



**Wonderlust: the influence of natural history illustration
and ornamentation on perceptions of the exotic in
Australia**

College of Arts and Social Sciences

Research School of Humanities and the Arts

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Doctor of Philosophy

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**Dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Doctor of Philosophy**

Declaration of Originality

I,hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two parts: a Studio Research component with an accompanying Exegesis (66%), and a Dissertation (33%). The Dissertation presented here examines the historical and cultural context of the production of natural history illustration and ornamentation, and the formal qualities of these visual forms that enabled them to inform and disseminate exotic constructions and perceptions. These visual forms were a significant part of the intellectual and cultural framework of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and frequently represented the 'other' as desirable and different. The aesthetic responses generated by such exotic representations operated subliminally to develop and reinforce dualistic notions surrounding the difference of the distant 'other' in comparison to the European self. The Dissertation examines the specificity of the operation of these visual forms in relation to exotic perceptions of the Australian 'other' from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, and develops an argument about the rise of a unique mode of perceiving the Australian 'other'.

The Dissertation elaborates the theoretical context for the studio research which is an evocation and examination of the aesthetic experience of the exotic, informed by natural history illustration and ornamentation. A process of quotation and transformation of historical imagery has been developed to investigate foundational representations and perceptions of the Australian exoticised 'other' and the manner that this imagery persists and reforms as it circulates in society. The imagery is reworked by a painting process that utilises the material and formal properties of paint to explore the nature of the aesthetic perception of the exotic while also providing a metaphoric model of the manner that the self is defined in relation to the 'other'. The process offers an alternative mode of conceiving the 'other' within the post-colonial concept of hybridity.

The results of the studio research are elaborated in the Exegesis and will be presented as a site-specific installation of paintings in the ANU School of Art Gallery from 17 to 26 March 2010.

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Introduction: Locating the 'other'

Frame of reference and motivations

This body of research, conducted in my studio and at my desk was initiated by the complicated and often contradictory perceptions of place that I experience. Fundamentally I feel a paradoxical mixture of pleasure and insecurity, excitement and fear when confronted with the strangeness of Australia outside of my familiar world of suburbia. Beyond a mannered fringe of houses and gardens alongside a fragile beauty I perceive an Australia of harsh light and dryness, inedible plants, and undomesticated animals; a land that does not allow for survival of the lost. This land with a history of brutal colonisation, penal servitude and a displaced indigenous population is a place that does not feel familiar to me. I am uncomfortable in the confrontation with the ‘otherness’ of Australia’s natural environment and indigenous people who I perceive as perplexing, enticing and unsettlingly strange. Reminded of my status as settler I become uncertain who the ‘other’ actually is.

One of the art theory courses I undertook as an undergraduate, *Cartographies: Art, Exploration and Knowledge* introduced me to a discourse which struck a resonance with these feelings of disquieting wonder and was the impetus for my interest in the intersection between visual languages outside of the canon of fine art, perceptions of the natural world and the increasing bodies of knowledge regarding the newly discovered lands and peoples during the eighteenth century. Reading Bernard Smith’s text during this course, *Imaging the Pacific: in the wake of the Cook Voyages*,¹ introduced me to the aesthetic perception of the exotic, which provided an entry-point for my exploration of the development and evolution of European perceptions of Australia. The reception, circulation and translation of natural history illustrations created by artists aboard the voyages of discovery in this period were integral to the formation of this perception of the distant exotic ‘other’. Situated as a fifth generation Australian settler, the formation of convict, explorer and settler perceptions feels close and relevant to my own

¹ Bernard Smith, *Imaging the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1992)

contemporary experience. This research project has grown from the desire to understand how these initial perceptions and the resultant often fabulous constructions have persisted and evolved into their contemporary form. Aligned to this enquiry was the certainty in my mind that the construction of the 'other' in Australia differed to that elsewhere. I wished to know how and why this distinction developed.

The decision to focus my research within the visual forms of natural history illustration and ornamentation was based on several factors. Firstly, natural history illustration was a highly significant form of imagery during the period of British colonisation of Australia. The importance of drawing was elevated in this period in the pursuit of scientific knowledge and imperial power.² Illustrations of natural history and ethnographic subjects as well as topographic views were central to these processes. Secondly, my own artistic practice has been persistently centred on the natural world. I consider this a result of an enduring personal enquiry to understand and investigate the intellectual, emotive and aesthetic appeal that plants, birds, animals and the natural environment hold for me. As I experience a sense of the captivating wonder bound within the process of creating imagery from close observation of a living creature I feel a degree of empathy with the widespread enthusiasm that existed historically for the production of this form of imagery. Similarly, ornamental imagery has great aesthetic appeal for me. The recognition that the mercurial nature of ornamental forms provides a sensitive marker of shifting cultural tastes and values stimulated my interest in investigating the relationship between domestic decorative imagery, constructions of nature and perceptions of the natural world in Australia. Finally, although conventional art history focuses nearly exclusively on the fine arts as a cultural marker, examining alternative visual textual forms enables a richly insightful body of information to be gleaned. Nicholas Thomas points out that visual imagery such as maps, botanical illustrations, frontispieces, diagrams, prints and postcards are increasingly recognised as valuable revelatory materials. Such imagery may not only enhance textual records but can also communicate additional or discordant information regarding cultural perceptions.³ I believed that study of the commonplace imagery which surrounded settlers, such as ornamental imagery in their domestic environment and natural history illustration reproduced within popular periodicals, newspapers and books, would offer a

² *Ibid.* 28.

