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*Losing Venus* at the Pitt Rivers Museum from 4 March to 29 November 2020, or online at <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/losing-venus>

The exhibition was closed for some of its run due to COVID-19. This article reviews the exhibition through its online offering and its catalogue which includes essays from Matt Smith, Cecilia Järdemar and Shelley Angelie Saggart.

The Pitt Rivers Museum is a space in which the inequities of British imperialism can feel stiflingly close. Yet in recent years the Museum has made concerted efforts to confront the lasting effects of its Victorian legacy, to make the Museum a more responsive, responsible and inclusive space. The artist Matt Smith's exhibition *Losing Venus*, curated by Smith and Andrew McLellan, Head of Education and Outreach at the Museum, can be situated within this broad and open-ended project. With tenderness and poignance, this exhibition makes visible the historic erasure of queer lives within this museum and others, highlighting the links between British imperialism, hegemonic cisheteronormativity, homophobic legislation and persecution, and demonstrates the kaleidoscopic potential of museum collections to tell stories previously censured or ignored.

In a webinar discussion on 10 February 2020 the Pitt Rivers Museum director Laura Van Broekhoven stated that it is not enough for museums to simply platform artists as a gesture towards doing the work of reflexive critical examination. Instead, the Museum endeavours to work with artists to change practices from within.<sup>1</sup> *Losing Venus*, then, represents a partnership between a museum willing to engage reflexively and critically, and an acclaimed artist whose creative interventions refocus and reframe objects and collections. Operating as a hybrid of artist and curator, Matt Smith's many previous works have included site-specific installations at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Fitzwilliam Museum and Leeds University Art Collections; his practice explores and critiques the standard narratives presented by cultural organizations, bringing to light marginalized viewpoints, and the power structures which have excluded them. The exhibition's title, *Losing Venus*, refers to the official purpose of James Cook's first voyage, to travel to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus, and speaks to the links between this pursuit of scientific knowledge, the claiming of lands on Cook's voyages as acts of British imperialism, and the effects of British rule on queer lives in the territories over which the empire extended. Of the 72 nations in which homosexual relations are today illegal or criminalized, 38 were formerly subjected to British rule. Thus, the policing of queer bodies and relationships, is a legacy intrinsically linked to the British Empire. The Pitt Rivers Museum, with its origins entrenched in the British imperial project, is well poised to tell this story.

Comprised of four elements in different media, *Losing Venus* is integrated within and among the Museum's permanent displays, with Smith's artworks speaking to and with the objects which surround them. A bow-fronted case on the first floor contains the exhibition title rendered in a softly glowing red light, directing the viewer to a collection of screenprints, and, beyond, a series of four dolls. Further along a vitrine contains the *Cook Service* (2020). While the main components of the exhibition are concentrated within this area—interspersed with the Museum's permanent displays—the suspension of two large banners



*Figure 1: Losing Venus in Pitt Rivers Museum. Photograph by William Pearce*

reaching from the first to the second floor would be immediately visible to viewers on entering the Museum. These banners—which duplicate two of the framed screenprints—hang over and above the uniquely cluttered displays of the Museum (Figure1).

### *The Cook Service*

The *Cook Service* imagines ‘the celebratory service that Wedgwood never made’ (Smith, 2020:15). Smith has created a series of plates, candlesticks, tureens and platters—beautiful and redolent of refined Georgian gentility—which feature images of Pacific peoples rendered by Enlightenment-era artists through a romanticized, Classical lens. Drawn from the illustrations accompanying the published accounts of Cook’s voyages, these are overlaid with depictions of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. As well as Pacific peoples, geographies, and fauna, the *Cook Service* also reproduces eighteenth century engravings of material culture collected on these voyages. On the same floor are displayed objects collected by Joseph Banks on the first voyage and George and Reinhold Forster on the second. A line of continuity may be traced between this display and the Service, between the appropriation of non-European objects and their folding into the museum scheme.

