

***The Understanding British Portraits Annual Seminar
Curating Historic Portraits: Transcultural Conversations***

Organised by the Understanding British Portraits Subject Specialist Network in partnership with The Box, Plymouth

Thursday 14 May, 14.00—17.00 and Friday 15 May, 10.00—13.00

Roland Levinsky Building, University of Plymouth, Plymouth PL4 8AA

Free, booking essential

This symposium will examine how historic portraiture can be reframed to broaden access to lives and narratives that have been overlooked within traditional museum and archive structures. It will also consider new methods being tested to foster more meaningful and relevant connections with contemporary audiences. Taking *Journeys with Mai*, a national partnership tour led by the National Portrait Gallery, as its starting point, we will hear from project partners how a British portrait masterpiece was radically redefined by introducing Pacific Island perspectives, new research approaches and contemporary art responses across the successive venues. The event will showcase innovative projects from the South West and across the UK to share recent curatorial and engagement work which has challenged or reinterpreted historic portrait collections to support more inclusive conversations.

Programme

Thursday 14 May

12.30—13.30 **Curator introduction to *Journeys with Mai* exhibition – at the Box**

Hannah Hooks, Curator of Contemporary Art, the Box

Tours of the exhibition will take place in small groups prior to the official start of the programme.

13.00—14.00 **Registration and refreshments**

14.00—14.05 **Welcome from Victoria Pomery, CEO of The Box**

14.05—14.15 **Introduction from Chair: Daniel Maudlin, Professor of History at the University of Plymouth**

14.15—14.25 ***My Journey with Mai***

Lucy Peltz, Joint-Head of Curatorial & Senior Curator of 18th Century Collections, National Portrait Gallery

14.25—14.45 ***Mai in motion, or; How to acquire a portrait, then let it go***

Luke Uglow, Assistant Curator, National Portrait Gallery

Following its joint acquisition by the National Portrait Gallery and J. Paul Getty Museum, the portrait of Mai will be in perpetual motion. The Journeys with Mai project aimed to begin this process, with the hope that the portrait's physical trajectory would open up new contexts and new meanings. It will reflect on the success of the Journeys with Mai project, especially its collaborative, communal and decentring ambitions, in particular the important connections that emerged with Tahitian artists, scholars and curators.

14.45—15.15 ***O vai o Mai? Collaborative exhibition-making and the story of Mai***

Eve Haddow, Senior Curator in Anthropology, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge and Rosanna Raymond, SaVĀge K'lub with a recorded interview with Hinatea Colombani, Artist, Researcher, and Cultural Leader

The paper reflects on the Tau o Mai | Journeys with Mai exhibition hosted by the Fitzwilliam Museum as a collaborative project involving multidisciplinary Pasifika arts collective SaVĀge K'lub and MAA (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology), University of Cambridge. Mai's portrait was brought into dialogue with artworks by contemporary artists based in Tahiti and Aotearoa New Zealand and 18th century ta'oa/taonga currently cared for at MAA. The paper speaks to creative disruptions to institutional and art historical approaches, questioning accepted narratives around this iconic portrait, and examining the ways that museums and practitioners work together with diverse and sometimes competing perspectives and priorities. I reflect on the challenges of working across geographical and cultural boundaries and consider Mai and the ta'oa/taonga as active collaborators in the process.

15.15—15.50 **Refreshments** provided for all

15.50—16.10 ***Curating between the artist and the collection***

Lara Goodband, Contemporary Art Curator and Programmer at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery (RAMM), Exeter

The first of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery's (RAMM's) collections came to the museum in the 1860s and in many cases were already within historic collections. Created at a time of British colonial rule, this process of collecting was often a relationship of unequal power between donor and collector. Since 2018, RAMM has worked with contemporary British artists inviting them to create new work inspired by these collections. In this talk I will discuss RAMM's approach to working with three artists: Michelle Williams Gamaker; Joy Gregory; and Charmaine Watkiss. Focusing on Joy Gregory who was commissioned in 2019 for the temporary exhibition *In Plain Sight: Transatlantic slavery and Devon* (January to June 2022), I will explore how she approached the subject of Britain's, Devon's, Exeter's and RAMM's indebtedness to the trade in enslaved people by drawing on new research into the collections.

