbean people and has shaped their identities and experiences, whether they are migrants themselves or not. From the arrival of European expeditions, dating from the end of the 15th century, and the extermination of the indigenous population, the Caribbean was repopulated first by Europeans as well as through forced migration from Africa and subsequent waves of migration from Asia and North and South America. The 20th century also witnessed significant movement out of the Caribbean to diasporic centres such as London, New York, Miami and Toronto. There has also been ongoing migration into and throughout the region. The art selected for this exhibition focused on the social and cultural impact of these migratory patterns and histories, their political significance, as well as acts of defiance and resistance and the implications for individual and collective identities. The work of Kamau Brathwaite provided inspiration on how traditional practices, models and languages might be reconsidered, altered or creolised.

Both curators of the *Arrivants* exhibition, Veerle Poupeye and myself, migrated to the Caribbean in the 1980s from Belgium and Canada, respectively. We both have had long careers as educators, curators and writers in the Caribbean, but we remain in some sense ‘outsiders’. This perspective of living between two places, of belonging in some way to a somewhere else, is the experience of the migrant. Indeed, many of the key texts on Caribbean identity and culture have been impacted by the writer’s experience of distance or remove, strangeness, of being outside or away.

The Caribbean, while often superficially characterised as an undifferentiated region, is in fact a complex and highly varied space in terms of geographies, histories, ethnicities, religious or spiritual practices, languages and more. For the *Arrivants* exhibition, it was decided to give particular focus to the Anglophone Caribbean from the early 20th century to the present day and to the cultural impact of migration from and to the UK, North America and Europe, as well as movement within the Caribbean and Central American region. Implicit in this are the earlier histories of forced and voluntary migration that have shaped the Caribbean as we know it today and the manner in which these have shaped the identities and experiences of Caribbean peoples, whether they are themselves migrants or not. Most of all, the exhibition focused on the social and cultural impacts of these migratory movements, their political significance, the histories of defiance and resistance, and their implications for individual and collective identities. While the decision to focus on the Anglophone Caribbean was the result of certain practical considerations – notably the relatively small scale of the project, the ease of accessibility to work and the ability to provide more focus on a restricted scope of research – this brings with it several shortcomings and biases. It continues to give priority to the divisions within the Caribbean based on the history of colonisation, most notably evident in the divisions of language today. In reality, people within the Caribbean have moved across these barriers for multiple reasons, including education, employment and family. While Barbados is unique in its uninterrupted history of colonisation under the British, many Caribbean countries experienced periods of control under differing imperial powers, with present-day cultures that reflect this.

Many of the artists included in the exhibition have lived in multiple locations and have reflected on this experience in their work; as well, the broader effects of diaspora, displacement and migration are key themes in the work of many artists in the Caribbean and its diaspora alike. Given the recent migration

crises throughout the world, and particularly the questions about the immigration status of members of the Windrush generation in the UK, the subject has taken on particular potency in this moment.

A second but important consideration in conceiving this exhibition pertained to the representation of Caribbean art in survey and thematic shows, most of which have been initiated, funded and toured by major institutions in metropolitan centres and most of which have never even been shown in the Caribbean – a major imbalance in the representation of Caribbean art that needs to be addressed. Was it possible, the organisers wondered, to rethink the exhibition format to respond to the specific needs and aspirations of exhibition-making in the region, to speak first to a Caribbean audience, but then also present an inflected voice to a global audience? Caribbean writers throughout the 20th century have had a profound influence on cultural and postcolonial studies – Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, Sylvia Winter, Stuart Hall and the list goes on. These critical thinkers are known and cited globally to describe the social transformations over the last century. But notwithstanding the broad application and relevance of their radical ideas, the kernels of this thought were rooted within the unique space described as the Caribbean.

Noted European curator Hans Ulrich Obrist (2014, p. 14) has famously remarked on his reliance on Caribbean theorists, especially Édouard Glissant in his attempt to formulate an approach of globality in his projects. But as art educator and curator Nanne Buurman has pointed out in her essay ‘The Blind Spot of Global Art? Hans Ulrich Obrist’s Ways of Curating’, the proliferation of contemporary art that is circulated as ‘global art’ in biennials and art fairs worldwide raises ethical questions about the tropes of globality and practices that presume to transcend territorial borders and the inequitable access to resources and visibility. Themes of migration, in particular, have been identified as one of the major conundrums of the

current global condition, but as Buurman indicates, there is a difference between voluntary and forced migration (Buurman, 2018, pp. 301–22). How can curators in the Caribbean address these power imbalances as they relate to access to resources and visibility? And how do we rethink the exhibition model to resituate the dialogue of a Caribbean contemporary and its relationship to the global?

In their book *Situating Global Art*, Buurman and her co-authors address the structural conditions of exclusion and systemic discriminations caused by the logic of national and regional canons, art history's 'colonial unconscious' (Dornhof et al., 2018, p. 11). They call for efforts to decolonise art historical knowledge and replace binary epistemological models with more relational approaches that focus on 'contacts, flows and circulations, as well as global relations of production' (Dornhof et al., 2018, p. 12). The traditional Eurocentric or Western narrative of a linear, chronological historiography of progress has been widely criticised for failing to acknowledge the existence of multiple modernities as well as the heterogeneity of coexisting contemporary art practices. The authors' description of a more fluid and non-linear model echoes Kamau Brathwaite's concept of Tidalectics, his riposte to the fixed, assured, earthbound reasonings of European thought embodied in Hegel's dialectic and inspired instead by the fluctuating tides, rhythmic waves and itinerancy of the ocean in modelling a different interpretative approach.

Museums and their practices of exhibition display are rooted in a European tradition of 19th century empire building through amassing colonial collections of looted objects and staging 'great exhibitions' and human zoos, and they are implicitly linked with the agendas of nation-building. However, Dornhof et al. argue that the exhibition format, with its ability to present a variety of images and objects from diverse contexts simultaneously, has the capacity to function as a counter-model and a 'critical corrective' to linear historiographies and diachronic narratives of progress – more so than the linearity

of written text. (Of course, Brathwaite's poetry confounded this very presumption of linearity!)

The emergence of so-called global art as represented, for example, in the proliferation and expansion of biennials can mask deep inequities and biases – the radically varying social, political and economic conditions that impact art production, distribution and reception worldwide. Dornhof et al. argue for a perspective that acknowledges 'the inherent transculturality of artistic practices and artefacts', in an effort to account for their 'dynamic cross-cultural constellations, migrations and transformations, locations and dislocations' (2018, p. 17).

