

Tom Nicholson

We're standing on the beach at Two Tree Point. It's a small rocky point on Adventure Bay, Bruny Island, just off the east coast of Tasmania. There's a little creek here, Resolution Creek, where Captain Cook's party collected water when they spent time on Bruny Island in January 1777, on the way to the Pacific, where Cook was ultimately killed. But for both of us this site is connected to that strange naval library in Portsmouth, inside a British naval base...

Greg Lehman

It's hard work getting in there, going past all those security people. Half of them didn't even know that there was a library. That took me half the time.

TN

The reason for both of us going to Portsmouth – you must have been there a couple of years before my visit early last year – was the same thing that brings us to this place. It's the earliest known European image of contact, John Webber's drawing *An interview between Captain Cook and the natives*, the first in a very long and complicated lineage. The drawing shows Cook's encounter with a group of twenty-four Aboriginal men, with a group of very indistinctly drawn men from Cook's party present too. Seeing the drawing on a naval base makes for a very particular encounter. It's also a really big drawing, which I think for both of us was a significant part of what unfolded from spending time with it...

GL

It's so big that you can't get far enough away from the drawing to see it very readily as one thing. I ended up photographing it in fragments.

TN

We looked at those photographs when we caught up in Geelong last year. They reminded me of the encounter with the drawing, the time I spent poring over its surface in fragments in that naval library. It must have been something similar for him making the drawing. If you look at the washes on the drawing, it's clear he made it on a horizontal surface. So he must have evolved the drawing in fragments too, in some way.

*Unfolding large sheet of paper*

I thought it was good to have a copy of the drawing at scale with us here on the beach.

GL

The drawing is two pieces of paper put together. Is this from the chart store? Is it chart paper?

TN

I think it makes sense that it's two pieces of chart paper stuck together. The scale of it means he could not have made it on the beach. There is a very strong sense of it having been made back on the ship, on the basis of a set of recollections, or a set of designations. I think that's also part of its curious space as a picture. On the one hand, in some moments it suggests a kind of proximity to the scene that's very interesting. And in other ways it insists on a kind of distance from the scene.

GL

When I first saw this image, I thought to myself that Webber had intentionally imagined or fabricated a perspective. I am fascinated by the relationship between the viewer and the work, and there is no doubt that artists were very conscious of *placing* the viewer. I initially thought that Webber had tried to place the viewer at a viewpoint which evoked the idea of looking at this scene, if not from the deck of the Resolution, then from an imperial perspective, off-shore – the sense of someone who is about to arrive – in order to be able to appeal to the European imagination.

TN

There are lots of strange and awkward early European images of contact, where you sense someone trying to make sense of something they do not know through the act of drawing. They're trying to figure something out. That's not how I found the Webber drawing when I saw it in Portsmouth. It felt very strongly like a set of projections. I became fascinated with the designations of scarification on the bodies of some of the Aboriginal men in the drawing. It was a moment in the drawing where I felt Webber was recalling something he had seen which he did not know. He's remembering something, not projecting. It feels like there is a visual memory there: these lines in motion on those bodies before him.

The lines that could be scars in Webber's drawing also suggest a radical sense of bodily closeness, different to that viewpoint you're describing. They are part of the back and forth between proximity and distance the drawing seems to produce, including the fact that we always feel like we're too close to the

actual object, at the same time that the drawing's viewpoint wants to produce a certain distance from the encounter that is taking place. But apart from those scars, the drawing felt quite strongly like a concoction when I looked at it in Portsmouth. And when I came to Bruny last year with Pete, I did not expect to find any one place that the drawing shows. We happened to come down to this beach to look at the little historical marker, and I suddenly realised I was looking at the little rocky point at the drawing's right...

GL

Yeah, having understood what is happening here in terms of the landscape and this rocky stuff that sticks out, I realise that he actually could have been sitting exactly at this viewpoint.

TN

When you are on these rocks that jut out into the sea, the profile of the little rocky point is very distinctly recognisable.

GL

It's not a construct at all. This is where he was sitting to create his sketch. This boat pulled up in the foreground, that's what put me out into water. But, no, no, it's tucked in on the beach here behind the rocks.