16.10—16.35 ***In Conversation: A Tiger in the Castle***

Grace Davies, Experiences and Partnerships Curator for the National Trust and PhD Researcher at Newcastle University and the National Portrait Gallery on the project *The Role of Contemporary Art in Addressing Missing and Marginalised Histories in Museum and Heritage Settings* and Curator, National Trust (Wales); and Daniel Trivedy, Multi-disciplinary Artist

From 2023–2025, artist Daniel Trivedy collaborated with the National Trust at Powis Castle to create *A Tiger in the Castle*, a project spanning performance, film and photography. In conversation with curator Grace Davies, Daniel will reflect on responding to the Clive Collection—largely assembled from India and shaped by complex colonial histories—and how his own relationship to this material, as an artist of Indian descent, informed the work. The discussion will explore the opportunities and challenges of bringing contemporary art into a historic environment, and consider the project's legacy for interpreting the castle's collections and histories.

16.35—17.00 **Chaired discussion and Q&A with the afternoon speakers**

17.00—18.30 **Opportunity to visit the *Journeys with Mai* exhibition**

18.30—19.30 **Optional Evening Event: In Conversation: Lisa Reihana and Dr James Fox**

A number of complimentary places are available for conference participants

New Zealand-based artist Lisa Reihana, whose monumental video work 'In Pursuit of Venus (infected)' is part the *Journeys with Mai* exhibition, joins Dr James Fox from the University of Cambridge and Honorary Fellow (2024) of Arts University Plymouth, to discuss the themes in their work and the exhibition.

Friday 15 May

9.00—10.00 **Early private view and curator tour of Beryl Cook (optional)**

10.00—10.30 **Registration**

10.30—10.40 **Welcome and introduction from Chair: Rebecca Bridgman, Head of Collections and Programme at The Box**

10.40—11.00 **Keynote Lecture: *Making Sense of Difficult Histories: Artists, Institutions, and Questions of Inclusion***

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, Research Fellow, UAL Decolonising Arts Institute

In her keynote, Anjalie Dalal-Clayton reflects on the possibilities, and limits, of contemporary artist interventions in museums through the case of Keith Piper's 2024 film installation *Viva Voce*, commissioned in response to Rex Whistler's mural *The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats* (1927) at Tate Britain. Tracing the institution's long and uneven attempts to account for the mural's racist imagery, she considers how artist-led, research-driven interventions can open new forms of dialogue and new ways of making sense of contested historical artworks, while also attending to the conditions under which such interpretive labour takes place. Although the inclusion of new voices and perspectives can reshape how histories of colonial violence and subjugation are encountered, they do not undo that violence, or resolve the power structures these artworks reflect and emerge from. Even as museums seek resolution through inclusive interpretive practices, Anjalie proposes a shift in emphasis towards more direct forms of confrontation with difficult histories, and towards recognising exclusion as a persistent condition of the museum itself.

11.00—11.30 ***In-conversation: Mohini Chandra and Hannah Hooks***

Mohini Chandra, Commissioned Artist - 'Expedition into a Volcano' for *Journeys with Mai* (The Box) in conversation with Hannah Hooks, Contemporary Art Curator, The Box

In this discussion, Mohini Chandra and Hannah Hooks will discuss their ongoing collaboration at The Box, Plymouth. They will explore Chandra's work with The Box's moving image archive, which opened up new connections with marginalised voices and people missing from institutional records. As well as talking more broadly about Chandra's decolonising approach to working with archives, they will also address best practice in relation to commissioning and what is needed to make a successful connection between commissions and collections.

11.30—12.00 **Refreshments** provided for all

12.00—12.20 ***'Jersey's' Story***

Zoë Shearman, Curator at Saltram (National Trust)

From early May, Saltram brings together two companion portraits painted by Reynolds in 1748 at his studio in Plymouth. The portraits are being displayed together for the first time in over 200 years. A research collaboration between the National Trust, National Gallery London and Royal Museums Greenwich has revealed the identity of 'Jersey', the artist's earliest known depiction of a person of colour. Scientific analysis undertaken in conjunction with conservation of the portrait of 'Jersey' and Lieutenant Ourry from Saltram has revealed Reynolds' working practices and early composition. The two portraits speak to the global ambitions of Plympton and the early presence of people of colour in Plymouth. Zoe will discuss the research project, which focuses on the Black sitter known as 'Jersey', and seeks to reinterpret the portrait from Jersey's perspective, and to begin a process of revealing the child's identification and life biography.