The concept of transculturation, first articulated by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz Fernández in the 1940s, has more recently been revived for its potential to address some of the current imbalances. Ortiz developed the term in his classic text *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940), as an alternative to acculturation, explaining that when a dominant culture imposes its ideas and practices on another, both are transformed through the multidirectional reciprocity of the exchange (Ortiz, 1995). The German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch introduced the term 'transculturality' in the 1990s (seemingly without acknowledging Ortiz's precedent half a century earlier) as an alternative to multiculturalism or interculturality, which portray cultures as homogenous and monolithic (like distinct spheres), since contemporary societies are characterised by greater inner differentiation and complexity as a result of multiple cultural influences, whether they experience migration or not (Welsch, 1999). For Welsch, the transcultural was equated with the cosmopolitan or syncretic and could serve as a political and ethical corrective to ethnocentrism and xenophobia. More recently, art historian Monica Juneja has identified the limitation of Welsch's description, which assumes that border crossings and cultural mixing were unique attributes of modernity. She argues that transculturation denotes a dynamic process of transformation that unfolds through extended contacts and relationships

between cultures. She reminds us that the emergence of the discursive category of ‘culture’ within the social sciences is tied to the idea of the modern nation, premised on the belief that identifiable groups were ‘ethnically bound, internally cohesive and linguistically homogeneous spheres’ (Juneja and Kravagna, 2013, p. 25). But this seemingly stable conception was challenged or threatened by contradictory trends generated by mobility and extended contacts that have characterised societies for centuries. The terms transculturation and transculturality are explicit critiques of this notion, for the prefix ‘trans’ enables emancipation from the concept: ‘Transculturality is about spatial mobility, circulation or flows, an insight drawn from studies of globalisation, but is neither synonymous with nor reducible to these’ (Juneja and Kravagna, 2013, p. 25).

Importantly, Juneja argues for using transculturality as an analytical mode rather than a theoretical given. It is necessary to acknowledge a range of possible transactions rather than fixed dichotomies or polar positions. While concepts such as syncretism, creolisation and hybridity, which have emerged in those regions that had close ties with colonialism, notably the Caribbean and Latin America, are related, they have become ‘globalised’ in their usage but also diluted from their original meaning and should not be conflated with transculturation:

it [transculturation] rather operates on a different register and highlights the procedural character of a broad variety of phenomena, including flows, entanglements, and other forms of circulation, and confronts us with the challenge of finding a precise language to capture the morphology of the relationships built into these phenomena. (Juneja and Kravagna, 2013, p. 29)

Decolonisation is identified as a transcultural project. The model of colonialism describes the transmission of culture from metropolitan centres to colonised peripheries where it is uncritically absorbed as a result of asymmetries of power. But

this model, even in cases where colonies have reconfigured the culture exported to them, is distorted by its construction as the coloniser–colony binary. A transcultural view refutes the myth of the dominant, fixed and immutable culture of the coloniser and instead allows us to locate these processes in a global context that transcends this opposition and views cultural phenomena as multi-sited interactions.

Relying on the adaptive concept of transculturation as articulated by Juneja, Dornhof et al. propose focusing on ‘transcultural topologies’ of global art – made up of institutions, actors and specific art practices as well as historiography and curation – that serve as ‘nodal points’ in networks that transcend bounded or geographical categories of nation, region or city.

Focusing on the transcultural topologies of global art thus permits the study of relational processes of circulation and exchange while also calling into question the idea of ethno-cultural locality as a nostalgic marker of authenticity as well as celebrations of multicultural plurality that disregard ongoing inequalities in capitalist and (neo) colonial power relations. (Dornhof et al., 2018, p. 18)

If transculturation, and by extension Tidalectics, can function as an analytical mode, the challenge is to conceive how this manifested in curatorial practice, in the face of the gross inequities in the distribution of resources, influence and power.

Responding to earlier exhibitions of Caribbean art, the Arrivants project intended to situate this discussion within the context of the Caribbean, beginning with Barbados. While the exhibition focused on the Anglophone Caribbean, it included artists from the diaspora, several of whom were exhibiting in the region for the first time. The original exhibition proposal emphasised the intention to cast its gaze on the issues represented from within the Caribbean itself. And while diaspora artists were included, there was a deliberate intention to represent the diversity of

artists and artworks that originate in the Caribbean, as this is often also a deficiency in externally curated exhibitions. As a project, *Arrivants* also reflected on the processes involved in art exhibition-making in the Caribbean, the challenges as well as the opportunities for new thinking and innovative approaches and the need for capacity development. A blog was established on which members of the curatorial team could share their thoughts and reflections, along with photographic and video documentation of the installation process and the exhibition, as well as short interviews with participants.⁴ Two broad themes were eventually identified, which helped to frame our thinking and choice of works: place/displacement and diasporic subjectivities.

Place/displacement

A key issue in diasporic experiences is the connection to place—both in terms of the imaginaries that surround the original homeland and the sense of connection, or lack thereof, to the place of arrival and settlement—and at times perilous and alienating process of moving from place to place, whether by force or by choice. These are common preoccupations in the work of artists who are themselves migrants, whose subjectivities are shaped by various diasporas and who are part of the cosmopolitan societies of the Caribbean as frequent travellers. Such a sense of displacement also occurs in the context of Caribbean tourism, which can be seen as the flipside of migration, which generates a largely fictional sense of place that is rooted in nostalgia, stereotype and exploitation.

Diasporic subjectivities

Between the diasporic origins of the Caribbean and the continued transnational movements of Caribbean people, identities are constantly renegotiated, with regard to notions of ‘home’ and responses to life in the diaspora, where cultures collide as much as they do in the Caribbean itself. This shapes

4 This blog can be found at <https://arrivantsexhibition.wordpress.com> (Accessed: 18/10/2022). Images of the artworks discussed in this chapter can also be seen here.

the experiences and definitions of self, community, family, race, social status and gender and sexuality, in both positive and negative ways.

The exhibition venue

Unlike neighbouring countries, such as Guyana, Jamaica, the Bahamas or Cayman Islands, Barbados does not have a national gallery, despite decades of calls for one from the local art community. Nor does it have a purpose-built museum for contemporary art such as those of Martinique, the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. Thus, it was largely out of necessity that the decision was taken to locate the exhibition at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. As such, the Arrivants exhibition was conceived as an intervention into the historically charged environment of the museum, which is located in a 19th century military prison, located within the environs of the historic Garrison Savannah area.⁵ The works were installed in two small temporary gallery spaces (the Aall Gallery and a former storage room, converted in the 1990s and referred to as the Exhibition Gallery), as well as the Cunard Gallery, which houses a permanent collection of historical prints. Additional works were installed outside the museum by the entrance, in the interior walkways, in a prison cell and in one of the period rooms of the Warmington Gallery.