TN

It's the only Webber drawing in that naval library. Most of the other drawings by Webber from that voyage are in the British Library in London. It's a singular drawing not just because it's the first European image of contact. It's more or less the only drawing of this kind that Webber did not make into an engraving and include in the published account. There is a kind of void after the drawing, in terms of the life of this image.

GL

And if we look at what he was doing later in his career and hazard to map back from that and try to divine his inclinations in this drawing, Webber was demonstrating a focus later in his career on producing typical, high-ranking products of an academy painter: in other words, history paintings. Which is exactly the pretensions that Benjamin Duttereau had. Whereas portraiture was fairly low-ranking stuff for an academy painter to be producing. There was a definite hierarchy... This was Joshua Reynolds' influence. And Benjamin West.

TN

I think one of the problems with Webber is that he is trained as an artist and he is self-conscious about being an artist. In this drawing you feel that quite strongly. He is trying to orchestrate something in the way that an artist does.

GL

To return to Pete's point from earlier, these European figures are the same resolution. Cook and the Aboriginal man at the front are arguably similarly worked up. And then these guys, the group of Aboriginal men, are the heroes. This is the cast. But it's also interesting if you look at the portraits of Aboriginal people that Webber produced, this is the same man. Basically, apart from the guy with the humpback, it's a cookie-cutter. He has just populated the scene with the same guy. Because I suspect he's got him in his sketchbook and he's just reproduced him. This all suggests that the drawing is a composite. This was worked up, probably later, on board, from a number of sketches that he had made. These are quite big sheets to be trying to work with *en plein air*. I reckon he had a number of smaller sketches – why the hell aren't these in the archive? If they were, we'd know this for sure.

TN

The drawing does feel like he is tracking towards a history painting.

GL

Yeah, it's a study. I feel quite confident that Webber had it in mind that this could be worked up as a major painting, because it was quite a significant moment. It was probably sitting there in his folio along with a few other similar things he could work up. And then Cook was killed. And we all know Webber from his most famous work, The death of Cook. That was his grand history painting...

TN

For whatever reason this drawing has an orphaned character, an image that never fully came into being. I think part of the reason he didn't make a painting or an engraving out of it is that it's quite an awkward composition. As you said earlier Rachael, it has this strange feature where literally half of the picture, the top half of the picture, is basically a kind of void. And I think the size of the paper produces a kind of awkwardness as well.

GL

The composition is not great. History paintings tend to have a sweep of diagonals. This is quite planar. In The death of Cook, you have the coastline sweeping away in the background, so there is a sense of depth.

TN

When we caught up last year we talked a lot about the way Webber's drawing anticipates The death of Cook. There is Cook's gesture, which is remarkably similar to the famous gesture in that painting. Both take place on a shoreline. Both have the same, very strong binary composition, with Europeans grouped on the left and the "natives" on the right. As you have pointed out, Greg, the Hawaiian who is about to kill Cook in The death of Cook is remarkably close to the physiognomy of the main Aboriginal figure in the Webber drawing, identical in his proximity to Cook, and occupies almost exactly the same position in the picture.

There are a lot of cues that suggest that The death of Cook assumes this Interview drawing as its preparatory image. Even if that is only on an unconscious level – and I suspect it's not unconscious, that it's a self-conscious relationship – I wonder if the fact that he used all these things about this Bruny Island drawing in The death of Cook was part of the drawing's redundancy. Having made The death of Cook, it's like...

GL

...it's already published.

TN

In other words, this earliest European image of contact is also the beginning of a pictorial chain, which runs through Webber's own The death of Cook up to Federation's most famous painting – the Emanuel Philips Fox painting, The landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay. Nick Thomas talks about how Philips Fox takes as the painting's central gesture Cook's gesture from Webber's The death of Cook, which is a gesture that really seems to originate here, in this Interview drawing. In a strange way this Webber drawing ends up mapping backwards to the earlier event – Cook at Botany Bay in 1770 – as well as forwards to Federation – Philips Fox's painting of the dubious origins of nationhood.