12.20—12.50 **Chaired discussion and Q&A with the morning speakers**

12.50—13.00 **Closing comments and end**



Participants' biographies (in order of presentations)

Chair (Session One): Professor Daniel Maudlin

Professor, School of Law, Humanities and Social Sciences (Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business), University of Plymouth. Dan Maudlin specializes in the architectural and material culture histories of Britain and its global contexts, focusing on the North Atlantic world of the long eighteenth century. He is Professor of History and Heritage at the University of Plymouth where leads the MA Heritage programme. He studied Art History at the University of St Andrews, undergraduate and postgraduate, followed by a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Fellowship at Dalhousie University, Canada. He has held fellowships at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Winterthur Museum, and the universities of Glasgow, Guelph, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Before turning to academia he worked at Historic Environment Scotland, National Galleries of Scotland, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

Dr Lucy Peltz is Joint Head of Curatorial & Senior Curator of 18th Century Collections at the NPG where over the last 25 years she has curated a number of major exhibitions and gallery redisplays. She was one of the team who led the reinterpretation and redisplay of the NPG, which relaunched in 2023. She was also closely involved in the work of saving Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Portrait of Mai* for the nation by raising £25million when the painting was stopped from export. Since then, she has been working with colleagues to enhance the understanding of this portrait, first by convening an international symposium in 2024 supported by the Getty and then, during *Journey's with Mai*, by working with national partners and South Pacific scholars and artists to open up new narratives and approaches to this important, transnational portrait.

Dr Luke Uglow is Assistant Curator at the National Portrait Gallery. Luke works across historical periods within the curatorial department at the NPG and supports the team with exhibition development, interpretation of displays, and processing new acquisitions. Recently, he contributed to the exhibition *Six Lives: The Stories of Henry VIII's Queens* (2024), the displays of miniature portraits from the sixteenth to nineteenth century, and the major new partnership project *Journeys with Mai* (2025-26). Luke has lectured in Art History at the universities of York, Manchester, Aberdeen and finally at Birkbeck, University of London, before joining the National Portrait Gallery in 2024. Luke's research centres on the history of art theory and criticism in nineteenth-century Britain. At the Gallery he focuses on eighteenth-century culture and history, especially the work of William Hogarth and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Dr Eve Haddow is curator with responsibility for the Pacific Islands, Australia, and Americas ethnography collections at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Eve's research focuses on material culture from western Pacific Islands, missionary collecting and photography, and histories of anthropology and archaeology, particularly narratives that may have been previously marginalised or overlooked. She is also interested in material culture connected with plantation histories in Pacific Islands and Australia. Eve is driven by an aim of making collections material more accessible and visible to communities and other researchers, and in highlighting the agency and voices of Pacific Islanders and other Indigenous and First Nations peoples within museum and archival collections. As a curator she is passionate about exploring ways of increasing connections between contemporary communities and MAA's diverse collections, seeking opportunities to develop collaborative projects for embedding contemporary community perspectives and stories.

Rosanna Raymond is a leading contemporary Moananui artist, writer, and performer. Founding SaVĀge K'lub and member of Pacific Sisters, arts collectives her work spans curation, critique, and

adornment. Raymond was awarded CNZ Pacific Senior Artist and appointed a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for Pacific Arts. @rosannaraymond

Artist **Hinatea Colombani** and her partner Moeava Meder unite Tahitian dance, tapa, voice, and myth in performances reviving ancestral arts. Their creations—exhibited at the Sydney and Paris Biennales—bridge ritual and contemporary art, emphasizing transmission, memory, and Polynesian identity through sacred textiles and embodied tradition. @hinateacolombani

Lara Goodband is a research-active curator working at the intersection between contemporary art curation and museum collections. She has over 25 years' experience as an art curator in galleries, museums and unusual places and spaces. Her curatorial practice begins with concepts drawn from museum collections and the contemporary cultural narratives that intersect with them. In her role as Contemporary Art Curator and Programmer at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery in Exeter, she curated *Dartmoor: A Radical Landscape* in 2024/ 2025 and *Earth Spells: Witches of the Anthropocene* in 2023 which included new commissions by Emma Hart, Grace Ndiritu, Florence Peake, and Lucy Stein. *Earth Spells* continued Lara's curatorial practice focusing on the climate crisis: before moving to Exeter in 2018, she co-curated the exhibition *Offshore: Artists Explore the Sea* for Hull City of Culture. Lara studied English Literature/History of Art at the University of York before a Masters in History of Art at the University of Manchester. She is a Research Associate at the University of Exeter and is completing her Fellowship of the Museums Association.

Grace Davies is Experiences and Partnerships Curator for the National Trust working across South and Mid Wales. Prior to this she led National Trust's programme of contemporary arts 'Trust New Art' and has overseen a number of key programmes including major commissions for 'Prejudice and Pride' exploring LGBTQ histories, 'Women and Power' exploring women's histories and 'People's Landscapes' exploring histories of protest and social change. At National Trust she produced and wrote 'Trust New Art' a survey publication celebrating 10 years of contemporary arts at National Trust places. She has also worked across the sector as Director of Visual Arts South West, Curator of Locws International in Swansea and on a number of curatorial projects, commissions and exhibitions both in the UK and internationally. She is currently undertaking a part-time collaborative doctorate exploring *The Role of Contemporary Art in Addressing Missing and Marginalised Histories in Museum and Heritage Settings* as part of the REACH consortium.