³ Nicholas Thomas, Diane Losche, and Assistant editor Jennifer Newell, eds., *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

subtle and nuanced revelation of the way in which the exotic was constructed and perceived.

Methodology

As this research project is concerned with the role of natural history illustration and ornamentation in engendering perceptions of the exotic and uncanny in post-settlement Australia, the nature of these practices from the late eighteenth century onwards is the focus of my investigation. A number of research questions structured the investigation of my topic, relating to the manner in which natural history illustration and ornament have informed the construction of the exotic in Australia. The most salient of these formative questions were as follows:

What is the relationship between the practice of ornamentation and perceptions of the natural world?

What were the formal qualities and cultural context of the production of natural history illustration and ornamentation that ensured that they both informed perceptions and acted as carriers of the exotic in the European imagination?

How did these visual languages specifically influence the formation and evolution of the perception of the exotic in Australia?

What were the unique features of the construction and experience of the exotic in Australia? In particular what, if any, relationship exists between perceptions of the exotic and the uncanny in response to the natural environment?

Has domestic ornamental imagery influenced the manifestation of the uncanny in Australia and if so in what manner?

I used three main methods: literature review, examination of primary sources and studio research concurrently in order to examine these questions. Each method provided a different experiential means of investigating my topic. The theoretical research of the Dissertation and the perceptual research inherent in the creation of artefacts within the studio mutually informed each other, particularly in my understanding of the perception and location of the 'other'. For the sake of clarity I have confined discussion of the

progress and results of the studio research to the Exegesis. This Dissertation elaborates the conclusions that I drew from my examination of the relevant literature and field studies undertaken to view primary sources. The range of archival material examined includes the Journals of Sydney Parkinson (1773), John Hawkesworth (1773), John White (1790), La Perouse (1791), John Hunter (1793), François Peron (1824) and La Harpe (1831) from the National Library of Australia and the Menzies Library (ANU); the illustrations of Sarah Stone in the Mitchell Library (Sydney) and the First Fleet Collection (which included the Port Jackson Painter and Thomas Watling) in the British National History Museum (London). The scenic wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacific* situated in the National Gallery of Australia was studied as was the wallpaper archive within the Caroline Simpson Collection (Historic Houses Trust, New South Wales, Sydney) which provided samples of wallpaper, journals and manuals available in Australia in the early twentieth century and unpublished material relating to the Gilkes and Morrisons Wallpaper companies. Within the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) I immersed myself in British decorative art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly textiles. Many of these artefacts provided rich examples of the eclectic, consuming nature of the process of exoticism. Also of great value was a visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) which continues to present its collection of exotic artefacts in the same manner devised at its inception in 1884. The ability to engage with original material was immensely valuable as much of the research project explores the impact of these very same artefacts on the formation of aesthetic perceptions of the exotic in the contemporaneous British and Australian cultures. Selected case studies undertaken during field work are presented throughout the Dissertation.

Theoretical research using a range of texts was vital for my understanding of the contextual cultural framework and key concepts within the topic. The manner in which I understand and employ these fundamental concepts and terms that form the frame of reference of this research project are defined as follows:

Natural history illustration: This is defined broadly as the graphic documentary field record created as a result of direct observation of the natural history subject. Constraints such as available time, difficult access and location of the subject ensured that these records were usually pencil and watercolour drawings on paper which aimed to observe and document as much information as possible in the often limited time available. The speed with which field studies may be executed and the portability of the associated materials of their production allowed this form of visual recording prior to

photography to be the most appropriate for capturing the vast volume of visual information that bombarded explorers, travellers and field naturalists. Natural history illustration's ability to privilege particular aspects of the information it documents has ensured that it is still preferred to photography as a means of visual documentation in specific aesthetic and scientific circumstances. The open diagrammatic nature of field studies enables them to absorb various meanings particularly when selected field studies are amended and transformed into 'finished' works; a process reliant on a varying combination of visual memory, collected samples, textual notes and previously published images.⁴ It is significant that the processes of naming, classification by comparison and collecting, conducted with the aim to understand and order the information gleaned are associated with the production of natural history illustrations.