GL

Here is a question: was Webber there for the death of Cook? Was he in a position to know that this was going to happen, have

his sketchbook there and "whoooo. whoo whoo whoo. Hold on. The killing blow... I need to get that down". Maybe this drawing is the closest thing he had to a sketch of the scene in his portfolio.

TN

That's right. It's very unlikely he was there for Cook's death. That increases the stakes with this drawing. This is the place where he did see Cook negotiate an awkward relationship with indigenous people. And in turn he orchestrated that into this image, synthesising the encounter into this gesture.

GL

Yes, he's presenting one of those Cook medals. The voyage set out with 1500 of those Cook medals. They were handed out willy-nilly to natives along the way. This is one of those medals, mounted on a chain or ribbon.

TN

What do you understand it to be orchestrating to say, as a gesture, as a picture?

GL

This is about Cook's command of the situation. Cook is being generous and magnanimous, which of course is what the empire is (not!). Cook is representing the empire. The Aboriginal guy at the front is the leader, so there is recognition of Cook's authority, by virtue of the fact that a leader has stepped forward. There is an element of recognition of military protocol there. And this group of Aboriginal men regard the situation respectfully, and with attention. They're all men. So they're ceremonially bedecked, with their cicatrices, which gives the sense that they might be warriors. This is all drawing on previous imagery from North America, where head-dresses and body-painting were very symbolic of the warrior. Native North Americans served as allies with the British against the French. So in the Webber drawing, these are not just wild men, these are people that have a place in the empire, potentially as allies.

TN

So there is a different set of imperatives compared to later. These people are potential subjects of the empire, rather than people that need to be expunged.

GL

There is a gap in Tasmanian visual history where Aborigines are just absent – until John Glover starts putting them back in the landscape. When it's safe to do so, is what I would argue. Because the war was over. The Governor had shipped off the last resistance group to Flinders Island. All of a sudden Glover swoops in and starts populating the landscape again. And people are comfortable to stand around and solemnly shake their heads and say:

“Oh, yes, that was a terrible thing. But look, we can think about the time when they were happy”.

And Glover himself writes on the back of some of his paintings that he hadn't witnessed more gaiety in the ballrooms of Europe than the corroborees that he witnessed in Van Diemen's Land. So it was all very nostalgic and romantic.

There are several very early paintings of Hobart Town and they don't have any Aboriginal people in them either. Apparently Aboriginal people withdrew from the area of Hobart Town initially, and they weren't seen. But people did come back. They were hanging around Hobart by the 1820s. But they're absent from images.

TN

That's part of the importance of this Webber drawing, that what follows is a relative paucity of picturing.

GL

Almost every European image that is created includes Aboriginal people, up until the end of the 18th century.

TN

They're all pictures made in the context of visiting. In a way, it's the difference between visiting and settling.

GL

The difference between the 18th century and the 19th century is British settlement here.

TN

I guess the logic of the settlement also produces its own imperatives: not picturing. Whereas visiting produces a type of curiosity, which is also present in the situation of the Webber drawing, the idea of a shoreline, where an encounter is quite brief.

GL

So was there a massive conspiracy, collectively on the part of the British, to create a *terra nullius*? I am being slightly facetious. I am not suggesting there was a directive from the art department of the colonial office in London to expunge any evidence of Aborigines. But was there a sentiment? Or was it a reflection of the fact that Aboriginal people were in very small numbers and had just made themselves scarce in those early few years. And there weren't too many artists around in those years either.

TN

I am trying to compare Webber's drawing to the late 18th-century French pictures made in Tasmania, the pictures we were looking at last night.

GL

The French had a different set of philosophies: the idea of the noble savage. They had Rousseau. Rousseau's idea was that humanity was neither good nor bad, but was corrupted by civilised social structure and hierarchy. The idea of ownership was what generated goodness and badness in people.

TN

What do you make of the fact that the central Aboriginal figure in Webber's drawing is speaking, that his mouth is drawn open, that the drawing is called an "Interview"?