Beginning with the accounts of Captain Wallis’ ‘discovery’ of Tahiti, a European imaginary of the Pacific was established wherein a misapprehension





Figure 2: *The Cook Service*. Photograph by William Pearce

of Polynesian cultures as both attractively and aberrantly licentious prevailed. European seafarers saw societies such as Tahiti and Hawai'i as spaces in which their sexual desires could be indulged, yet in which same-sex relations were framed as unenlightened tendencies of supposedly 'primitive' cultures. The *Cook Service* suggests the othering of non-European bodies and sexualities deemed aberrant by the British imperial project, and the violence inherent within; a violence that is extended epistemically by the exclusion and erasure of identities and stories seen to deviate from the hegemonic cisheteronormativity historically

presented by ethnographic museums. The original remit of the Pitt Rivers Museum was to catalogue and display human diversity, yet this as pertains to sexuality and gender was not visible; this was a formulation of diversity from an inherently Eurocentric perspective. The ordered, symmetrical arrangement of the Service brings to mind a Victoria and Albert Museum mode of display and demonstrates how even objects as superficially innocent as Wedgwood services may be embedded within an overarching scheme of imperialism. In this work the violence beneath the veneer of Enlightenment rationality and humanism is never far away. Here, a series of plates feature European muskets trisected; another displays Cook being stabbed while Venus passively gazes on (Figure 2).

### *The dolls*

The exhibition makes visible the exclusion of queer lives by elucidating the historic pedagogic function of museums as a means of ‘civilizing’ the public and promulgating cisheteronormative moral values. In response to the Museum’s display case of dolls, the labelling of which refers to their use for teaching children, Smith considers what kind of dolls might be used to teach children about the realities of LGBTQ+ lives in different contexts. One, against a background evoking tapa cloth, refers to fa’afine; people who represent a third gender within Samoan society. Perhaps the most immanently affecting of the four dolls is one with its head covered in sackcloth and arms folded defensively in front: a visceral reminder of the persecution faced by LGBTQ+ people in the 72 countries in which homosexual relations are criminalized and punished with imprisonment, such as in Uganda, or, as in the case of Iran, with death. The inclusion of these pieces speaks to the linkages between cisheteronormativity, Eurocentrism and supposed modernity, and how the queer resonances of objects in a museum such as the Pitt Rivers may be elided. The four dolls make manifest within the Museum a diversity of sexualities and gender identities, embedded within other societies but overlooked by European museums. And they raise the question: in a museum so typologically organized, what space is there for those who cannot be confined within rigid taxonomies? (Figure 3)

### *The prints and banners*

To the right of the dolls are a series of prints (Figure 4), two of which have also been enlarged and suspended as semi-transparent banners. These prints, taken from images in the Museum’s extensive photographic collection, feature monochromatic images of different individuals, their clothing remaining but their faces and bodies removed, blank against coloured geometric patterns. These patterns evoke the gridded backgrounds of the anthropometric photographs





*Figure 3: The Dolls. Photograph by William Pearce*

taken by Henry Evans in the 1860s. Here Smith deploys and subverts the visual language of these ethnographic photographs. Each, as labelled, pertains to a region previously subject to British legislation, which rendered sexual activity between men a criminal offence. The reducing of human beings to bodies, objects to be morphometrically assessed rather than individual lives lived, is here made manifest. These images are deracinated from their original subjects





*Figure 4: The Prints. Screenprints on handmade Indian, Khadi cotton rag paper. Photograph by William Pearce*

as are the surrounding objects in the museum: in these prints, lives are reduced to material culture (what the persons depicted are wearing and carrying) and stripped of any contextualizing or personal information. The suspension of the banners in the centre of the museum space draws attention, almost with urgency, to the severance of the objects on display in the museum from the lives and identities of those who made and used them.

*Conclusion*

Artistic interventions in ethnographic museums, now a commonplace feature of programming, are by no means a new phenomenon; but *Losing Venus* demonstrates, with beauty and with feeling, the potential for such projects to critique, examine and disrupt standard museum narratives, and to bring forward LGBTQ+ perspectives and stories, long rendered subaltern by historic museum practices. Smith raises the point that, while ‘looking for queer relevance’ in the Museum may be construed as a ‘twenty-first century rereading of the collections’ (Smith 2020:18), any explicit connections between objects in the Museum and queer lives have been either excised or missed entirely by past collectors and curators. That is not to say that queer resonances and valences do not exist within the Museum’s collections. The continuities between the violence of British imperialism and the violence of the epistemic erasure of LGBTQ+ lives within the museum are in this exhibition braided together. It is an approach which is affective rather than didactic, and very effective for it.

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*Notes*

1. The webinar is available to view at <https://youtu.be/IoAPHVZMJnU>

*References*

Smith, Matt. (2020) *Losing Venus*. Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum