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EAST COAST ENCOUNTER REIMAGINES JAMES COOK’S VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY SO THAT WE MIGHT LOOK AT IT FROM THE ENDEAVOUR, AND THE SHORELINE. WORDS: SHARI TAGLIABUE

ARTIST MICHAEL COOK, UNDISCOVERED 4, 2010. MAIN PICTURE: MICHAEL COOK, COURTESY OF ANDREW BAKER ART DEALER & DIANNE TANZER GALLERY + PROJECTS
Ask the average Aussie about British explorer James Cook, and with the exception of history buffs, most seem to recall only a few facts: the year 1770, the tall ship HMB Endeavour, New South Wales' Botany Bay, and a tentative query, “Cooktown?”

North Queenslanders are more aware of Cook’s voyage north as his compass went awry as they sailed past Yunebunun, which prompted him to rename it Magnetic Island.

Many would know of the Endeavour running aground and having to stop at Cooktown for 48 days while they repaired the ship, replenished provisions and tended to their sick, and some might have heard of an altercation, then reconciliation, with the local Guugu Yimithirr people over Cook’s turtles.

Few, however, would know of a small island in the Torres Strait called Bedanug by its original inhabitants, the Kaurareg people.

While up north, Cook claimed the entire east coast of Australia for the Crown and commemorated the “discovery” by renaming the island Possession Island.

Most of us weren’t taught to consider both sides of the story at school but the travelling multi-art exhibition, East Coast Encounter, might.

East Coast Encounter is an exhibition of paintings, photographs, videos and three-dimensional works that reimagines Cook’s journey, and captures images and moments of contact between the inhabitants and the explorers.

By merely viewing the fascinating collection of contemporary works, Cook’s penchant for claiming and renaming land appears insensitive at best, the Crown-barked sense of entitlement completely ignoring those who inhabited this land. And while the exhibition doesn’t force any kind of viewpoint, the viewer can’t help but re-evaluate events.

The exhibition is curated by John Waldron and Dr Lisa Chandler, and with the University of the Sunshine Coast as project manager and the Australian National Maritime Museum, who now own the collection, on board, the eclectic mix of works by Australian indigenous and non-indigenous artists, writers and songwriters has been travelling on a 12-venue tour up the east coast of Australia to Cooktown, and is now on its way back down to Sydney, providing not only a visual feast but a thought-provoking switch from our known history to a more balanced viewpoint. “Even today, the full history is not well taught, and it’s not one that’s taught in a balanced way,” said Waldron.

“The exhibition attempts to present the two world views, the two cultural viewpoints, and to present them in a balanced way, and have indigenous and non-indigenous people explore that.”

The seed for the exhibition was planted in 2010, when Sunshine Coast artist Peter Hudson approached Waldron with a concept, to explore Cook’s journals. Waldron thought they would need to get as many of the artists as possible to experience the locations.

“Some of the artists got to travel to Possession Island, spend time there, and spend time with the community at Cooktown, at Hervey Bay, Fraser Island, and Botany,” he said.

But if you’re thinking of seeing Possession Island for yourself, Waldron says it isn’t really an option.

“The artists were taken across to Possession Island for themselves, spend time there, and spend time with the community at Cooktown, at Hervey Bay, Fraser Island, and Botany,” he said.

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