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Imagining Paradise

Embroidering Myth

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An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Design

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Abstract

This practice-led textile research project explores notions of tropical paradise from the perspective of a European imagination. It critiques colonial myths of tropical paradise that have been perpetuated through visual art including textile design and wallpaper. The design practice is informed by a review of french scenic wallcoverings, tropical prints in popular culture and the paintings of Henri Rousseau and Paul Gauguin and a visual analysis of how colour, pattern repeat, motif, symbolism and embroidery work together to construct an idealised notion of the tropics.

The design responses liken colonialism to domestication and extends the same sense of control, domination, structure and regularity to historic textile design, effectively placing traditional processes and practices in textile pattern composition under review. In the creative works, paradise has not been rejected, but instead, it has been inhabited, explored, embellished and highlighted in order to captivate nostalgia and critique prevailing myths fostered by nineteenth century colonial paradigms of paradise.

The three design works employ digital embroidery and digital textile print to re-present three selected myths: Arcadia which explores the expectation of tropical abundance informed by a story from James Cook's voyages, Living in a Fool's Paradise reframes the palm tree emblem in a bid to purge colonial nostalgia and Embellished Phantasmagoria re-visions the fecundity of the tropical environment. Each work offers a critique of the inauthenticity of paradise perceived through a European lens.

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