



## A good medium for living

*Leaping from a 1769 drawing by the navigator Tupaia, Sarah Munro's series Trade Items interrogates historic exchanges and environmental impacts by way of embroidery. Lily Hacking explores the new direction in Munro's practice.*

Sarah Munro is not afraid of hard work. Until relatively recently the artist was predominantly known for large-scale minimalist sculpture works made from fibreglass and automotive paint, their forms rendered using computer-aided design software. The works have the meticulous appearance of being factory made but actually required a huge amount of Munro's own physical labour, with each highly polished abstraction painstakingly sanded and spray-painted by the artist.

These days you're more likely to find Munro furiously stitching – engaged in an activity once reserved for ladies of a particular social class. The resulting embroideries offer a stark contrast to the glossy surfaces of her older works, but there is an intensity to this new mode of making that speaks to the large-scale sculptures and reveals something of Munro's self-confessed obsessive nature. There remains a consideration of the act of making and the body as method of production, with each embroidery requiring hours of intricate work. Their delicacy is countered by a complex subject matter, transforming these unassuming works into something that is at once playfully provocative and sharply political.

Munro's embroidered *Trade Items* is an ongoing series that references an original 1769 watercolour and pencil drawing by Tahitian navigator and high priest Tupaia. Originally from the island of Ra'iātea in the Society Islands, Tupaia travelled aboard the *Endeavour* on James Cook's first voyage to New Zealand. He died before the ship reached England, an early casualty of imperialism and a precursor to the death and violence that was to come. Tupaia's drawing is an incredible record of cultural encounter. It depicts English naturalist Joseph Banks exchanging a crayfish for a piece of cloth or tapa with an unidentified Māori man. For years this drawing was reproduced with the artist unknown. It was only after the discovery of a letter from Banks in 1997 that Tupaia's authorship was revealed.

"Of all the documents produced during Cook's voyages in the Pacific I find Tupaia's record of this trade the most interesting," says Munro. "I'm not particularly interested in Captain Cook. I'm more intrigued by Tupaia. I think about all the unrecorded knowledge lost with him, and of him. He's a much more interesting historical character." Munro's work plays off the original drawing, with each embroidery swapping out the crayfish and tapa to depict a different

Title page: Sarah Munro and Frank Schwere, *First Trade*, *Pickersgill Harbour*, *Dusky Sound*, 2014, digital inkjet, 1378 x 3000mm. Courtesy of Sarah Munro

Below: Sarah Munro, *Surface Detail*, 2012, automotive paint over custom-made fibreglass support. Installation view of *Acting Out*, 2017, Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi. Photo: Shaun Matthews, courtesy of Adam Art Gallery

exchange between the two central figures. In some works endemic animals or plants are exchanged for European ones, with the latter often signalling the eventual demise of the native species. Other works point to the destruction of the natural environment in the face of farming and manufacturing practices.

While Munro's fibreglass works appear as vestiges from an imagined future, these new works address the past from a contemporary perspective. They highlight the subjective and complex nature of history and the predominance of eurocentric and male-oriented accounts of the Pacific.

"As a feminist I am cognisant of the many problematic biases embedded in 'history' when written by a dominant culture from within its cultural paradigm. Most narratives of colonisation are written from a coloniser perspective," says Munro. The artist recognises the issues inherent in appropriating Tupaia's work, admitting she is still reconciling her use of his drawing.

Munro is quick to state that Tupaia isn't the central motivation for the new body of work, despite its obvious debt to the original drawing. "My concern is focused on the consequences of our attitude and belief that we are the dominant species," she says. The *Trade Items* works not only offer a meditation on that which has come before, but consider the ongoing implications of this exchange, while addressing an increasingly uncertain environmental future.

In 2014 Munro travelled to Dusky Sound with fellow artists, including Mark Adams, Frank Schwere and partner Alex Monteith. Here, surrounded by the mists and histories of Fiordland National Park, Munro's sense of environmental disquietude was brought sharply into focus. "I kept walking out on deck in the morning as the sun came up... I mean the sublime beauty of it all was just a bit ridiculous. And I was overwhelmed by this powerful feeling of this place not being made for us. I felt my insignificance," reflects Munro.