Outside the museum, works by Eddie Chambers and Hew Locke were situated on either side of the large entrance. Chambers was born in Wolverhampton, UK to parents who had emigrated from Jamaica as part of what became known as the ‘Windrush

5 There have been artistic interventions at the Barbados Museum previously. Joscelyn Gardner’s *White Skin, Black Kin: ‘Speaking the Unspeakable’*, curated by Joscelyn Gardner and Denyse Menard Greenidge in 2004, was an intervention into four galleries at the Barbados Museum. In 2008, Sonia Boyce installed the two-screen video *Crop Over* in the Cunard Gallery. And in May 2018, Katherine Kennedy invited five artists (Llanor Alleyne, Annalee Davis, Ada M. Patterson, Adrian Richards and Kraig Year-wood) to join her to create artistic interventions that engaged with the collections.

generation', a term referring to West Indian people who were invited by the colonial British government to help rebuild Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁶ The 1948 British Nationality Act gave all subjects of the British Empire citizenship and the right of settlement in the UK. Despite this, the new Caribbean arrivants encountered intense racism and a colour bar that excluded them from housing, many types of employment and social spaces such as pubs and restaurants. The British Parliament subsequently passed immigration laws in 1962, 1968 and 1971 that radically curtailed immigration to Britain from the Commonwealth, bringing the Windrush era to a close. The term has recently received renewed attention in the wake of the Windrush scandal, during which many of these early West Indian settlers found their citizenship called into question by the authorities. Hundreds of citizens were detained, deported and denied legal rights as a result of a 2012 government policy to create a 'hostile environment' for immigrants. The Windrush report, which investigated the scandal, ultimately presented evidence that harmful immigration policies were the result of the public's and officials' poor understanding of Britain's colonial history.

This lived experience of the hostile and racist environment in which West Indians lived, one that led to riots in the late 1950s and escalated to militarised police aggression in the 1970s, informs the work of Eddie Chambers.⁷ In *Untitled* (1994), which was included in the *Arrivants* exhibition, Chambers reconfigures the Union Jack, changing the colours to red, gold and green, symbolic of Rastafari culture. The work was first

6 The name comes from the Empire Windrush, a ship that brought an early group from the Caribbean to Britain in 1948.

7 Eddie Chambers's most well-known work is undoubtedly the four-part collage now in the collection of Tate Britain, *Destruction of the National Front* (1979–80). For this four-panel work, the artist tore up an image of the Union Jack and reorganised it to form a red swastika. Reproduced as four screen prints, each successive version is torn until, in the final frame, the image is completely destroyed.

produced as part of a project in which artists were invited to design flags for the Liverpool Town Hall. Chambers explained:

Growing up Black, in Britain, in the 1970s, it seemed to me that I did not really have a flag. I had never been to Jamaica, so I did not feel that the flag of that country was mine. Racism and a certainly alienation from the British nation state meant that I did not see the British flag as being mine either. What I did start to feel, by my mid-teens, was a strong pride in my Afrocentric ancestry, history and heritage, engendered, in no small part, by the teachings of Rastafari, and reggae music. My flag, made in the mid-1990s by a flag maker, was my attempt to create a Black British ensign, that took account of the influence of Rastafari on the making of Black Britain. With its Rastafari colours of red, gold and green, for me at least, this was a flag that I could finally identify with. (Chambers, 2018)

Veerle Poupeye has identified in Chambers's work a 'subversive inversion of images and symbols' similar to the mocking tactics traditionally used in Caribbean carnivals, such as Jamaica's Jonkonnu, observing that Chambers imposed a 'black' identity on a quintessentially 'white' symbol (Poupeye, 2022, p. 19).

There are protocols in place that govern the display of national symbols, and when Chambers's flag was first exhibited at the Liverpool Town Hall, it was removed after only one day. Poupeye describes that, in an ironic twist, Chambers's flag, which was deemed unsuitable for display, was nevertheless ceremoniously folded and formally returned to him. This history gave us pause as we pondered what procedures to put in place to fly Chambers's flag on the flagpole outside the Barbados Museum, next to the Barbados flag. The imposition of a black identity on a symbol of Britishness in a formerly colonised island where the vast majority of the population are descendants of African slaves resonates in a very different way than it does in the UK.

We contemplated alternative options for displaying Chambers's work if the museum was instructed to remove it, but that never happened. The only incident occurred the night of the exhibition opening when a museum guard lowered Chambers's flag along with the Barbados flag at sunset, as protocol dictated. We had to explain that this was a work of art and the flag needed to be quickly raised again before the guests arrived. Also installed at the front of the museum, next to Chambers's flag, was a new work commissioned from Guyanese British artist Hew Locke, which also manipulated iconic yet contested national imagery. Locke has been investigating the history and symbolism of public monuments for over 15 years, altering their images with paint and collage. In response to the many recent controversies surrounding statues commemorating war heroes and political figures, and in questioning the notion of designating public and national heroes, Locke has created interventions in the form of altered photographs, which he describes as 'mindful vandalism'.⁸ Images of statues of Christopher Columbus, Edward Colston and Peter Stuyvesant have been garishly draped in cheap gold chains, medals and other adornments—the excessive wealth and booty harvested by the enterprise of empire.

For the *Arrivants* exhibition, Locke was invited to address the statue of Lord Horatio Nelson, which had been located in the centre of Bridgetown since the early 19th century. The bronze statue was originally commissioned by public subscription from Sir Richard Westmacott, following Admiral Nelson's death in battle at Cape Trafalgar in 1805, and was erected at the top of Broad Street in front of the Parliament Buildings in 1813, in what was then named Trafalgar Square. The statue predates Nelson's column in London's Trafalgar Square by almost three decades. The Barbados monument became a source of controversy in the post-independence era, particularly after the site was renamed 'National Heroes Square'. This move

8 See, for example, the digital viewing room created by Hales Gallery entitled 'Mindful Vandal-ism.' <https://halesgallery.com/news/583-hew-locke-mindful-vandalism-online-viewing/>

alone necessitated a rethinking of the historical narratives surrounding Nelson's legacy as the protector of Great Britain's hold on the Caribbean island.

