



Drew Pettifer

A SORROWFUL ACT:
THE WRECK OF THE ZEEWIJK

LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY

29 August - 5 December 2020





Drew Pettifer, *Untitled (Journal #4)*, 2019, chromogenic print, 27.6 x 38.2cm. Image courtesy the artist

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A SORROWFUL ACT: THE WRECK OF THE ZEEWIJK

Drew Pettifer is the quintessential artist/academic who weaves together his knowledge and insight as a historian with a rigorous practice of image-making to explore themes of gender, sexuality, and the politics of desire.

His first encounter with the story of two boys from the Dutch VOC Ship *Zeewijk*, left to die on separate islands in the Houtman Abrolhos Archipelago, was a moment of realisation of the importance of this event in recontextualising our history. It was the beginning of Australia's European queer history, a brutal and cruel one, that is still little known. It began on an island off the coast of Western Australia, in December 1727, 60 years before Captain Philip imposed the punishment of death for sodomy in the newly founded colony of New South Wales.

Engaging the multiple strands of his creative and professional practice, Pettifer began his archival research and documented his engagement with these ideas in photographs and videos made at sites related to the event, including on and around Gun Island. He also visited museum collections in Australia and the Netherlands with the support of an Australia Council grant, where he encountered the ship's log, among other documents. Adriaan van der Graaf's journal from the *Zeewijk* reports

that after colliding with Half-Moon Reef on 21 May 1727, the ship's company abandoned the wreck and established a base on Gun Island. When the rescue party they sent out failed to return with help, they set about building a new boat (*Sloepie* – Little Sloop) from the remains of the wrecked vessel.¹ During this fraught period, two young men (aged 18 and 22) were discovered “committing with one another in god-forsaken way the gruesome sin of Sodom and Gomorrah”. In one of the first recorded European trials on this continent, they were found guilty and condemned to death. Each was marooned without food or water on a separate island north-east of Gun Island, where they perished. Their agonising deaths mark the recorded beginning of a homophobic history of Australia, a history that needs to be reclaimed.

As he explains, “... like many artists working in an archival mode, this process could be said to be recuperatory, as it attempts to reclaim this obscure queer history, (re) inserting the past into the present. The combination of built archives, found archives and, at times, quasi-fictional archives in this project articulates a historical ‘truth’ that challenges dominant narratives through a profound act of historical revisionism.”



For Pettifer, this truth is made accessible through art, which makes that encounter with history a visceral experience. In outlining the major theme of his novel *Atonement*, Ian McEwan suggests that human beings can only inflict suffering if they are without empathy for others because “cruelty is a failure of the human imagination”.² Pettifer orchestrates this empathetic connection with deft and economic skill in his photographs and videos. Once we are hooked by this narrative about these two young men, and we connect with them over time, he guides us through a timeline of queer oppression in Australia to a point of contemporary awareness. History is continuously remade in the present, and in that reframing, we are reconnected with those two young men and simultaneously alerted to current experience.

This is not a museum exhibition, though the show includes historical items such as maps and items from the wreck. Their presence enhances the veracity of the narrative; they speak from that time. Yet, there is also a blurring of these truths, as the objects themselves acquire new meaning through contemporary slippage. The maps anchor the narrative to a particular site, but even then, the actual islands on which the boys perished are undocumented. In the exhibition, they are represented by

a small pile of sand and a small pile of shale referencing their composition. As an audience, we are left to reshape this narrative, make it our own, and re-articulate its significance through the act of remembrance.

Identification with these two boys took Pettifer to the Netherlands, to walk in their footsteps through the streets of Sint-Maartensdijk and Gent where they wandered and to connect with their relatives, two of whom are documented in Warhol-style “screen-tests”. These are the only human presence in the exhibition, conjured up on a screen, overseeing the event with a calm detachment. They provide a sense of continuity and hope. Just as van der Graaf made entries in his log, so these are entries in Pettifer’s artist’s journal. Together with his large-scale video work documenting the journey from Gun Island to one of the possible islands where the boys were left, they are a central component of his navigation of the *Zeewijk* saga. Featuring a voiceover interspersed with traditional Dutch sea shanties, and field recordings from Australia and the Netherlands, the video documents Pettifer’s odyssey across the ocean and across time, as he reconnects with the boys and in the process links us into their narrative.



