Two Oceans at Once

Rhea Maheshwari, Skawennati, and Kahurangiariki Smith

Curated by Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua and Charlotte Huddleston

3 October – 17 November 2019

THE
PHYSICS
ROOM CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

◀Sᵀ PAUL ST

AUT
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

Two Oceans at Once

Rhea Maheshwari, Skawennati, and Kahurangiariki Smith
Curated by Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua and Charlotte Huddleston

Exhibition Preview: Wednesday 2 October, 5:30pm
Exhibition Talk with Rhea Maheshwari, Kahurangiariki Smith, and Charlotte Huddleston: Thursday 3 October, 11am

Two Oceans at Once is named from a phrase in a story by Uruguayan journalist and poet Eduardo Galeano. In the story 'Americans', from the book *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, Galeano retells the commonly known history of the world in 600 short episodes. Here it is:

> *Official history has it that Vasco Núñez de Balboa was the first man to see, from a summit in Panama, two oceans at once. Were the natives blind?*
>
> *Who first gave names to corn and potatoes and tomatoes and chocolate and the mountains and rivers of America? Hernán Cortés? Francisco Pizarro? Were the natives mute?*
>
> *The Pilgrims on the Mayflower heard Him: God said America was the promised land. Were the natives deaf?*
>
> *Later on, the grandchildren of the Pilgrims seized the name and everything else. Now they are the Americans. And those of us who live in the other Americas, who are we?*

At face value, it is an account of discovery, naming and renaming as part of historic global exploration in search of 'new' territories and resources under a colonial agenda. The 'two oceans' in Galeano's story are the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Although Vasco Núñez de Balboa was not the first person to see these two oceans at once, it is said that in 1513, from that vantage point in Panama, he was the first European to see the Pacific Ocean.[1]

In the context of Aotearoa, *Two Oceans at Once* takes on the impetus of retelling, where 2018 was the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage, and 2019 holds the 250th anniversary of the arrival of Captain James Cook—an arrival that, like Vasco Núñez de Balboa's, involved naming. The most notable in Cook's case was calling the headland Te Kurī a Pāoa of the bay known as Tūranganui-ā-Kiwa, Young Nick's Head, after Nicholas Young who spotted the land from the Endeavour. A hugely significant person on board the Endeavour was Ra'iātea born Tahitian navigator and artist Tupaia who on this voyage played a pivotal role in mediating between Māori and the crew of the Endeavour. Tupaia was not included in the initial landing party. After the landing, based on subsequent events, Cook named the bay Poverty Bay and left.

Galeano's story and accounts of Cook's arrival and naming narrate historical time—conceived as chronological and linear—fixing these occasions in the past and at a distance. There are other ways of thinking this. What happens to our perceptions of and relationships with history if we emphasise not the logic of time as past-present-future, but rather, as Victoria Browne argues, "the experiential, relational, and discursive aspects of temporal existence"?[2] Browne writes of 'lived time,' conceived of as grounded, personal and collective, it "pertains to the way the different individuals and societies think, feel, behave, and relate to one another according to their experiences of and ideas about time."[3]

Retelling stories and accounts of events serves multiple purposes—memorialising; aggrandising nation building narratives; guarding against loss; telling of lived time, individual and cultural histories and identities. When hearing these accounts, it is vital to consider whose stories are heard and whose are suppressed, whose words are given value and whose are

overwritten, and by whom. Browne's lived time, countering the idea of a linear progression of human development and a totalising master narrative of 'universal human experience', foregrounds the intersections of different historical temporalities and trajectories. The linear chronologies of history purposefully construct the past as a state of being which is primitive, naïve, and undeveloped, and the present as overwriting the past, rather than being constituted by it. The recent process of 'renaming' Poverty Bay has brought forward examples of this perspective. While the favoured option of the dual name Tūranganui-a-Kiwa/Poverty Bay was contested by some, it was officially adopted on 15 February 2019. Following this process and the arguments opposing the reinstatement of the original name raises some questions in response to the commonly told history of the arrival of the Endeavour in Poverty Bay. What was the place where Cook landed called? Who authored the history? If we fail to acknowledge that multiple narratives make up history—that there is no singular account of history—then how can we ever appreciate its complexity? In Aotearoa this year after vocal agitation from school students and teachers, the Government announced on 12 September that New Zealand history will be taught in all schools and kura by 2022. This is a moment to revisit the past, and answer to it as a complex series of encounters and exchanges.