In *Nelson, Bridgetown* (2018), Locke's treatment of Lord Nelson differs from many of his other digital manipulations of monuments. Locke describes the earlier images as more graphic while this one is more impressionistic. Rather than being draped with the trappings of his conquests, Nelson is surrounded by images that seem to emerge as ghostly apparitions, an aura of the violence that characterised the colonial era. Skulls and bodies appear from the patinated bronze of Nelson's figure like silent witnesses and victims. His military jacket is transformed into the Union Jack, emphasising Nelson's role as the embodiment of the empire's naval power. The graphic diagram of bound human cargo aboard the slave ship *Brooke* is printed across the plinth of the statue below Nelson's name, unmistakably linking his exploits with the British transatlantic slave trade. The larger-than-life digital image of Locke's altered Nelson was the first to be presented in the form of a two-dimensional cut-out figure as a simulated public monument. 'History is messy,' Locke states. 'But there are means of reconciling with it' (Locke, 2018).⁹

Locke's intervention at the Barbados Museum was a temporary one, and at the end of the exhibition, the work, which was digitally printed on foam-core was, at the artist's instructions, destroyed with a sledgehammer. In retrospect, this was an uncanny foreshadowing of events around the world, when public monuments were pulled down, notably that of Edward Colston in Bristol. In November 2020, on the occasion of Barbados's 54th anniversary of independence, the government

⁹ Locke refers to his own ambivalent feelings about these public figures. While he admires the technical skill of his fellow sculptors of the past, he wants to draw out the complexities of their readings in a postcolonial context. This is only the second time Locke addressed public monuments in the Caribbean; the first was the statue of Queen Victoria in Georgetown Guyana.

formally removed the bronze statue of Nelson from his plinth in Bridgetown.

Stepping through the large fortified doors of the Barbados Museum, the first work viewers encountered was Kelley-Ann Lindo's *Sending Love Inna Barrel* (2018). Four cardboard shipping barrels were suspended from the ceiling, end to end, forming a long tunnel. Chairs were placed at either end, and visitors were invited to engage in conversation through the long echoing chamber. The work is a response to the feelings of abandonment experienced by Caribbean children left behind when their parents migrated overseas. It was not uncommon for parents to leave children with family members or neighbours for years while they struggled to secure housing, employment and some financial security before bringing their children to join them. In the meantime, parents would send clothing and foodstuff in large cardboard shipping barrels, which were eagerly received, not only for the goods inside but also as a longed-for connection with mothers or fathers. The term 'barrel children' is used to refer to this phenomenon, acknowledging the traumatic repercussions this has had. Lindo has commented:

Traumatic memories are forever susceptible to change, each time there are attempts to recollect it, and it is that fragility I have explored, through the use and manipulation of fragile materials. My ongoing body of work seeks to establish a conversation around the dynamics surrounding the 'barrel children' syndrome within the Caribbean culture – a term referring to children who have been left behind by one or both parents who have migrated. (Lindo, 2018)

The barrel is a recurring image in a number of works in the exhibition, symbolic of a nomadic existence as well as the movement of both peoples and goods that has governed the region's history. *For Reparation* (2003), Guyanese artist Philip

Moore repurposed the cardboard container used by West Indians to import consumer goods from England and the United States, painting the surface with intricate patterns, sweeping brushstrokes and sequin-like dabs of paint. Prominent among the images is a crowned, two-faced colossus, his armour itself the profile of another face with a row of all-seeing eyes. The heart-lined strip that wraps around the barrel is highlighted by rows of holes punctured through the cardboard surface and repeated in patterns across the rest of the object. These are illuminated by a string of Christmas lights inside the barrel, evocative of a metropolitan city at night; metal rings at the top indicate that the barrel could be hung like a chandelier or beacon. The title, *Reparation*, refers to the paltry compensation handed to slaves at the moment of Emancipation as well as more recent calls for economic restitution to be paid to descendants of slaves by those who profited from their enforced and unpaid labour.

Barrels also appear repeatedly in the epic painted series by Guyanese artist Stanley Greaves, *There is a Meeting Here Tonight*; however, here, these are the steel drums used to export oil. In *The Annunciation* (1993), a man stands inside the drum, which is transported on a dolly, pushed by the woman beside him, an agricultural worker identified by her stalk of sugar cane. While the specific meaning of the figures, objects and relationships in these surreal works is evasive, the barrels are pervasive, signalling the extraction of resources and circulation of capital that continues to influence the political instability in the region.

Kishan Munroe, an interdisciplinary artist from the Bahamas, produced a singularly remarkable work for the Arrivants exhibition. Munroe, whose practice is rooted in extensive historical research, employs documentary practice to promote engagement with underexplored narratives of the African diaspora. *Drifter in Residence* (2018) was a live expedition and video installation in which the artist undertook what he described as an 'artist's residency at sea' (Munroe, 2018). Based on extensive research and training in survival techniques, Munroe constructed a raft – kept afloat on a platform of barrels – for

an expedition on the Atlantic Ocean at the peak of hurricane season. In a statement, the artist explained:

This ‘introspective/retrospective’ pilgrimage marks a ten-year milestone in my professional artistic journey, actively engaged in extensive anthropological investigations through cultural immersion. With this phase of the project I literally plunge into the foreign world of the ocean, seeking to tap into the narratives, realities and histories of man’s precarious relationship with the sea and his never-ending quest for ‘home.’ (Munroe, 2018)

For the *Arrivants* exhibition, nine video screens were installed in the Exhibition Gallery in three rows of three. The outer eight screens showed images of the research and construction process as the artist conceived of and built the raft, while the central screen presented a live feed of the artist drifting at sea, conveying the isolation and vulnerability of this singular yet heroic figure adrift in the expanse of the ocean.

The sea was another recurring theme. Nadia Huggins presented two works from her Transformations series (2014–2016), a group of diptychs that explore the relationship between the artist and the marine ecosystem. The artist pairs cropped photographic self-portraits with marine organisms resulting in a new and hybrid relationship. Huggins explains:

In the sea, as a woman who identifies as other, my body becomes displaced from my everyday experiences. Gender, race, and class are dissolved because there are no social and political constructs to restrain and dictate my identity. These constructs have no place or value in that environment. (Huggins, 2018)

Cosmo Whyte’s *The Expat* (2017) provided a poetic corollary to Huggins’s images—a self-portrait of the artist seen from behind, his damp back dotted with clumps of barnacles, a performative display that presents bodies, and bodies of water, as liminal.

