

ART MONTHLY

AUSTRALASIA



Michael Parekowhai's *The Lighthouse*

N. S. Harsha's 'Charming Journey' in Tokyo

Alison Carroll on German artists in the South Seas



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WELCOME TO ISSUE 299

In my upcoming novel *The Pacific Room*, I write about the confluence of a number of South Seas souls, drawn from both history and the imagination – most notably the bohemian extended family of the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson who ‘happily island-hopped, pushing the edges of the Pacific north and eastward until they seemed to enter a dream’.

A similarly expansive impulse would seem to be at play in this special Asia-Pacific Winter bumper edition. It was evident in the group of travelling *Reisekünstler* artists who set sail from Germany in the mid-nineteenth century armed with Alexander von Humboldt’s magnum opus *Cosmos* and a curiosity for the South Seas, as Alison Carroll recounts. It is present in the 1960s work of Colin McCahon which, reviewer Peter Simpson notes, opened up to the greater Polynesian spirit of the artist’s new hometown of Auckland. And it is there in the contemporary Hawaiian artists whose conceptual work is showcased by Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira and which seeks to transcend the Islands’ ‘touristic veneer of sun, sand and swaying coconut trees’.

As *Art Monthly* approaches its 300th edition in August this year, it is our vision and honour to present Australasia’s visual artists on this journey outwards into territories still unknown and uncharted. For this, it is hard to think of a better mascot than Michael Parekowhai’s shiny Captain James Cook who graces our front cover, floating into the light. As essayist Robert Leonard ponders: ‘Is he a lighthouse keeper, tending the flame for us, or a prisoner, making us his warders?’ Parekowhai’s sculpture is but a stepping-off point into an ocean of artistic ideas.

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Michael Parekowhai, *The Lighthouse*, 2017, detail; Queens Wharf, Auckland;
image courtesy the artist, Michael Lett, Auckland, and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,
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From storied gourds to political billboard

Native Hawaiian artists in focus

Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira, Honolulu

With its natural endowment of white-sand beaches, verdant tropical mountain ranges, and salubrious climate, Hawai'i is more commonly associated with being a tourist hub rather than an art mecca. But that perception is in the process of changing, no doubt helped along with the advent of the Honolulu Biennial, which recently concluded its inaugural edition in May 2017.

A significant feature of the Biennial was the showcasing of Native Hawaiian art, which has been under-represented in mainstream Hawai'i art discourse until very recently. Native Hawaiian artists who participated in the exhibition included Drew Broderick, Kaili Chun, Charlton Kūpa'a Hee, Marques Hanalei Marzan and Keith Tallett. Broderick and Hee, in particular, are part of the most recent wave of Native Hawaiian talent to emerge on the contemporary art scene and deserve focused attention here for the points at which their works critically address local concerns that are often obfuscated by the Islands' touristic veneer of sun, sand and swaying coconut trees.

In his dual-sited open-air installation of ceramic vessels titled *Pōhue: Storied Gourds* (2017), Hee drew inspiration from the Renaissance artistic tradition of *sgraffito* (meaning to scratch onto) and Hawaiian gourd (*pōhue*) making to convey an ecologically inflected missive about the present-day challenges confronting Hawai'i's native habitat. Hee's work as an environmental scientist has afforded him a powerful viewpoint in this respect. At the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum where part of *Pōhue* was displayed, five gourd-like vessels hung from a breadfruit tree, a plant regarded by Hawaiians as a symbol of health and abundance. In the context of the installation, however, the cultural meaning of the tree was disrupted by the images etched on the surface of the vessels, each of which communicated a story of ecological imperilment. Various scenes showed the negative impact of introduced species such as rats, pigs and goats on native wildlife. On one vessel, for example, an endangered 'ākeke'e bird was depicted flying into its nest where a rat had devoured its precious clutch of eggs.

A few kilometres away at Foster Botanical Garden where the rest of Hee's exhibit was located, the leitmotif of tree-suspended vessels was maintained but with the addition of large ground-based urns representing the five principal gods in the Hawaiian pantheon: Kū, Lono, Kāne, Kanaloa and Haumea. These larger works stood like sentinels in the space, exuding a kind of protective authority over the fragile flora and fauna depicted in the vessels above. Importantly, as Hee relayed to me, Native Hawaiians can also be considered part of Hawai'i's threatened ecosystem. From the artist's perspective, they too are 'being pushed out' and endangered as a result of the damaging impact of American colonialism.

Exhibited at The Hub pop-up gallery in Honolulu, Drew Broderick's *Billboard I (The sovereignty of the land is perpetuated in righteousness)* (2017) upended preconceived notions of Hawai'i as an island getaway and highlighted lesser-known truths regarding the exploitation and occupation of Hawaiian lands through tourism and militarism. The two-piece work included a digital reproduction of George Carter's painting *Death of Captain Cook* (1783) and a billboard-size detail of the palm trees that featured in the painting's background. Incorporated in the top left corner of the billboard was a neon 'Vacancy' sign, emitting a penetrating fluorescent glow. Importantly, by enlarging the trees from Carter's original, Broderick emphasised the conspicuous use of such imagery in the promotion of the Islands for tourism, while the vacancy sign underscored Hawai'i's easy accessibility to the endless stream of tourists who visit each year, ironically resulting in many Hawaiians being forced to leave their own homeland – that is, to vacate it – because of the high cost of living. The word 'vacancy' also evoked the doctrine of terra nullius or 'vacant land', which was commonly used by colonial military forces to legitimise the seizure of Indigenous lands across the Pacific.