GL

Again I'd think about that under that heading of generosity, which might be too generous: the idea that there was some equity in the encounter. I keep thinking of the implications of the North American colonies. It's too easy just to think about these nasty colonials turning up. They treated people like animals, so of course they only thought of them as flora and fauna, the whole rhetoric that we are surrounded with today. But the reality was much more complex than that. For example, the role that the Mohawk played in the conflict between the French and the British was absolutely pivotal. So these Aboriginal guys in the Webber drawing were more than just stupid natives. In terms of what may happen – and, no, the French hadn't been here yet – the French were always on the English mind in matters of empire, particularly

with naval people. Is it just generosity, or is it actually something much more serious and robust: “Wherever we go we must be thinking about the potential for allies”, or at least just cannon fodder.

TN

I sometimes think about the Webber drawing in relation to Benjamin Duterreau’s The Conciliation. There are quite strong compositional echoes, and gestural ones too, as well as an undercurrent in both images, around the sovereign and around how sovereignty is pictured. Last night we were talking about that Duterreau image and you were saying that for Aboriginal people in Tasmania that picture is so laden with the worst dimensions of colonial thinking that it’s hard to re-animate it in another way. Does this Webber drawing operate differently in that respect, for you or for Aboriginal people in Tasmania generally? Does its meaning function differently to the Duterreau image?

GL

I think it’s very different. The Duterreau painting is so laden with event and moment and consequence and implication and deceit and treachery. Because that is the moment a treaty is discussed. Several treaties were discussed with Aboriginal people – and that was the last one that was discussed with them. And it was the one that convinced an armed resistance group to surrender. George Augustus Robinson told them that if they went with him to Hobart Town he would arrange a meeting with the Governor, and the Governor would agree to all their requests. That’s what they were told. And so that moment of the handshake is them accepting that assurance. And of course when they got to Hobart they were shipped off to Flinders Island, and the war was over.

Whereas here... the portent of that scene in the Webber drawing is even more extensive. It occurs before the *whole* saga, in its entirety, before British colonisation. But it’s less pointed, it’s less focussed, in terms of consequence. If it had been worked up into a painting, and it had been there on the wall of a museum, and published in history books more often, and in the school curriculum, and more celebrated and recognised, the narrative of the painting might have been more developed. And the things that it symbolised might have been drawn out more, to the extent that you could be

describing that moment as buying off the confidence of the Aborigines and supplanting them with the idea of *terra nullius*. You could load that painting up.

TN

That’s interesting. Because in a way this drawing is like the Duterreau painting. It contains sovereign claims implicitly. Cook is made to be the central, beneficent character. But what you’re saying is that partly because it is never developed into an image to be distributed – in the sense of what an engraving literally is, but also in the sense that a painting distributes a certain idea of something or a particular claim – that leaves the drawing as a more open thing...

GL

...less defined.

TN

It bears that sovereign imprint less heavily.

GL

It doesn’t obtain the same power as an instrument of visual history.

*Walking towards the rocky point shown at the right of Webber’s drawing*

There is a midden right on top of here.

*Climbing on to headland, then picking up a shell from the ground.*

That’s a *werrena* shell. Very tasty bit of seafood. In fact it’s mostly *werrena*. You’d expect to find mussels and maybe oysters in a midden, but this looks to me to be largely *werrena*, which would have been gathered from these rocks that jut out here. In fact, it wouldn’t be hard to find some out there now. And this would be... it looks thick enough to me for this to have been here for several hundred years. It means that Aboriginal people were camping right on this point. So the Aborigines didn’t wander out of the bush. The British basically pulled up at one of their picnic spots.

TN

This form in the drawing – the rocky form that is the most worked up part of the drawing – is a midden?

GL

All this sitting on top of the rocks is an accumulation of hundreds, possibly thousands of years – middens are commonly two, three, four, five thousand years old. So all of this accumulation of soil on the top part of the form on the right of the drawing is the accumulation of midden material, around a camp. This is a typical camp spot. You camp here, and it commands an elevated view up and down the beach. You can see people coming, you can see what's going on, you can keep an eye on the kids.