Whyte's *In the Belly of the Whale* (2018), responded to the physical space and history of the Barbados Museum, specifically a jail cell which has been preserved as a record of the building's original function as a military prison. With the cell door shut tight, viewers had to peer through the small opening to glimpse the spartan and cramped environment which Whyte transformed with veils and soft lighting. Artefacts from the museum's collection – an African drum, large ceramic jugs, a funerary urn and a ceramic replica of an Ife head – were surrounded by dozens of empty and discarded rum bottles, a rusty machete and an old shoe; a clash of historical artefacts and detritus of a colonial past.

Veronica Ryan also created an installation that responded to the Museum's existing exhibition spaces with work that like Whyte's, challenged traditional notions of the artefact. *Shack Shack* (2018) consists of a series of small mixed media sculptures displayed in a pair of glass cabinets built into the thick coral stone walls of the Aall Gallery. The title references the long wooden seed pods produced by the flamboyant tree and woman's tongue tree (*Albizia lebbek*) that appear in the cabinets, bound together with twine. Ryan combines natural, organic elements with colourful nylon fishing line, woven plastic bags and crumpled soft-drink bottles. Wrapped, bound, nestled and confined, these various materials—natural and manmade—revel in their contorted eccentricities. Some of the objects are stitched into pillows, concealed within crocheted covers or displayed on doilies. The singular objects spaced out on the shelves exist as separate islands, curiosities that are paradoxically familiar and strange. They teeter between museum artefact and domestic ornament, preserved in an anthropological display case or the cabinet of a West Indian front room.

Ryan's focus on the rich and varied – and increasingly imperilled – natural life of the region resonated with the paintings of Lynn Parotti and Winston Kellman. Parotti's *Microatoll I and II* (2016), part of her Bahama Land series, provide a microscopic

view of a thriving reef head with corals as seen through the crystal Caribbean water, an environment of extraordinary life forms and beauty. But Parotti introduces foreign elements that suggest an imperilled ecosystem.

Winston Kellman's seascapes are recorded from the ocean's edge, looking out across the rugged east coast of Barbados from a small fishing village known as Bathsheba, which lies on the brink of the 'Black Atlantic.' Paul Gilroy uses this phrase to describe an African diasporic model of modernity understood from a transnational and intercultural perspective that acknowledges the centrality of the experience of slavery as central to plantation economies and imperial capitalism (Gilroy, 1993, p. 15). Every day, Kellman paints the same yet changing view; Paul Gilroy's 'changing same,' a phrase that emphasises the connectedness between different moments that allows us to identify systems of cultural exchange and continuity across time (Gilroy, 1993). The artist completes each work in one sitting, recording a site which is layered with a history of trauma that is both personal and collective, but also capturing the ephemeral atmospheric sensations of that unique encounter. Collectively – and ultimately this is how the works need to be understood – the Bathsheba Series forms a diary or journal that records the intersection of place and memory.

Marianne Keating brings a unique perspective to the selection of works in the *Arrivants* exhibition. Born in Ireland and based in London, Keating has created *Landlessness* (2017), a two-channel video installation, filmed on location in Ireland and Jamaica, that interrogates the largely undocumented migration of Irish indentured labourers to the Caribbean during the early 19th century. Based on records found in the National Archives in Ireland, England and Jamaica, Keating presents conversations and recovered textual traces, which previously had been consigned to disappear within the archives.

Simon Tatum's response to the theme of migration was *Tropical Forms* (2018), a collection of organically shaped paintings

that function as organisms capable of adapting to the various environments and exhibition spaces that a nomadic existence takes them to. The wooden crate in which they were shipped lies at the base of the installation of forms – a mixture of plants and human limbs – that expand upwards and across the walls, claiming space and visibility.

Caroline Holder's *Homeland Insecurity* (2006) is a 24-piece ceramic dinner set decorated with intricate sgraffito images and text that reference the heightened state of fear, suspicion and paranoia that have been fostered in New York after the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. As a Barbadian artist based in New York, Holder recorded the atmosphere of paranoia and fear that pervaded the city:

I was in a prime position as an 'outsider' to observe the enormous psychological toll; the world had become less safe and we less certain of our place in it. Fear cast a thin layer of dust over the city. I found it particularly poignant to see the burning towers recurring in the drawings of my young students two years after the tragedy occurred. These, alongside the ubiquitous advertising campaign, 'If you see something, say something,' and police presence everywhere compelled me to develop this installation. (Holder, 2018)

The clay pieces are inscribed with images of planes flying into burning buildings, neighbours peeking through their curtains, phones being tapped, with accompanying messages: 'Yo mamma is a terrorist [...] So turn the bitch in'. For the *Arrivants* exhibition, the work, which is in the Barbados National Collection, was displayed in the 'dining room' of the Warmington Galleries, period rooms that are on permanent display at the museum, viewed through openings, as if peering through a window. The pairing of the ostentatious interior décor of an 18th century colonial 'great house' with pointed commentary on contemporary xenophobia poses opportunities

to contemplate the long and ongoing trajectory of historical contestations and power imbalances within the intimate sphere of domestic rituals.

On a wall facing the Warmington Galleries, Leasho Johnson's expansive mural *Land of Big Hood and Water* (2018) – the third incarnation of a 'guerrilla' street art action originally located on Hope Road in an upscale part of Kingston, Jamaica – transformed the serene ambience of the museum's tree-lined upper courtyard into a raucous party. Vinyl cut-out figures frolic with abandon in a sea of vibrant red. These modified figures pose in a variety of contorted dance hall-inspired postures. Like Tatum's *Tropical Forms*, Johnson presents a hybrid melding of human and plant forms. The title parodies Jamaica's informal motto, 'Land of Wood and Water,' 'hood' being an American term for ghetto, but also a colloquial Jamaican term for penis. These humorous characters seem to mock tourist expectations of a hyper-sexualised excess but equally evoke how racist stereotypes are rooted in histories of violence and exploitation.

The imagery in Johnson's mural shared some links with Sheena Rose's work. *'This Strange Land' Sketchbooks #anotherconfession* (2018) was the title given to a display of six small and well-worn drawing books. 'This Strange Land' is, for the artist, Barbados. Through a vast compilation of line drawings, the artist explores her own feelings of anxiety and alienation in the island of her birth. In depictions of herself as a half-submerged island monster, her sense of self becomes synonymous with place – an identity that both embraces and breaks apart the tropes of the Caribbean as an act of rebellious self-exploration and self-realisation. The intimate scale of the notebooks perhaps makes their diaristic self-confessions less confrontational but no less provocative.