The works of *Two Oceans at Once* each hold distinct relationships with time and place, accommodating many points of departure while making manifest their own particular experience of the world. Rhea Maheshwari talks of the formative memory of an ornate marble temple that sat in the corner of her childhood bedroom. It housed a statuette of the Hindu warrior goddess Durga. Every morning Maheshwari would perform a ritual asking the goddess to transform her into a bird in the hope that they could meet. If the chance were ever to have arisen, she would have asked Durga what her purpose on Earth was.

In *Ornamental Utopia*, Maheshwari presents an ornamental tapestry cast as mural. The work builds from a translucent wash (counter to the naturalistic style of a traditional fresco), and features motifs such as figures, interiors, landscapes and architectures that are pulled from a personal archive of photographs taken throughout India and Europe. She describes her artistic process as being connected to her daily ritual with Durga, that through the act of painting she is able to begin accessing the answers to her questions. The artist becomes a world-builder, complicating the relationship between East and West to enable, as Maheshwari states a "third intersectional territory that reconciles differences, and projects itself into an imaginative future."

Skawennati uses images and words to address representation of aborginal and indigenous people now and in the future. She says, "there are plenty of images of us in the past, often in those images we are silent, unnamed and I wanted to show something else, I wanted us to be able to imagine ourselves in the future."[4] To do this she uses new media—including software, websites, apps, video games, virtual worlds, machinima—which she refers to collectively as cyberspace, a medium that is a metaphor for the future.

Science-Fiction has been a love of Skawennati's since she began reading stories as a young girl. Eventually she realised that there were no Indigenous people in the futures she read about. *She Falls for Ages* and *The Peacemaker Returns* made in the virtual reality of Second Life, are futuristic narratives that are both important Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) origin stories. *She Falls for Ages* retells the creation story of Turtle Island. Set on an ancient, alien world it reimagines the ancestral Sky World—where humans lived before Earth—as "a futuristic utopia and Sky Woman as a brave astronaut and world-builder" who falls to a watery world that becomes the Earth.[5]

Set in 3025, *The Peacemaker Returns* tells the story of the formation of the Haudenosaunee confederacy. The confederacy, founded by the Peacemaker and "made up of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas was intended as a way to unite the nations and create a peaceful means of decision making."[6] It is one of the first and longest lasting participatory democracies in the world. In both of these works, Skawennati brings the past and future together to reimagine and tell two foundational narratives from the perspective of the present, and in doing so she celebrates the ongoing lives and practices of First Nations peoples.

In Kahurangiariki Smith's *FOB*, the artist takes the legacy of Tupaia as a starting reference. In addition to Tupaia's expertise in navigation and interpretation he also specialised in cartography, and most famously, his illustrations that documented first contact between Europeans and the indigenous peoples throughout Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. The illustrations were widely attributed to Joseph Banks, a botanist attached to Cook's expeditions, until the discovery of correspondence in the late 1990s proved otherwise.[7] An iconic image created by Tupaia was an exchange between Māori and Joseph Banks where they are seen trading a crayfish for a piece of cloth.

FOB aims to recontextualise Tupaia's legacy into current, engaging mediums. Set as a classic arcade shooter-style video game, players are placed in the first-person position of a coloniser or tourist. In the game bullets are replaced by money and oncoming 'savages' are the obstacles to be aimed at. Taking a satirical slant on colonisation, Smith hopes to "make the viewer consider the history of colonisation, the impact upon cultures across the Pacific, and to challenge the FOB ('fresh off the boat') stereotype." Her centring of Tupaia reflects not only a necessary shift in focus but also reopens dialogue of Aotearoa's connectedness to their Pasifika cousins.

In the retelling of past events as history, dominant sociocultural constructions privilege linear and chronological retelling in a single voice. But within Galeano's account, as with the events of Cook's arrival, there are multiple positions from which history can be told. In 'Americans', Galeano questions whose voice is heard and remembered in accounts of history. Recognising that there is no singular past, present or future, this exhibition looks to reorient historical time within the lived experiences of communities. In all of its artists, *Two Oceans at Once* is a quiet gesture toward the many worlds we hold as individuals and citizens of a global community. It takes as its provocation the realities of these artists, whose works speak to and unfold what Dipesh Chakrabarty characterises as the "diverse ways of being human… through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to 'world the earth' in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging."[8] It holds narratives of arrivals, departures, cohabitation, time, place, knowledge, language, and love, and is anchored in the lived experiences of its participants. As an exhibition it is *peopled*, as a microcosm and as a family.