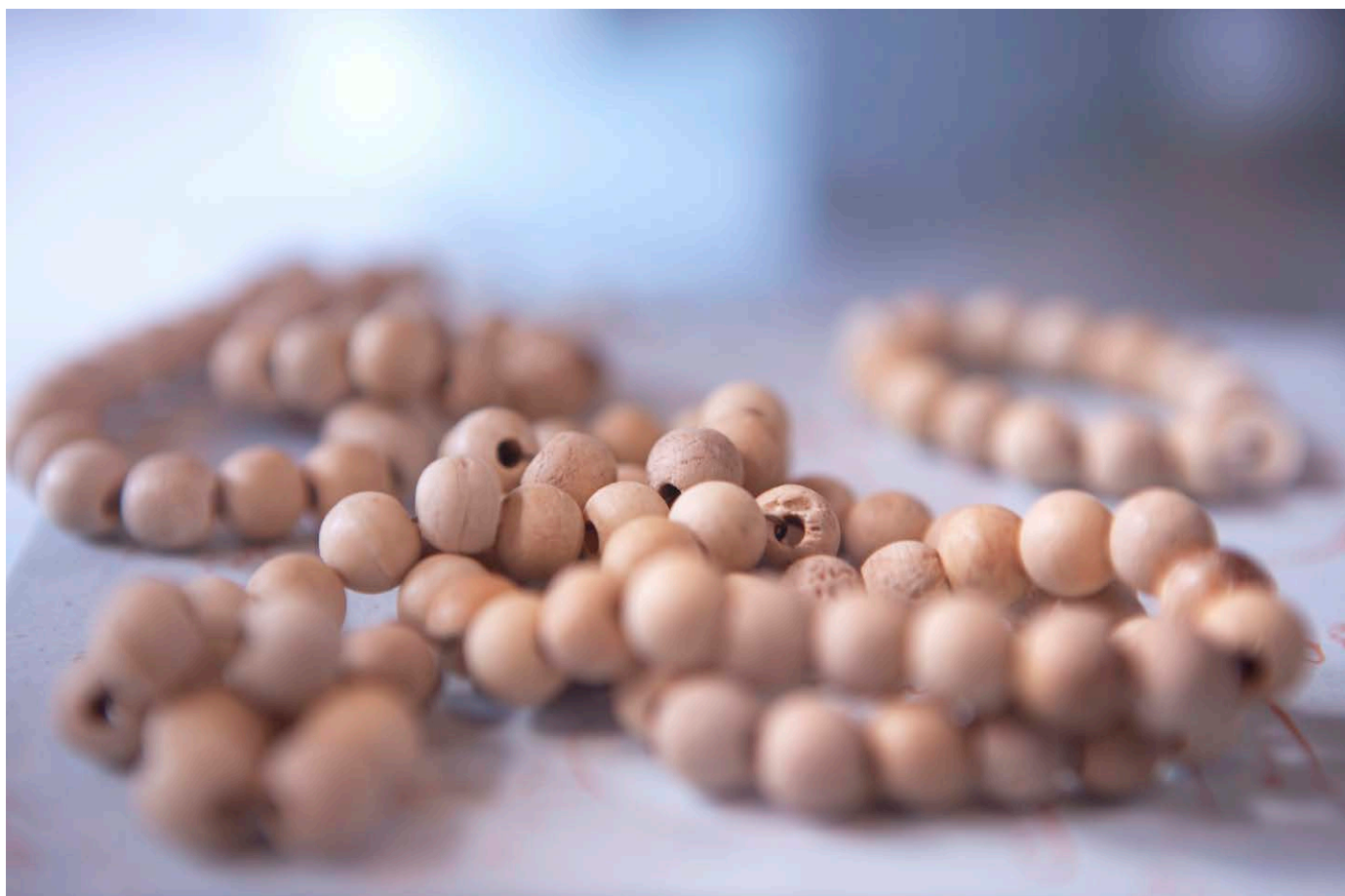
Drew Pettifer, *Untitled (Gun Island)* (detail), 2019, chromogenic print, 27.6 x 38.2cm. Image courtesy the artist

The elements of this extraordinary story are encapsulated in the installation of 45 small-scale framed photographs, hung in a grid, though with some grid places left blank to reflect the broken historical record. Nothing is complete, and no history is immutable, the gaps are eloquent reminders of slippage and omission. This body of work, and the major publication that will accompany it, will contribute to that expanded history. The essays, photographs of sites, the rescued objects, captain's log, maps, and documents provide the evidence on which we will all build our personalised chronicle.

Finally, to be hung high above the show, the artist has created a flag — his standard — based on the stacking pattern of the onion-shaped bottles found on the *Zeewijk*, that are concurrently phallic and yonic. It boldly shows his colours by celebrating sexual ambiguity, the need for recognition and for tolerance.

