

Gavin Hurley at Boutwell Draper Gallery, Sydney, 2008

In April 1770, after a complete circumnavigation of New Zealand, Captain James Cook turned the *Endeavour* westwards and headed for Australia. Nearly two and a half centuries later Auckland-based artist Gavin Hurley has charted a similar course, although adopting a rather different angle of approach. The object of his particular voyage of discovery is a reworking of the intervening period, between Cook's and our own, when the vast interior of the island continent of Australia was being explored by Europeans for the first time.

The immediate stimulus for this exhibition was the set of bronze busts of Australian explorers emblazoned on the doors at the Public Library of New South Wales in Sydney. These hardy adventurers have no doubt been household names on this side of the Tasman, and essential to any understanding of the country's history. In the spirit of C.E.R. (Closer Economic Relations, the free trade agreement between Australia and New Zealand, which came into force in early 1983), Hurley has included two who made their marks on both sides of the Tasman; Edward John Eyre (who was a sheep-farmer, magistrate and explorer in Australia prior to becoming lieutenant-governor of New Zealand) and Sir George Grey (an explorer in Western Australia before serving, at various stages, as both governor and premier of New Zealand).

Hurley's distinctive brand of portraiture has its origins in secondary sources. Most are the result of serendipitous finds in fleamarkets and secondhand bookshops, with adventures of the *Boys' Own* variety proving a particularly fertile field. Preferring popular imagery which has already passed through several reproductive processes, Hurley gives it another going-over. Likely subjects are reduced to the barest minimum needed for 'identification', although a few handy clues may be provided. Thus a stick-on moustache or a pipe inserted in the mouth might suggest the persona of a private detective, while the great navigator, James Cook himself, has been signified merely by the application of an 18th century wig and occasional 'captain' badge.

If Victorians had a weakness for excessive ornament, Hurley has over-ruled it here. Facial features are simplified, to outlines and areas of mostly unmodelled colour, an approach that also suits his supportive collage work. At the same time Hurley makes little attempt to cover his own tracks; he intentionally uses thinned pigments on open weave hessian to evoke the sense of textured pages from an old book.

Like Cook before them, these 19th century Australian gentlemen are character types in Hurley's historical identikit parade. They give little away, but perhaps just enough to be recognized by anyone with a sense of history. Their luxuriant beards are obvious indicators of their era and, incidentally, have more than a passing resemblance to that worn by Mick Jagger's unlikely Ned Kelly in the 1970 movie. A century or so on, these intrepid heroes have been distanced from their once illustrious past. There are no signs of any terrible ordeals in the harsh interior etched on these smooth complexions, while their larger-than-life faces fill the canvas, conveniently leaving little room for any landscape that might usefully hint at a location.

These characters came to Hurley via history books and a library door, as acknowledged heroes from a golden age of Australian exploration. After being subjected to his distinctive reductive process they have

become – almost - blank canvases, apart from hints of various emotions. If they appear mellow, melancholy or coolly detached, perhaps it is because they are mindful of being at the mercy of revisionist historians. And if they seem somewhat surprised, they may simply be wondering why they've now come in for all this belated attention at the hands of an artist from across the Tasman.

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