———————————

Two Oceans at Once at The Physics Room is the second iteration of the exhibition under this title. The first exhibition of *Two Oceans at Once* was at St Paul St Gallery, AUT from 15 February to 17 May 2019. It included work by Ayesha Green, Ruth Ige, Rozana Lee, Nicole Lim, Jane Chang Mi, Talia Smith, Vaimaila Urale, Layne Waerea, Yonel Watene. Two Oceans at Once is also the title of the project of collective enquiry begun at St Paul St in 2018, which is shaped by three core interrelated kaupapa: knowledge, language, and love. The enquiry and accompanying programmes attend to an understanding that we are in a constant state of becoming, and 'coming into relationship with' our contexts.

———————————

1 Heritage Te Manatu Taonga. 1. – European discovery of New Zealand – Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, April 3, 2019. https://teara.govt.nz/en/european-discovery-of-new-zealand/page-1. "Vasco Núñez De Balboa." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, September 29, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasco_Núñez_de_Balboa.

2 Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 26.

3 Ibid, 27.

4 "Skawennati: Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 3 - Museum of Arts and Design, New York." YouTube. YouTube, April 16, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMoPU4e4e1k.

5 Skawennati. Accessed October 1, 2019. http://skawennati.com/shefallsforages/.

6 "Who We Are." Haudenosaunee Confederacy, April 17, 2018. https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/who-we-are/.

7 "Tupaia the Navigator, Priest and Artist." The British Library. The British Library, April 13, 2018. https://www.bl.uk/the-voyages-of-captain-james-cook/articles/tupaia-the-navigator-priest-and-artist.

8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2000), 262.

Two Oceans at Once

Rhea Maheshwari, Skawennati, and Kahurangiariki Smith
Curated by Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua and Charlotte Huddleston

Exhibition Preview: Wednesday 2 October, 5:30pm
Exhibition Talk with Rhea Maheshwari, Kahurangiariki Smith, and Charlotte Huddleston: Thursday 3 October, 11am

Rhea Maheshwari is a visual artist currently based in Tāmaki Makaurau and is finishing her final year of her Bachelor's Degree (Honours) in Visual Arts (Painting) at the Auckland University of Technology. Rhea draws different strands of symbolism from her personal experiences to paint ornamental tapestries. These tapestries explore how mythical and architectural elements situate her in liminal space between East and West. She was awarded the Board's Choice at the Eden Arts Art schools Awards 2018, the Gordon Harris Award for Excellence in Fine Arts 2018 and was the Overall Winner for the Eden Arts Young Artists Award 2018. Her artworks can be found in the James Wallace Arts Trust Collection.

Skawennati makes art that addresses history, the future, and change from an Indigenous perspective. Best known for her machinimas—movies made in virtual environments—she also produces still images, sculpture and textile works.

Her groundbreaking new media projects include the online gallery/chat-space and mixed-reality event *CyberPowWow (*1997-2004); a paper doll/time-travel journal, *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* (2001); and *TimeTraveller™* (2008-2013) a multi-platform project featuring nine machinima episodes. These have been presented in New Zealand, Hawaii, Ireland and across North America in major exhibitions such as "Now? Now!" at the Biennale of the Americas, and "Looking Forward (L'Avenir)" at the Montreal Biennale. Skawennati is represented by ELLEPHANT and her award-winning work is included in both public and private collections.

Born in Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory, Skawennati holds a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal, where she is based. She is Co-Director, with Jason Edward Lewis, of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), a research network of artists, academics and technologists investigating, creating and critiquing Indigenous virtual environments. She also co-directs their Skins workshops in Aboriginal Storytelling and Digital Media. In 2015, AbTeC launched IIF, the Initiative for Indigenous Futures; Skawennati is its Partnership Coordinator.