TN

What you're saying now becomes a remarkable feature of this drawing. This is the most convincing and worked-up part of the picture. And it has this rocky form, with its horizontal strata, that begins to make us attend to what is above it, and to think about layers, and time. It has been included presumably unwittingly, but maybe on some level intuitively. It's also a very classical European landscape thing to do, to have this form at the edge framing the scene. But either way, the presence of this midden becomes something extraordinary in what the picture shows.

GL

This is a major dividend of coming here today. All of a sudden we've identified that this form in the drawing is actually a midden. I didn't know that before.

TN

There are two registers of accumulation here. I think part of what is interesting about this drawing is the sense of gathering. There is the implication of a social space that Cook engages with. But there is also the way that these two things – the gathering of people that Webber depicts, and the rocky point in the foreground that we now realise is a midden – become the relationship between two modes of gathering, including a deep-time sense of gathering. The way these two modes are pictorially aligned, along a band of the drawing, is incredibly interesting.

GL

It's quite likely that the British would have recognised this as a midden, or as a hearth, or whatever they would have called it at the time. And it concentrates even more the bilateral nature of this picture.

Not only have you got all the Aboriginal people grouped to the right of

the drawing, you also have a cultural deposit there on the right, which the British might not have known about. But chances are they would have seen these shells and seen the charcoal.

TN

Part of what is interesting about pictures – as opposed to words, which of course can still contain Freudian slips – is that pictures let in lots of meanings that are not necessarily intended but are intuited. The framing in the drawing becomes really interesting in this way too. The relationship between what you identified earlier, about the very ghostly indication of a man hauling a log at the far left of the drawing, and this very solid form on the right, the rocky point, which is the point at which the drawing yields this archaeological space, sets up a relationship between these two perimeters of the picture.

GL

Well, they're both forms of industry, native industry and of course the much more focussed and determined and productive industry of the expedition.

*Walking up on to the top of the rocky point*

At that time, this would almost certainly have been bare ground. There would have been a hearth, a campfire, up here. It wouldn't have been clogged with all this vegetation.

TN

There are two huge eucalyptus trees above us, the reason Cook named the point "Two Tree Point". It's another remarkable feature of this site – that we know from this name, and from late 18th-century pictorial records – that these two trees were present when Cook was here, when he encountered the Aboriginal men at this shoreline. How do you find the presence of the two trees here? There are many living things that live through these incredibly dramatic historical moments. But the fact that there are these two trees here – that seem to have been here the whole time, that were here when Webber stood here and conceptualised this picture – is quite a peculiar set of presences to try to reconcile in your head.

GL

Well, it's like we're in the company of some witnesses to the scene that this picture is all about. I have got a thing about trees (laughs). I don't differentiate as much as a lot of people do between

animals and plants. People who think you've got to be ethical in your treatment of animals and don't think about plants I think are taking a really simplistic view of things. Trees are just really really slow moving. They have a different mode of living in the environment than animals do. They're specialists in making the most of one spot.

TN

They're also monumentally, visually glorious, these two trees.

GL

The other thing to talk about too, is that Tasmanian Aboriginal people had what in other parts of Australia might be referred to as moity relationships, or totemic relationships. That language is loosely relevant here. People were recorded as saying that they were related to particular kinds of trees, to Banksias or to particular kinds of gum trees. So these trees are not just however you might describe them in European nomenclature. They are beings that are commensurate to an individual's ontological identity.

TN

They are a way to express different types of affiliation between people, figured through trees?

GL

Yes, so the trees are not just inanimate, inert objects. They're not spiritually, cosmologically, ontologically inert. The presence of these trees is germane to the place. And that's just a slightly different way of describing something that is also describable from a European perspective. It's not secret sacred stuff.

TN

In a physiological sense I guess it's also true that these two trees are nourished by the midden. The roots must be burrowing into all those strata of living and eating together.

GL

Every shell that is thrown away is going to have some kind of organic protein material in it, which is eaten out by ants and the ants transfer it into the subsoil and pull the nutrients down for the trees. "The great circle of life".

TN

I can't quite get over the fact that this drawing is also the drawing of a midden, that this earliest European image of contact is either inadvertently or unconsciously or semi-consciously also the drawing of a midden.