Professor Ted Snell AM CitWA, Curator

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1. When the *Sloepie* finally arrived in Batavia, a year and five months after the *Zeewijk* was wrecked, only 82 men had survived.
 2. Kate Kellaway, interview with Ian McEwan, 'Review: Interview: At Home with his Worries', *Observer*, 16 September 2001: Review



Drew Pettifer, *Untitled (Rosaries)*, 2020, installation detail, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist

LIST OF WORKS

Drew Pettifer

Untitled (Journey), 2019-20, single channel HD video, dimensions variable, collection of the artist

Untitled (Roel), 2019-20, single channel HD video, dimensions variable, collection of the artist

Untitled (Bram), 2019-20, single channel HD video, dimensions variable, collection of the artist

Untitled (Sand) and Untitled (Shale), 2020, installation, dimensions variable, collection of the artist

Untitled (Sandy Island), 2020, chromogenic prints, 100 x 150 cm, collection of the artist

Untitled (Stick Island), 2020, chromogenic prints, 100 x 150 cm, collection of the artist

Untitled (Flag), 2020, textile, 200 x 300 cm, collection of the artist

39 framed photographs, 2019-20, chromogenic prints, each 27.6 x 38.2 cm, collection of the artist

Untitled (Timeline), wall based installation, dimensions variable, collection of the artist

Untitled (Map), 2020, wall based installation, dimensions variable, collection of the artist

Johannes van KEULEN

(Map Houtman's Abrolhos; Together on same sheet as views of "het Pyland Amsterdam / Het Eyland St. Paulo; Swartte Swaane drift op het Eyland Rottenest"), 1753, engraving on paper, 54.5x 32.3 cm, Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Alexander DALRYMPLE

Houtman's Abrolhos near the West Coast of New Holland from Van Keuten, 1782, engraving, 30.4 x 41.2 cm, Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Hugh Edwards

Image of Bosun's Whistle found at the Zeewijk Wreck, c.1970, b & w albumen photograph, 21 x 15 cm (matted in a mount 27.6 x 38.2 cm), Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Zeewijk cannon - breech loading poop gun, c.1970, b & w albumen photograph, 15 x 20 cm (matted in a mount 27.6 x 38.2 cm), Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Pieces of Eight coins from the Zeewijk, c.1970, b & w albumen photograph, 21 x 16 cm (matted in a mount 27.6 x 38.2 cm), Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Model Dutch East Indiaman ship of the Zeewijk class, c.1970, b & w albumen photograph, 20 x 15 cm (matted in a mount 27.6 x 38.2 cm), Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Model of a Dutch East Indiaman Ship, c.1970, b & w albumen photograph, 15 x 19 cm (matted in a mount 27.6 x 38.2 cm), Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Hier Langs Heen Ship Grondt (Here lies our ship aground), c.1970, b & w albumen photograph, 15 x 19 cm (matted in a mount 27.6 x 38.2 cm), Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Items from the wreck of the Zeewijk

Silver coins, Gouda clay pipe fragments & replicas, brass buttons, onion bottle, rosary beads, ship's bell, stoneware jug, glass tumbler, wine glass, fish hooks & sinkers, scissors, musket balls, bone buttons, brass buckles, c.1720, Western Australian Museum



CURATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ted Snell

I would like to thank Drew Pettifer for the time and commitment he has given to this exhibition. It has been a remarkable journey bringing to a wider audience the remarkable narrative of these two boys, left to die on separate islands so many years ago. We are grateful for the support from the Australia Council for the Arts, the Dutch Foreign Ministry, the City of Melbourne, RMIT University, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Museums Western Australia, and the Dutch National Maritime Museum. Sincere thanks to Erica Persak at the Kerry Stokes Collection for her advice and support since the inception of this project. I also acknowledge the expertise and hard work of the extraordinary team at the Cultural Precinct who are integral to the success of every project at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.

ARTIST'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

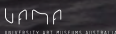
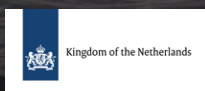
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Cover image: Drew Pettifer, *Untitled (Half-Moon Reef #2)* (detail), 2019, chromogenic print, 27.6 x 38.2cm.
Image courtesy the artist.

Inside Cover images:
Drew Pettifer, *Untitled (Bram)* (detail), 2020, video still. Image courtesy the artist.
Drew Pettifer, *Untitled (Roel)* (detail), 2020, video still. Image courtesy the artist.



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