Kahurangiariki Smith's waka are Te Arawa, Tainui, Takitimu, Horouta. Kahurangiariki Smith's principal focus is on mana wāhine and storytelling, which inform her art and video game development practices. Kahurangiariki's artworks often employ digital formats, a reflection of the media we engage with, in person and online—gifs, games and karaoke. Her work seeks to elevate indigenous voices, critiquing colonial histories and ongoing colonising relationships. Recently Kahurangiariki has been in collaboration with her mother, Aroha Yates-Smith, and working alongside Graeme Atkins, Alex Monteith and Natalie Robertson in *Te rerenga pōuri o nga parawhenua ki Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa* (2019) in "Moana Don't Cry", Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts. She has also been involved in other recent exhibitions, with video game *MāoriGrl* (2017) in "E Hina e! E Hine e!", Waikato Museum; and *FOE (Fresh off the Endeavour)* (2019), an arcade machine with modified version of *FOB* (2016), in collaboration with Hōhua Thompson at "Native Voices", Tairāwhiti Museum.

Two Oceans at Once

Rhea Maheshwari, Skawennati, and Kahurangiariki Smith
Curated by Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua and Charlotte Huddleston

Library

2

1

Hall Entrance

Volunteer Desk

3

Worcester Boulevard
Entrance
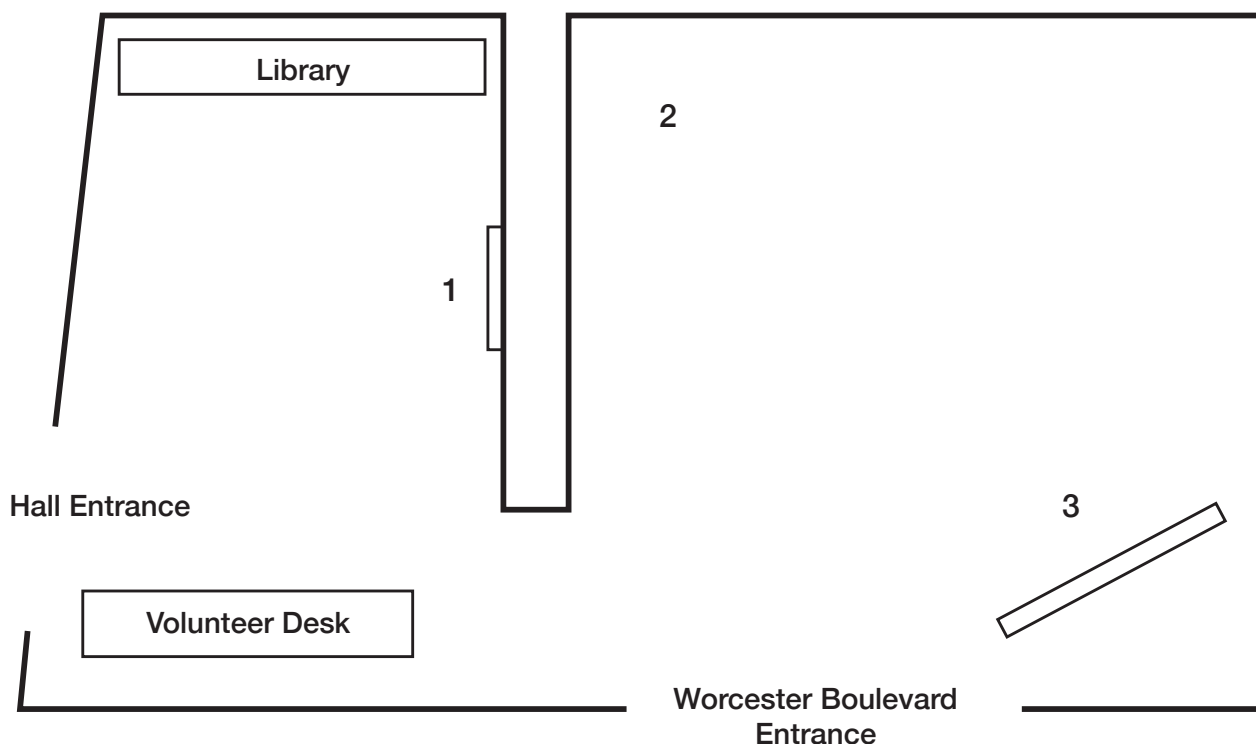
1 Kahurangiariki Smith, *FOB*, 2016, video game, TV, controller, milk crates, mat. Interactive installation.

2 Rhea Maheshwari, *Ornamental Utopia*, 2019, acrylic wall painting, 1 x 9.6m.

3 Skawennati, *She Falls For Ages*, 2017, 21:02 mins. Skawennati, *The Peacemaker Returns*, 2017, 18:39 mins.