As objects, the sketchbooks fit well in the museum's Cunard Gallery, named for Sir Edward Cunard, a member of the eponymous shipping line dynasty and a donor to the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. He was one of several wealthy

British visitors who built villas on the Barbados West Coast in the mid 20th century. Encouraged by Neville Connell, the director of the museum, Cunard collected colonial Caribbean prints, which were bequeathed to the museum upon his death in 1962. The collection included iconic early images of the Caribbean by artists including Agostino Brunias, Isaac Mendes Belisario and Lieutenant J.M. Carter. These works form the core of the historic print collection permanently on view in the Cunard Gallery. As Veerle Poupeye noted in the Arrivants blog, these prints, produced largely by itinerant and military artists, present the Caribbean as seen through the eyes and the world view of the planter and colonial administration classes, and form an important and multilayered visual archive of life in the colonies during the 18th and 19th centuries.

For the exhibition, we retained a selection of the historical prints and paintings in the Cunard Gallery to operate in contrast to, and in tension with, the modern and contemporary works. These acted as interventions into the historical narratives, in an effort to subvert these colonial perspectives while commenting on the social and cultural contradictions of postcolonial Caribbean life. The room was dominated by Ras Ishi Butcher's epic painting *400 Years: New World Order* (1994), which extended across the length of the end wall in the rectangular gallery, directly facing the panoramic mid-18th century painting *Governor Robinson Going to Church*. Butcher's *400 Years* presents a revised historical overview of Europe's tragic and violent encounter with the Caribbean, including Columbus's voyages, transatlantic slavery and the proto-industrial plantation system. The large figure of the overseer surveys the patchworked fields, with smaller vignettes recording scenes of colonial domination and death. The overseer's thorned and undulating whip snakes across the diptych. It is an epic retelling of transatlantic encounter that led to the long and brutal institution of plantation slavery. Referring to this work, Richard Powell states, 'one notices certain technical procedures and recurring motifs that, apart from distinguishing him as a remarkable witness with something

special and powerful to say, individuate Ras Ishi as a dedicated and cerebral painter' (Powell, 2010, pp. 19–20).

Also located in the Cunard Gallery was a work by Ewan Atkinson, created for the *Arrivants* exhibition to be displayed in the 1950s-styled cases that house a selection of historical maps. *Peregrination, A Playable Reproduction* (2018) is a Victorian-styled board game that was presented as if 'in play,' laid out with accompanying game pieces, a pair of dice and a stack of 91 buttons as 'counters.' As described in the accompanying instructions, the supposedly serendipitous game pieces have been taken from the pockets of the imaginary players: a wooden shoe, a Vape mat (mosquito repellent), a dried passion fruit, a peanut-candy wrapper, the key from a can of corned beef, a plastic toy and a commemorative pin.

Using a language both visual and written that mimics colonial texts and parlour games, Atkinson fashions this faux artefact as a storytelling device. The full title, as inscribed on the board, is *A New Neighbourhood Amusement: Peregrination! An instructional game of chance replete with folly and adversity for the benefit of recent arrivants.* Like an ancient map, the game is presented as a well-worn and much-used document, complete with illusionistic fold marks, rips and stains. The route or journey to be pursued through the game is mapped out as a spiral moving through 50 'symbolic figures' or stations that represent locations, artefacts and residents or characters found in 'the Neighbourhood,' an imaginary community of misfits and migrants that has encompassed Atkinson's production for the past 16 years. The two text panels that frame the central image provide a description of the 50 figures along with the meticulously articulated rules of the game. Nevertheless, ambiguity recurs and randomness seems to rule in the end. The often unreasonable and dehumanising bureaucratic hurdles, the waiting in line, the prospect of being sent back, the loopholes and penalties are familiar pitfalls for all who travel or migrate. In the era of visa lotteries, Atkinson's surreal world is all too familiar.

Francis Griffith's painting *A History of Time* (c. 1966) provides an interesting comparison, as it can also be understood as a map of sorts, a diagrammatic representation or symbolic depiction that charts not only space but also time, a constructed world view that compresses biblical stories, historical events and recent international happenings into an architecturally ordered framework, tying these disparate elements into a seemingly preordained expository presentation.

The story of Francis Griffith's life is an extraordinary one that involved migration and travels across the world and provided him with rich experiences and mystical revelations that were recorded in his paintings. Griffith, who was born in Barbados, became a seaman with the British Merchant Marines and worked as a gunner with the British Royal Navy during World War II and, later on, the docks repairing and painting ships. In the 1950s, Griffith continued to work in Cardiff in construction and manufacturing, during which time he studied welding and technical drawing. By the early 1960s, Griffith returned to sea life, travelling, by his own account, to 76 countries. He was most impacted by visits to Africa and the Middle East, where, through mystical interventions, he was given the name 'Son et Luimere' (sic), which he translated as 'Son of Light'. It was at this time that Griffith began painting as a way to record not only the places he had visited but also important world leaders and significant dates, mapping out a complex web of indecipherable connections and meanings.

A History of Time is one of Griffith's earliest known paintings as well as the largest and most ambitious. The majority of the painting is taken up by an elaborately articulated banquet hall where crowds of Arab men and women have come to honour the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, who appear twice at the top and bottom of the composition. Rows of elegantly arched windows and richly attired guests are separated by mountain ranges and rivers with travellers arriving by boat and on camel. The centre of the composition is dominated by a large circular fountain with a six-petaled structure that functions like a large

compass – a magnetic, orienting force. Along the top border of the composition, Moses presents the tablets with the Ten Commandments. On either side, horse-drawn chariots bear the flags of the various nations engaged in World War II: Australia, the United States and Greece on the left, and Pakistan and the USSR on the right. Through the central north–south axis of the painting is a meeting of powers, both ancient and modern, overseen by God’s laws, imposing structure and order over the history of time as understood and divined by the artist.

The theme of diasporic subjectivities finds particular expression in a series of portraits located throughout the exhibition. *The Poet* (1947), one of the earliest known works by Karl Broodhagen, is a portrait of writer George Lamming when he was only 20 years old, six years before the publication of his acclaimed debut novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*. This sensitive terracotta bust reflects Broodhagen’s lifelong interest in portraiture, and specifically the representation of Caribbean people. The sculpture was made the year Broodhagen began teaching at Combermere school, where Lamming had studied under Frank Collymore.¹⁰ Lamming’s later writings, such as *The Emigrants* (1954) and *The Pleasure of Exile* (1960), focused on the migrant’s journey and the alienation and displacement caused by colonialism. The portrait busts and paintings by Broodhagen provide their own subtle insights into the diversity, complexity and richness of the Caribbean experience.