Daniel Trivedy is a multi-disciplinary artist of Indian descent based in Swansea, South Wales, whose practice explores themes of identity, connection, belonging and the psychological relationships between people. Using art as a method of enquiry, his work draws on critical theory, migration and colonial histories and often investigates how personal and collective narratives shape social bonds. Trivedy was awarded the Gold Medal for Fine Art at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 2019, and his work is held in both private collections and Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales. Alongside his artistic practice, he also contributes to arts education and cultural development in Wales, reflecting his ongoing commitment to fostering inclusive and socially engaged dialogue through creative practice.

Chair (Session Two): Dr Rebecca Bridgman is Head of Collections and Programme at The Box, Plymouth, where she leads on collections development and delivery of an innovative and ambitious programme that aims to fulfil the organisation's aim to be 'nationally known and locally loved'. Prior to joining The Box in November 2023, she was Curatorial and Exhibitions Manager at Birmingham Museums Trust, where she also chaired the Subject Specialist Network for Islamic Art and Material Culture.

Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton is an art historian and museologist based at University of the Arts London's Decolonising Arts Institute. Her research focuses on the art and exhibition histories of Britain's Black and Brown artists and how racism and imperialism manifest in the work of public museums. She has led research for numerous AHRC-funded projects, including *Black Artists & Modernism*, *Provisional Semantics* and *Transforming Collections*, and is currently developing two forthcoming publications, *Interventions in British Art History: Critical Approaches to Work by British Artists with African, Caribbean and Asian Heritage* (Routledge) and *Curating Black British Art: Exhibition Cultures Since the 1980s* (Bloomsbury). Across her work, she is committed to bridging scholarship and practice, advancing curatorial strategies that challenge exclusionary histories and promoting equity and accountability in the museum sector.

Dr Mohini Chandra, Commissioned Artist - 'Expedition into a Volcano' for *Journeys with Mai* (The Box), Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art (UAL) and convener of the Empire and Place Research Network, uses a variety of media including still and moving image, found objects and sound to create complex installations. Her work explores ideas of identity and globalised spaces, and the role of photography in relation to memory and migration. As a child, Chandra spent time in Fiji and travelled widely with her family within the Indian-Fijian diaspora. She has an interest in photographic histories and visual culture within colonial, anthropological and ethnographic discourses and the imagery of contemporary globalised cultures. Chandra's work is held in international collections in the UK and USA including the UK's Arts Council Collection and included in major survey publications such as Phaidon's Art and Photography.

Hannah Hooks is Contemporary Art Curator at The Box Plymouth where she is lead curator on The Box's iteration of *Journeys with Mai* - an exhibition which re-examines Reynolds' *Portrait of Mai* within the specific context of Plymouth's history as a primary seaport at the heart of colonial expansion. With almost twenty years' experience in art programming and commissioning she has curated major group exhibitions on a broad range of themes. Her experience of working closely with artists to realise ambitious projects includes those with Mohini Chandra, Cornelia Parker, Goshka Macuga, Serge Attukwei Clottey, Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, John Walker, Nina Royle & Lucy Stein, Maria Nepomuceno and the estates of Elisabeth Frink and Gillian Ayres. Before joining The Box, she held roles as Art Curator at Eden Project, Cornwall; Head of Programming at Messums (Wiltshire & London); Co-Founder and Director of Space In Between; as well as at ACME Studios, Fiorucci Art Trust and the studios of Raqib Shaw and Damien Hirst. Hannah studied Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art before undertaking a Graduate Diploma in History of Art and Architecture at Birkbeck.

Zoë Shearman is a curator and art historian with a focus on contemporary art, re-visiting cultural and social histories, and de-colonisation. As Property Curator of National Trust Saltram since 2021, she has curated/co-curated spotlight displays of the work of Angelica Kauffman, a two-way loan exchange with The Box Plymouth as part of Reynolds 300, and Chinese Gardens at Saltram co-curated with University of Exeter MA Curation students of Chinese heritage. Artists' projects curated include: Louise Bourgeois, Tania Bruguera, Yoko Ono, Donald Rodney, Doris Salcedo, and Zineb Sedira. Multi-site projects include: Human Cargo: Excavating the Contemporary Legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Plymouth and Devon (The Box Plymouth), Craftivism (Arnolfini and off-site), Lois Weinberger (Camden Arts Centre and the Freud Museum), The Visible and the Invisible (Institute of International Visual Arts, London) Patterns (Spacex, Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies University of Exeter, Exeter Mosque, Exeter Cathedral), and Art for Life (The Wellcome Trust).