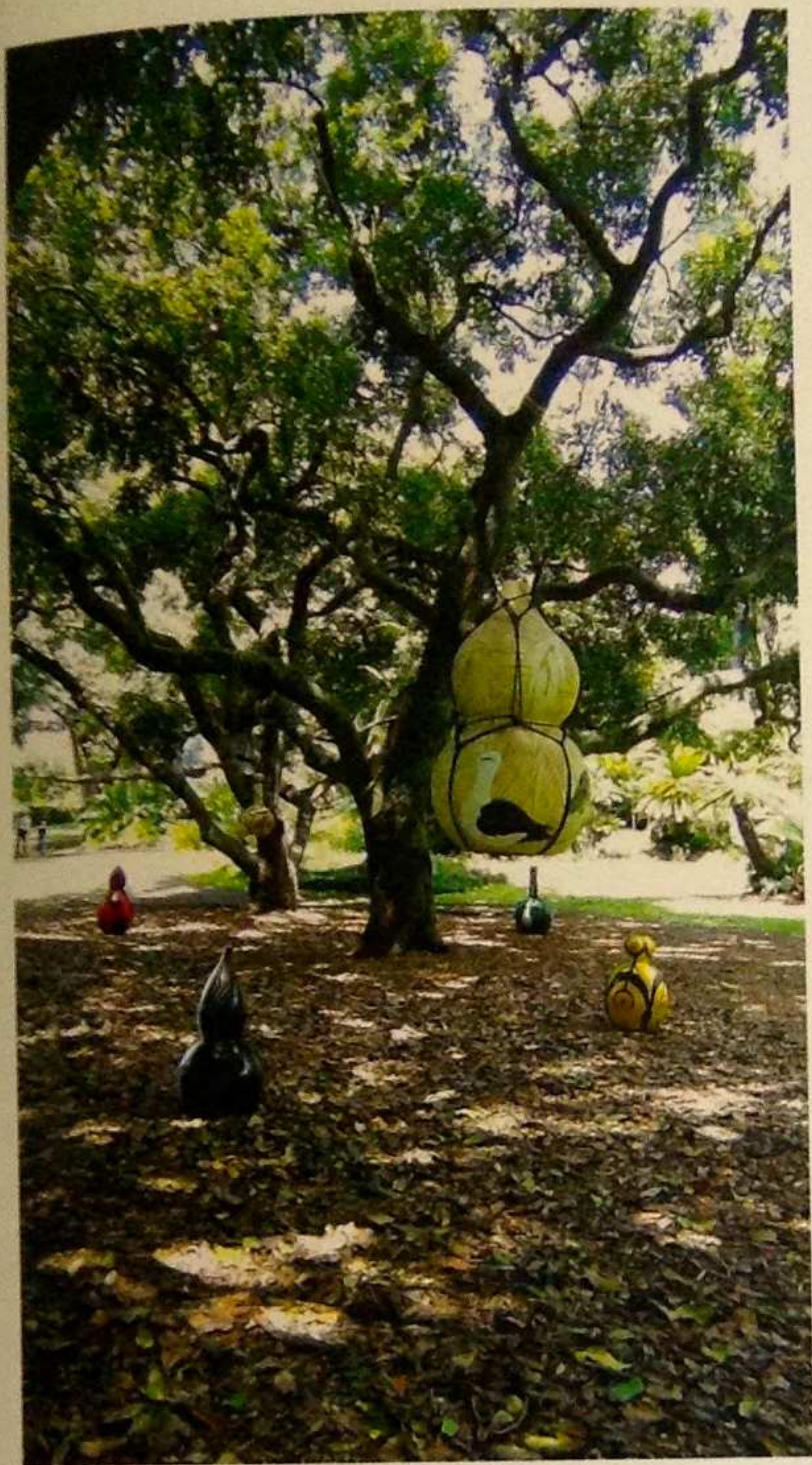
Billboard I showed how the history of colonial violence associated with the forcible occupation of Hawaiian lands – a process advanced by Cook and fully manifested in the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom by the United States in 1893 – has been historically framed out with romanticised images of the Islands looming large. In a conceptually masterful way, Broderick managed to capture this process by simultaneously magnifying the fallacy while drawing attention to a much larger truth: that the land and the people have prevailed in spite of everything – as emphasised in the last part of the work's title, *The sovereignty of the land is perpetuated in righteousness*. Significantly, the artist continues to view this will to perpetuate Indigenous sovereignty in Hawai'i as a collective effort. He underscored this point in a poem he sent me during our correspondence about his work. With his kind permission, I share part of it here:

Responsibility is shared.

The land is enduring in its nature, endless in its sovereignty.

From Hee's ecologically responsive gourds to Broderick's politically charged billboard, the Honolulu Biennial constituted a promising new site for bringing Native Hawaiian art into sharper, clearer focus. It will be an event to watch in the coming years as it pushes to include an increasingly broad selection of Native Hawaiian artists in its program.

The 1st Honolulu Biennial, 'The Middle of Now / Here', was exhibited in various venues from 8 March until 8 May 2017.



Top left:
 Charlton Kupa'a Hee, *Pōhue: Storied Gourds*, 2017, installation view, Foster Botanical Garden, Honolulu, 2017; photo: Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira
 Drew Broderick, *Billboard I. (The sovereignty of the land is perpetuated in righteousness)*, 2017, details; installation views, 1st Honolulu Biennial, 2017;
 neon, vinyl; images courtesy the artist