

The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy

Christopher Ulutupu

1 – 25 November 2018

**THE
PHYSICS
ROOM** CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

List of Works

The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy (duration 1 hour 1 min)

Part 1. *Into the arms of my coloniser*, 2016

Part 2. *Do you still need me?*, 2017

Part 3. *Lelia*, 2018

HD moving image (16:9) and sound

Christopher Ulutupu and Kevin Cartwright (Cinematographer)

Thanks to Heather Galbraith, SCAPE Public Art, Kasmira Krefft, Emerging Artists Trust, Costume Cave, George Parker and Free Theatre, the Court Theatre, *Lelia* and Fitu, family and friends.



Image: Christopher Ulutupu, *Lelia*, film still, 2018.

Artist Biography

Christopher Ulutupu is an artist of Samoan/Niuean/German descent currently residing in Wellington. He recently completed his MFA at Massey University, Wellington and has a Bachelor of Performance Design (Hons) from Massey University and Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School. Ulutupu has a background in art direction and set design. Ulutupu mounted a solo exhibition at play_station, Wellington in 2018 and participated in the inaugural Hobart Biennale in 2017.

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The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy comprises three video works— *Into The Arms Of My Coloniser* (2016), *Do You Still Need Me?* (2017), and the newly created *Lelia* (2018)—by Christopher Ulutupu, presented together for the first time as a single-channel cinematic experience.

Ulutupu's video / performance art practice explores landscape, photography, and the construction of colonial narratives. Responding to early 1900s landscape photography and 'postcard' tourism, Ulutupu's earlier work looked at exoticised depictions of Pacific people disseminated throughout the western world. His practice seeks to re-contextualise these stereotypes and re-imagine them through video and performance, offering new ways of exploring the effects of colonisation and diaspora.

The trilogy contains a collision of ideas and references elements of traditional and modern indigeneity to create a performance both critical and humorous. The three works approach the conversation around hybridity in a way that looks forward and asks, 'Who do I want to be?' rather than fixating on 'Who am I?' Viewed together the works can be seen to address different stages of development in what can only be termed a love affair between Coloniser and Indigenous person(s).

In his new work *Lelia*, Ulutupu continues to stage performances within 'picturesque' landscapes, this time in a Cantabrian alpine resort scenario. The work mingles excess with the everyday with Ulutupu casting friends and family members as core characters and takes stylistic inspiration from an *ELLE Magazine* article about a notorious photoshoot that appeared in the 1977 winter issue of *Vogue*.

The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy is presented in partnership with SCAPE Public Art.

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Christopher Ulutupu

Exhibition preview: Wednesday 31 October at 5.30pm

Exhibition runs: 1–25 November 2018

Thursday 1 November, 12.30pm: Exhibition Talk with Christopher Ulutupu and Jamie Hanton

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World-Making and The Romantic Picturesque

In 1977, a New York fashion crew travelled to the Andes Mountain to shoot a catalogue of furs for the luxury department store Neiman Marcus. The crew, which included a young Jerry Hall fresh off her first Paris runway, were led by the photographer's escalating demands to realise his vision for the shoot. They braved increasingly difficult conditions, driving to the edge of mountain cliffs and shooting in severe snow storms. They were then snowed in and trapped at their lodge for several days unable to contact the outside world. Christopher Ulutupu's *Lelia*, the last work in *The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy*, takes many of its stylistic cues from the resulting imagery.

An *ELLE Magazine* article in 2016 refers to the story sensationally as a “drug-fuelled, multimillion-dollar supermodel snowpocalypse”, focusing in particular on the cocaine, drinking, gambling, and sex that went on during the crew's time trapped at their lodge. In *Lelia*, Ulutupu re-stages this shoot in a Southern Aotearoa setting with his own cast of friends and family. It goes beyond the the visual lushness of the fashion aesthetic and draws on the salacious behind-the-scenes exemplar of Caucasian excess to ultimately tell a story of heartbreak.

In one vignette, a lone figure crosses the frame of a snowy backdrop. She details a break up from her husband, describing the hurtful realisation that after years of making him a cup of tea every day he had never returned the favour. The story is left untranslated, available in the first instance only to those who speak Samoan. Like much of Ulutupu's work, he throws ‘foreignness’ back on to the audience. The scene is visually enticing, but the audience must do the work to retrieve their own translation if they want access. Subverting the lifestyle advertising of the Neiman Marcus furs catalogue and its inaccessible luxury brand, Ulutupu works to create an indigenous experience that is glamorous and enamouring, but largely inaccessible to white audiences.

The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy is an exercise in Ulutupu's world-making abilities. Vignettes or scenarios are regularly set against striking landscapes, contending with the assumed affinity between exotic-nature and exotic-person and the inadequacy of this to describe contemporary indigenous experience. In *Lelia*, what could be more foreign to the tropical islands of Samoa than ski fields? In *Into the arms of my coloniser*, the sandy backdrop is studio-shot, referencing beaches and islands but never allowing the association to be fully realised. Connection to nature is upended, never to be presumed.

Ulutupu's fictionalised characters tell loose narratives based on personal stories where the relationship between indigeneity and coloniser is always at the fore. At times, some of his characters seem to play into stereotypical expectations of brown bodies. They perform indigeneity; singing, dancing, and entertaining an unknown audience. However, pop culture references and humour punctuate performances in a way that winks to the audience. Much like artist Shigeyuki Kihara's work to decolonise the gaze, Ulutupu plays with the power dynamic between audience and artist, his presence always felt in each scene.

While Kihara inserts herself into historic representations in order to interrogate popular western imagery, Ulutupu's restagings seek to imagine entirely new realities of contemporary indigenous experience. Ulutupu's work doesn't seek to re-tell or ‘fix’ past wrongs, he creates an alternative logic for ways of being in the world. *The Romantic Picturesque* offers up these alternatives as something entirely more speculative and ultimately much more imaginative.

Robbie Handcock



Image: Christopher Ulutupu, *Into the arms of my coloniser*, film still, 2018.



Image: Christopher Ulutupu, *Do you still need me?*, film still, 2018.



Image: Christopher Ulutupu, *Lelia*, film still, 2018.



Image: Christopher Ulutupu, *Lelia*, film still, 2018.