Paul Dash’s *Self-Portrait* (1979) appears as a remarkably intimate and honest confrontation with self, as the artist, palette and brush in hand, faces the viewer with an intense and steady

10 Collymore was an important literary figure and publisher of *BIM* magazine and a mentor to both Lamming and Broodhagen as well as other literary figures, such as Derek Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Lamming had left Barbados in 1946 to teach in Trinidad; he remained there for four years before emigrating to England, where he worked as a broadcaster for the BBC Colonial Service. Broodhagen followed him to London two years later when he began his studies at Goldsmiths, University of London.

gaze. By the end of the 1970s, Dash had been actively involved with CAM. His acquaintance with other Caribbean artists and writers may have influenced his determination to focus on his own identity as an Afro-Caribbean man. He later explained:

At that time I had not painted a full-on portrait of a black sitter and hadn't seen many portraits of black people in the flesh; paintings in which there was a black presence yes, but few portraits in which artists struggled to say something specific about such sitters. Rembrandt, Pieter Paul Rubens, Marie Benoist, Augustus John and others had made wonderful paintings of black subjects but I hadn't yet seen them in a gallery setting or had the opportunity to study such works in depth.
(Dash, 2018)

Dash, who later had an influential career as an art educator at Goldsmiths, University of London, had to wait until after his retirement to gain long-overdue recognition for his painting.¹¹

In Sheena Rose's photographic double self-portrait *Flowers and Pearls, Gorgeous* (2018), the artist is presented as a famous personality, wearing dark glasses and literally coated in glitter. Rose has developed a rich cast of personae over the years that she performs through photography and videography, both as a means to explore multiple dimensions of her own personality and to allow herself to live other lives. She writes:

Sometimes, I feel so disconnected from my home Barbados, that I feel like an outsider and it doesn't feel like an ordinary space; its more than that. There is magic, spirits, beauty and mystery in this strange land; a quiet magical space. Perhaps an exaggerated space that draws

¹¹ This *Self-Portrait* was recently acquired by Tate and was included in the Tate Britain exhibition *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s-Now*.

the viewers to be very curious of space and surroundings. (Rose, 2018)

Keith Piper's *Ghosting the Archive* (2005) presents the largely forgotten studio contents of British commercial portrait photographer Ernest Dyché, who recorded the likenesses of residents of the inner-city area of South Birmingham during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. Piper came across boxes of glass negatives during an artist residency undertaken in the archival spaces at the Library of Birmingham in 2005. Having grown up in the same area, Piper was inspired to 'reactivate' this record of an evolving inner-city community composed largely of immigrant families. In the single-screen video presented as a slide show, the artist stands behind the camera in the library storage room and extends his hands into the frame, wearing white archival gloves and holding up photographic negatives. This image is then reversed so that the room is seen as a negative, while the archival portraits – and the individual they recorded – appear as they were originally intended.

Sovereign State (2016) is a single-screen video work by Hew Locke who again interrogates the consumption of official portraiture as an ongoing deference to empire. Recalling his childhood in Guyana, Locke remembers images of Queen Elizabeth II on the covers of his school exercise books long after the country's independence from Britain. He would often be reprimanded for drawing over these images, literally defacing the symbols of monarchy. Reviving this aesthetic of the doodle, Locke's current work challenges the dearth of more complex portraits of the royal family and instead creates images with a very different truth as art. In *Sovereign State*, the monarch's mouth is bound to safeguard her secrets. Sounds of whispers hover in the air as the altered images of the Queen slowly morph and transform. Locke's contemporary take on royal portraiture references medieval and Renaissance imagery of the ruling elite, who were often portrayed with skulls or skeletons

as a reminder that ‘in the midst of life we are in death’ and thus change is always inevitable.¹²

Arrivants was conceived as part of an EU-funded initiative looking at museums, migration and gender. Collectively, the works in the exhibition spanned seven decades, from the pre- to post-independence eras of the Anglophone Caribbean, a period of important change and transformation, and addressed a broad spectrum of issues related to migration in ways that are nuanced, incisive, moving, inspiring, surprising, humorous, thought-provoking and beautiful.

Not only did the diverse works by the participating artists present a broad scope of approaches to the theme, the integration of the works into the museum’s existing displays placed these conversations within the broader context of a British colonial history.

A number of the participating artists were exhibiting in Barbados for the first time, and many viewers remarked on the importance of the opportunity to see these works, particularly in relation to one another in the context of the exhibition. Particularly impactful were those works that were commissioned and made for the exhibition and which responded to the context of Barbados and the museum. Several of those artists were able to travel to the island to make and install their work, and the two youngest artists in the exhibition, Kelley-Ann Lindo and Simon Tatum from Jamaica and Cayman Islands, respectively, participated in short-term internships with the Museum, assisting with the installation of the *Arrivants* exhibition. This created significant opportunities for interaction with the

12 Edvard Munch’s famous 1893 painting *The Scream* is a significant influence, as are Tudor portraits of Elizabeth I by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger. These include *The Rainbow Portrait*, in which the Queen wears a dress covered in eyes and ears as the all-seeing ruler, and *The Ditchley Portrait*, where she stands upright on a map of England, storms raging behind her while the sun shines on her.

local art community and wider public, a social aspect of the exhibition-making process that should not be disregarded.

The intersecting themes of migration and museology provided the potential for a meaningful discussion and analysis about how museums, and particularly small regional museums, can participate in the current interrogations into the meanings and directions of Caribbean art and question the ways in which and where it is presented. While the Barbados Museum as a venue provided opportunities for interventions into existing narratives, the choice was partly in response to the lack of purpose-built spaces in which to exhibit contemporary art. Deficiencies in infrastructure, both physical and professional, were recurring challenges throughout the process. Initial ambitions that the exhibition could travel throughout the region and eventually to the UK were never realised. And the absence of a catalogue documenting the event is a significant missed opportunity.