GL

Colonial artists were forever unknowingly recording cultural landscapes, without recognising them, whether they be fire-managed grasslands or middens.

TN

The presence of the midden performs something remarkable. The encounter, the part of the drawing that is a type of concoction or a projection that Webber tries to orchestrate in such an overt way, attempts to make a claim. It's a picture working towards sovereign ends, in the way that it instates Cook at the centre of the scene, and with a certain power over the scene. The presence of the midden in the drawing, either unconsciously or inadvertently, is a kind of a sovereign counter-claim.

GL

Yeah. It's a quiet presence. An immutable presence. An undeniable presence.

TN

It goes to what we were talking about last night. As much as you could understand the Webber drawing as being purely at the service of imperial ends – which it certainly is intended to be – it's also an unstable document. On the one hand it seems to be wanting to perform one thing, in terms of Cook's authority, but it actually records the beginning of a type of counter-claim: that this place has been occupied for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years.

GL

And isn't that a lovely analogue of what Cook tried and failed ultimately to do with his assertion of *terra nullius*. You can assert it, but the evidence is all there that it is just not the case.

TN

In relation to that history of invasion, it's curious to think of who is present at this scene. William Bligh is one of the people in the group of Europeans at the left. And probably Truganini's father is one of the young Aboriginal men. It's a scene that is witnessed by a fairly significant group of people. It's extraordinary that this first European image of contact takes place here on Bruny

Island, as a link to some of the most significant figures in the early colonial period, both in Tasmania and the south east of Australia.

GL

I was last here on this beach a long time ago, before I even knew of the existence of the Webber drawing. For me this has been experiencing this place *as a completely different place*. I just did what I always do when I go to places, I spotted the nearest midden and tried to orient myself from there, to connect the midden to the shoreline by seeing if the main shellfish that the midden is made of are still around. There are a small number of *werrena* there, in the crevices of the rocks.

TN

The first time that Pete and I came to this site, I think retrospectively part of what was powerful for me was that it was wedged between two other encounters. It was after Pete had taken me to Dennes Point, in the north of Bruny Island, the main Aboriginal crossing point to Tasmania, where you have that incredibly strong sense of imagining centuries and centuries of meetings, on that stage-like point, which feels like it's a natural place where people would greet long-lost friends, or in some way ritualise that encountering-again. Then we came here, and quite by chance realised it was the site of the drawing, which prompted lots of thinking about Webber's image-making here.

The following day – I think I mentioned this to you last night Greg – I went to try to find the site of the old Hobart zoo. I ended up jumping the fence and wandered around in there. It's mostly completely effaced. There was something quite peculiar about finding the place where the Thylacine enclosure used to be. I realised it was a bit like this site here, where part of what you imagine is an act of making images. The site of the Thylacine enclosure for me so powerfully evoked that film footage, those 30 or so seconds of footage. In the same way, one of the main things I think about at this site is someone making an image here. It's a funny kind of spectre, when what you seek to imagine is itself the making of an image.

GL

It also just goes to show how much authorship a viewer brings to a picture. That sketch now has a midden in it that it didn't have before. Of course it always had a midden in it, but it never had a midden in it. Without wanting to get too

semiotic about it, it just goes to show how much life is in the act of looking.

TN

That's part of the instability of picture making. Webber is actually producing a meaning that he doesn't know that he's producing.

GL

Is he producing it, or are we producing it? If he doesn't know that he's producing a meaning, is he producing a meaning? Or are we investing that drawing with something through our *post-factum* analysis and observation of the context?

TN

There is a kind of latency in the drawing that he's produced, don't you think? I do think there is an intuited dimension to this, that accounts for his inclusion of that rocky point. And also for the particular way that the rock formation does make these visual indications of strata, and almost cues the idea of a midden. As you said earlier, Greg, he did not then describe the midden in the drawing. You don't see the details or highlights of it overtly indicated. That latent set of meanings I find encouraging, both as a reason to continue to love art, because art works are full of these latencies that we can discover and then fully articulate, but also for political reasons. We can retrieve things out of those pictures that are otherwise connected to a pretty grim history, things that would make other possibilities emerge from them.

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