Ornamentation: the definition I have employed is derived from James Trilling's text, *Ornament: a modern perspective*. Trilling distinguishes between ornament and decoration, decoration defined as the most general term for the addition of one work of art to another so that it is physically and visually dependent on it. For example Michelangelo's Last Judgement is part of the decoration of the Sistine Chapel, but it is not classified as ornament.⁵ Rather 'ornament is decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content. Ornament can and does have representation, narrative and symbolic content, but visual pleasure must be paramount.'⁶ Ornamentation plays a substantial yet shifting role in cultural definition, the significance of individual motifs on identity being linked to the social use of the ornamented object. Exoticism is readily manifest in ornament which rapidly alters its form to influence and reflect popular taste for distant and different visual ornamental cultures. This transmission and intermingling of motifs is a fertile and important area of artistic and cultural exchange

Exotic: The implications of identifying a distant and different 'other' are complicated by the construction of the exotic. The exotic is not an inherent quality found in particular people, objects or places; rather it is a particular form of culturally determined aesthetic perception – 'one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it

⁴ Bronwen Douglas, 'Art as an Ethno-Historical Text: Science, Representation and Indigenous Presence in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Oceanic Voyage Literature,' in *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, ed. Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66.

⁵ James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective, Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003), 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*

domesticates them.’⁷ The perception of attractive strangeness is central within the construction of the concept of the exotic and its implications. This is because identification of the strange or unusual exotic ‘other’ is made by comparison to the usual and familiar and its attractiveness generates degrees of often ambivalent desire. Particularly during the nineteenth century the exotic (distant) foreign ‘other’ whether plant, animal, artefact or person carried strong, commercially valuable connotations of stimulating and exciting difference. Desire for the wonder of these exotic ‘others’ ensured their adoption as commodities in the consuming domestic economy.⁸

Uncanny: Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay, *Das Unheimliche*, is the seminal text that elaborates this concept.⁹ Freud describes the uncanny as a specific form of fear or dread which is initiated by a variety of circumstances to which individuals vary in sensitivity. These circumstances are located or concealed within those that were formerly perceived as safe and homely. It is not simply the experience of strangeness or alienation but a particular mingling of the familiar and unfamiliar. The concept is further extended by the theories of Julia Kristeva who states perception of the uncanny occurs when the stranger or ‘other’ is recognised within the notion of the self.¹⁰

Chapter outline

Chapter One begins by describing the intellectual interest and wonder generated in response to the natural world at the time of European settlement of Australia. Natural history illustrations introduced a receptive Western public to previously undescribed flora, fauna and peoples. The wonder experienced in response to these illustrations was integral to the establishment and acceptance of the cultural construction of the exotic. The aesthetic perception of the exotic was developed further by the manner in which the novel subjects were represented and presented. Within the chapter I explore the formal characteristics and the cultural context of production of natural history illustration that ensured that this form of imagery was intrinsically involved with informing the ability

⁷ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 13.

⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 94.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

of the West to imagine the 'other'. The widespread contribution that natural history illustration made was largely due to the translation and circulation of the illustrations into other documentary and decorative forms. The chapter concludes with a case study of the panoramic wallpaper, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*.

Chapter Two explores the reciprocal relationship between perceptions of the natural world and the culturally universal practice of ornamentation. The visual representation of aspects of the natural world in domestic ornamentation is often the most frequent mode of experiencing a conception of nature. This form of imagery both reflects and informs constructions of nature and perceptions of the natural world while exerting formative and expressive influences on identity. Within the chapter I examine the significance of the process of ornamentation to the human psyche; the relationship between the discourses surrounding ornamentation and philosophies of humanity's relationship to the natural world and the influence of modernism on the decorative arts. Wallpaper imagery of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is investigated as a case study of this interrelationship. Observations regarding the nature of influence between ornamentation and perceptions of the natural world generally are extrapolated to the specific experience of the exotic and uncanny in Australia.

The final chapter investigates the cultural mechanism of taste as a measure of social aspirations and cultural tensions in Australia. The establishment of Australian tastes from a blend of historical and cultural factors is explored as is the interrelationship between taste and perceptions of the natural environment. Taste as manifested by the widespread consumption of domestic ornamental wallpaper imagery until the mid twentieth century is examined as a case study which relates the unique visual properties of wallpaper to concepts of the home and the uncanny. A discussion of the relationship between an evolving contradictory sense of nationalism and ornamentation in Australia concludes the chapter.

The conclusion reiterates the role of natural history illustration and ornamentation in informing the construction and perception of the exotic 'other'. The significance of the formal qualities and manner of circulation of these visual forms is emphasised within the broad historical, political and cultural framework that informed the specificity of the process of exoticism in Australia. I relate this specificity to the development of a distinctive binary pairing within the operation of the Manichean allegory in Australia. I develop this argument by connecting the purposeful constructions of self and national

identity, the experience of the uncanny and the persisting process of exoticism in Australia.