The challenge for museums and curators to develop innovative strategies, reconciling ambitious objectives with limited resources, to present Caribbean art to Caribbean as well as global audiences is ongoing. As Dornhof et al. observed, the exhibition format, with its potential to assemble and juxtapose diverse objects and perspectives, provides unique opportunities to address issues of migration and diaspora. Migration is often a disorienting process, necessitating strategies of problem-solving and improvisation. Taking on the theme of migration as a critical strategy allows us to rethink the exhibition format, to respond to the specific needs and aspirations of exhibition-making in the region, to speak first to a Caribbean audience, but then also present an inflected, creolised voice to a global audience.

Viable, sustainable strategies will require formulating not only different routes but also potentially, different destinations.

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Figure 1: **Nelson, Bridgetown** by Hew Locke (2018), digital print on PVC, 305 cm, and **Untitled** by Eddie Chambers (1994), flag, 113 x 253 cm. The Barbados Museum and Historical Society, *Arrivants* exhibition (2018). Photo © Daniel Christaldi.



Figure 2: **The Presentation** (from the series *There is a Meeting Here Tonight*) by Stanley Greaves (1992), acrylic on canvas, 120 x 106 cm. National Art Gallery Collection, Barbados; **Drifter in Residence** by Kishan Munroe (2018), live expedition and video installation. The Barbados Museum and Historical Society, *Arrivants* exhibition (2018). Photo © Daniel Christaldi.



Figure 3: **Land of Big Hood and Water** by Leasho Johnson (2018), mural (paint and vinyl), variable dimensions. The Barbados Museum and Historical Society, *Arrivants* exhibition (2018). Photo © Daniel Christaldi.

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Author Bios

Karen Brown is Professor of Art History at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. She has (co-)edited several volumes relating to community museums, ecomuseums, and sustainability, including Brown, Karen, Alissandra Cummins, and Ana Sol González Rueda, eds. (2023), *Communities and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: Shared Histories and Climate Action*. Routledge; Brown, Karen, ed. (2019), 'Museums and Local Development', *Museum International*, Routledge; Brown, Karen, Peter Davis & Luís Raposo, eds. (2019), *On Community and Sustainable Museums*, Lisbon. An Honorary Research Fellow at the McDonald Institute, University of Cambridge, Karen has also coordinated several large international team research projects, including EU-LAC Museums (EC Horizon 2020, 2016-2021), and Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future (UKRI Grant Number UKRI EP/X023036/1, 2022-2027), which has kindly supported her research for this edited volume and the University of St Andrews conference Transnational Island Museologies (2024).

Chloe Cull (Kāi Tabu, Aerani, Ingarani) is Pouarataki Curator Māori at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū. She works primarily with Māori artists and develops exhibitions that explore and uplift Indigenous knowledge and storytelling. Chloe's recently curated exhibitions include *Whāia te Taniwha* (co-curated with Madi Williams and Kirsty Dunn, 2025); *John Vea: Ini Mini Mani Mou* (2025), *Edith Amituanai and Sione Tuívailala Monū: Toloa Tales* (co-curated with Melanie Oliver, 2024) and *Te Rā: The Māori Sail* (2023). Chloe recently co-edited two Christchurch Art Gallery publications: *Whāia te Taniwha: Stories from Te Waipounamu* (2025) and *Whenua* (2025) and has contributed texts to several publications including Davis, Sophie (ed), *Tracy Keith: Remember Industry*, Hastings Art Gallery (2025); Baker, Kirsty, *Sightlines*, Auckland University Press (2024) and *ATE: Journal of Māori Art*, Volume 1, ATE Press, Wellington (2019).

Cora-Allan is a multidisciplinary artist of Māori and Niue descent, originally from Waitākere. Named after both her Great-Grandparents on her maternal side, Cora-Allan prefers to be called by her first name only. In recent years her practice has focused on her efforts to revive the art form of hiapo (decorated barkcloth from Niue). Prior to this she completed her Masters in Visual Art and Design in Performance from AUT (2013), also receiving a Postgraduate Dean's Award for her research. She has exhibited her work throughout Aotearoa and internationally including Australia, Niue, England and Canada. Her work is a part of major collections including Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira and The Chartwell Trust. In 2021 Cora-Allan was awarded a McCahon House Residency and received an Annual Arts Grant funding from Creative New Zealand to focus full time on her hiapo practice. In 2020 she received the Creative New Zealand Pacific Heritage Artist award. Her most recent exhibition project *Encountering Aotearoa* opened at Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2023 and toured to Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū and the Waitangi Treaty Grounds in 2024.

Clémentine Debrosse is a CHASE-AHRC funded PhD student at the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas (University of East Anglia, UK). Titled 'Archival Present: Contemporary Artists at Work With Colonial Archives in European Exhibition Spaces,' her thesis examines the practice of contemporary Indigenous, diasporic and Global South artists, arguing that archival art is a method for the dissemination of colonial archives outside of their storage spaces (analogue or digital) by means of their exhibition, offering new meanings to the archives and chances of encounter and experience by the public. Her work has been published in both academic peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes, as well as non-academic blogs and magazines.

Ana S. González Rueda is an art historian specialising in contemporary art curation. Her publications include *Sea of Islands and Poetics of Relation: Rethinking Islandness*, a double issue of the ICOFOM Study Series (2025) co-edited with Bertin, Tissandier, Lagarde, Brown, and Brown; *Communities and Museums in the 21st Century: Shared Histories and Climate Action* (London: Routledge, 2023) co-edited with Brown and Cummins; and *Decolonising the Curriculum, Decolonising Museology*, vol. 3 (Paris: ICOM/ICOFOM, 2022) co-edited with Brown and Brulon Soares. Ana holds a PhD in Museum and Gallery Studies from the University of St Andrews (2019) and has also completed a postdoctoral research residency at the Decolonising Art Institute, UAL (2021). She has contributed to major research projects including EU-LAC Museums (EC Horizon 2020, 2016–2021) and *Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future* at the University of St Andrews. She currently teaches art history at the American College of Greece.

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Kaiden M. Waverley (they/them) spends their time investigating how critical theory and dialogic aesthetics can inform anti-racist, feminist, and queer curatorial approaches to mobilise museum spaces for interrogating systematic inequalities. They coordinate travelling exhibitions at the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street, organizing exhibitions that showcase America's diversity in *Know Your Treaty*, *The Bias Inside Us*, and *Many Voices, One Nation*. Previously they have worked with the National Galleries of Scotland, Scotland + Venice, and Thinkery Museum, as well as completing museological intensives with L'École du Louvre and the Università di Padova. They earned their MLitt degree from the University of St Andrews' Museum & Gallery Studies programme in 2022.