

Press Release

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Losing Venus

The Pitt Rivers Museum is committed to being a space in which difficult histories can be reflected on, acknowledged and the legacy of colonialism in the present, including in the museum space, disrupted. This includes acknowledging the impact of colonialism on 'queer' lives across the globe. By queering and questioning the collections and displays, the *Beyond the Binary* project, which started in 2019, aims to shape the Museum into a welcoming space, so that no individual or group feels excluded because of sexuality or gender and all visitors, however they might identify themselves, can understand humanity better. *Beyond the Binary* is working with a broad range of partners, from researchers to community activists, to challenge historical interpretations of the Museum's collections, offering alternative understandings from people with different identities, as well as identifying human histories which are unrepresented as a result of intolerance.

Losing Venus, consisting of multiple installations by artist Matt Smith, highlights the colonial impact on LGBTQ lives across the British Empire and seeks to make queer lives physically manifest within the Museum. From 1860 onwards, the British Empire criminalized male-to-male relations, imposing lengthy prison sentences and the legacy of these legal codes lives on. Of the 72 countries in the world with anti-gay laws, 38 of them were once subject to British colonial rule. As a response to these colonialist gender laws, *Losing Venus* seeks to place contemporary discrimination, which is still affecting the lives of many around the world, at the heart of one of the cultural centres of the country which exported it, examining their impact through the lens of sexual identity and gender fluidity.

The name *Losing Venus* is a reference to the idea of love and gender, but also references the purpose of Captain Cook's first voyage – to measure the transit of the planet Venus. The installation will comprise four main parts located throughout the galleries.

1. Recording the Invisible

The Pitt Rivers Museum has an extensive collection of photographs, including work from the photographer, Henry Evans, whose work illustrates the 19th century desire to record 'difference' and 'scientifically' measure it. Before Western colonial expansion, lives which fell outside of heteronormativity or gender binaries were an accepted part of society, from the fa'afafine in Samoa to the hijira in India. The imposition of LGBTQ legislation encouraged queer difference to disappear for fear of criminalization. Working with a screen printing studio, Matt has developed a series of seven prints based on historic photographs in the Museum collections, which were taken in countries where British anti-LGBTQ laws were imposed. Using the scientific grids from the Henry Evans images, these individuals' identities have been visually erased, using the very grids meant to record them.

2. Creating the Unbelievable

The Pitt Rivers Museum has a case of dolls and puppets. Dolls are commonly used to teach children about adult life, roles and beliefs but following the colonial criminalization of LGBTQ lives, the ability for LGBTQ children to learn about the queer aspects of their lives effectively disappeared. A new set of dolls and puppets, depicting transhistorical and transcultural gender difference and sexuality variance will be created and installed.

3. Commemorating the Unknowable

The complexities of gender variance and sexualities which were met by colonial expansion, fell outside of European expectation, as did the diversity of geography, flora and fauna. Trying to place new knowledge within the framework of European understanding resulted in confusion and misunderstanding. 2019-2020 is the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's voyage to Tahiti, New Zealand and Australia on *HMS Endeavour*. This intervention recreates the lost Wedgwood dinner service, which was commissioned by Cook on his return. Taking the 1773



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dinner service commissioned by Catherine the Great as its starting point, this ceramic service visually explores the distortion when non-European discoveries are translated back to Europe.

4. Signposting the Future

To mark the queering of the Museum, draw the different strands of the interventions together and also signal a link to the *Beyond the Binaries* work which will be ongoing throughout the duration of this exhibition, custom-made neon signage and large-scale panels will be in place to flag up this installation.

Matt Smith said: *"I'm delighted to be working with the Pitt Rivers on Losing Venus. It is a very interesting time for museums generally, and specifically ethnographic museums. Calls for repatriation of collections, decolonisation and acknowledgement of non-western ways of viewing the world focus a light on these collections. The museum has been doing a lot of work with these issues, and its initial appearance as a time capsule of Victorian collecting and aesthetics belies the progressive work it is undertaking with its collections and originating communities. With the 250th anniversary of Cook's voyage to Australia, we have an opportunity to review the relationship between the northern and southern hemisphere and question long held views of progress and enlightenment, especially where they impact on the ways in which people are allowed to live and love. What is sometimes overlooked in ethnographic museums is that nearly all the objects are handmade. Craft can be seen as a universal language, one that unites us, and it therefore seemed vitally important that any response to the museum - however conceptually driven it is - should predominantly feature the handmade."*

Andy McLellan, Head of Public Engagement at Pitt Rivers Museum, added that *"Matt's role as an artist, maker and academic seemed to fit the nature of the Pitt Rivers Museum perfectly... he is not only a successful artist, but also an artist who grapples with the issues of our times, something we are very consciously trying to do at the Pitt Rivers."*

Losing Venus will be on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum from 4 March – 29 November 2020. There will be a Private Launch event on the evening of Thursday 12 March. Please contact the Pitt Rivers Museum Press Office if you would like more details.

This exhibition has been made possible by funding from Arts Council England and Konstfack, University of the Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm.

Notes to Editors

- The University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) is one of the finest archaeological and ethnographic teaching museums in the world. Founded in 1884, when General Pitt Rivers, an influential figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary anthropology, donated his collection of more than 27,000 objects to the University of Oxford, it now stewards over 550,000 objects. These collections of historical, social and ritual significance are of an extraordinary range and depth, including great works of art, invention and design from around the world. The Museum carries out world-leading conservation and research and welcomes half a million visitors each year. It is currently focused on developing more socially engaged practice with the emphasis on inclusivity. The Pitt Rivers Museum is much loved for its characteristic multi-layered and dense displays and was Museum of the Year Finalist 2019. Today, the Museum is a dynamic, forward- looking institution with many connections to stakeholders throughout the world. Press Contact: Louise Hancock, Marketing and Media Officer, press@prm.ox.ac.uk. 01865 613017.
- Matt Smith is an artist who works in response to museum collections. Solo shows have included *Flux: Parian Unpacked* at the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. He holds a PhD in Queer Craft from the University of Brighton, is Professor of Craft: Ceramics and Glass at Konstfack University of the Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm and Honorary Visiting Fellow at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. In 2016 he was Artist in Residence at the Victoria and Albert Museum and in 2018 he was awarded Work of the Show at Collect at the Saatchi Gallery. His work features in numerous public collections, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Walker Art Gallery and the Fitzwilliam Museum.



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