Sarah Munro, *Trade Item – Fabric/Tapa, Crayfish*, 2017; *Trade Item – Dairy Industry, Toheroa, Tuatua bivalve molluscs*, 2017; *Trade Item – Wallaby, Karamu, Mahoe*, 2017; and *Trade Item – Possum, Totara*, 2018; all unbleached calico, cloth, thread, 300 x 300mm. Images courtesy of the artist and Page Blackie Gallery

Prior to the trip, Munro had decided to stop working with fibreglass and automotive paint due to ongoing health concerns. “This current shift in my practice was precipitated by various events in my life that changed my priorities considerably. One of those factors was that I became quite unwell,” says Munro. “The fatigue was so horrendous that I needed to take a rest after crossing a room. I think once you’ve been through something like that it really changes your world.” She was thinking a lot about her practice and the kind of work she wanted to make.

“I was feeling a bit adrift trying to figure out what to do, and whether I would even keep making work. I had decided I couldn’t keep using the fibreglass and automotive paint because I really needed to get well and I needed to make it less gruelling and give my body the chance to get back on track. That material and the kind of finish it produced was so integral to my thinking and making. I didn’t actually like using the material. Spray-painting is a terrible thing to do. Those materials did what I needed them to do but I hated using them. I was kind of faking this idea of a factory. I was the factory!”

Munro had brought fabric and embroidery materials on board. “I have always sewn and was quite into embroidery as a kid. It was something my grandmother taught me.” She thought she might continue a project she had begun the previous year while traveling through Cambodia. However, when she arrived in Dusky Sound that project felt far removed from her new surroundings, the environment that inspired the wild and sublime paintings of William Hodges, the artist on Cook’s second voyage. Munro wanted to make something that responded to this particular place and its history. “I happened to have a book about Tupaia that I had brought with me, and I remembered this drawing from a time before it was attributed to Tupaia,” she says.

She didn’t know it at the time, but this was to be the basis of the first work in the *Trade Items* series and the new direction in her practice.

I ask Munro if she considers *Trade Items* to be a particularly feminist body of work – a question prompted by the historically gendered associations of the medium but also because Munro’s practice has evolved to fit with life as primary caregiver to her young children. She makes work between feeding, playing, naps and tantrums. There’s a photo of Munro cutting out fabric while inside a child’s playpen, out of reach of little hands. In another image she sits working on the floor with her youngest daughter sleeping on her outstretched legs. These intimate photographs capture something of the reality for many women artists. “The same criteria that meant embroidery was a good medium for living on a boat in Dusky Sound coincidentally make it a good fit for motherhood.” In Dusky Sound, on a boat with a group of men for three weeks – amidst conversations about Hodges, Banks and Cook – Munro became increasingly conscious of her gender and the fact that women weren’t represented in the historical narrative of the area.

“While a ship is usually referred to as a ‘she’, the seafaring superstition of Cook’s time was that a woman on board was unlucky, could result in an angry sea and put the crew in peril. The women had to stay home. They don’t appear in the central heroic narrative of Cook’s ‘adventures’.”

I encountered Munro’s embroideries last year while working at Page Blackie Gallery. Her exhibition *Nature Unassisted by Art* with photographer Frank Schwere saw a suite of the *Trade Items* embroideries presented alongside a series of Schwere’s large-format photographs depicting Dusky Sound. In a photographic triptych made by Munro



and Schwere, Munro sits embroidering on the rocky shore of Pickersgill Harbour with a large 'stunt lobster' hilariously positioned at her side. "The photo I made with Frank Schwere was a way of locating myself in the history of that place. And the cray indicates the staged nature of the photo," says Munro. "Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) was in my head as we were making it. We discussed recreating classical angles and composition... while I sat there in my very unclassical (but fit for purpose) outdoor gear," she laughs.

Earlier this year Munro attended Under Her Eye, a conference in London which brought together international women leaders, scientists, artists and academics working to address climate change. While she was there she had the opportunity to view Tupaia's drawing, which is held in the collection of the British Library and was coincidentally on display as part of *James Cook: The Voyages*, an exhibition marking 250 years since Cook's first expedition. She is now working with the British Library in the hope of creating another photographic work in response to the original. In the meantime, Munro will continue working on the *Trade Items* series. "It's about finding the critical mass that activates the medium. There's something in the repetition," she says, "and the fact that they are so clearly handmade. Before I was denying the handmade in my work. But these works do the opposite. They are very human. Finding that critical mass can shift something from being a small decorative object to something more obviously committed."



Sarah Munro aboard MV *Pembroke*, Dusky Sound, 2014.  
Photo: Alex Monteith

*Sarah Munro has work in the exhibition From where I stand, my eye will send a light to you in the North, curated by Gabriela Salgado, at Te Tuhi, Auckland, until 11 November. She has an exhibition scheduled for October–November 2019 at Page Blackie Gallery, Wellington.*