

West Auckland Heritage Conference
7 October 2018

Headforemost the unfounding of Cornwallis in four drawings

Ko te mihi tuatahi, tenei ki Te Kawerau a Maki me nga ure o Tainui waka.
Te mihi tuarua ki a koutou kei konei – tena koutou, nau mai haere mai ki te kaupapa nei.

I'm here to talk to you about the suite of large ballpoint pen drawings I had the privilege of exhibiting here at Te Uru from May to August.

I'd like to acknowledge the staff of Te Uru, especially Andrew Clifford and Ioana Gordon-Smith, for their support of this project, and for their care and attention in staging it here.



Installation still, *Headforemost*, Te Uru, May-August 2018. Photo: Sam Hartnett

The suite, or series, is called *Headforemost* and refers to an incident on the Manukau Harbour on the 26th of November 1841.

These slides are of the Te Uru installation.

In 1839 William Cornwallis Symonds, acting for the Manukau Land Company, bought Puponga or Karanga a Hape Peninsula (now known as Cornwallis) from the widow of

an earlier settler. Symonds thought he was acquiring a much larger block, and iwi disputed the sale when Symonds visited the land. That didn't stop Symonds from reporting favourably to the Company, nor the Company from dispatching the ship "Brilliant" with about 30 Scottish migrants on board on the last day of 1840.



Installation still, *Headforemost*, Te Uru, May-August 2018. Photo: Sam Hartnett

William Cornwallis Symonds was a colonial archetype – ambitious and energetic. At 29 he was a captain in the British army, deputized for William Hobson gathering signatures for the Treaty in the Auckland area, was deputy to Felton Matthews the Government Surveyor, a Police Magistrate and later Chief Magistrate, and freelanced as a land speculator.

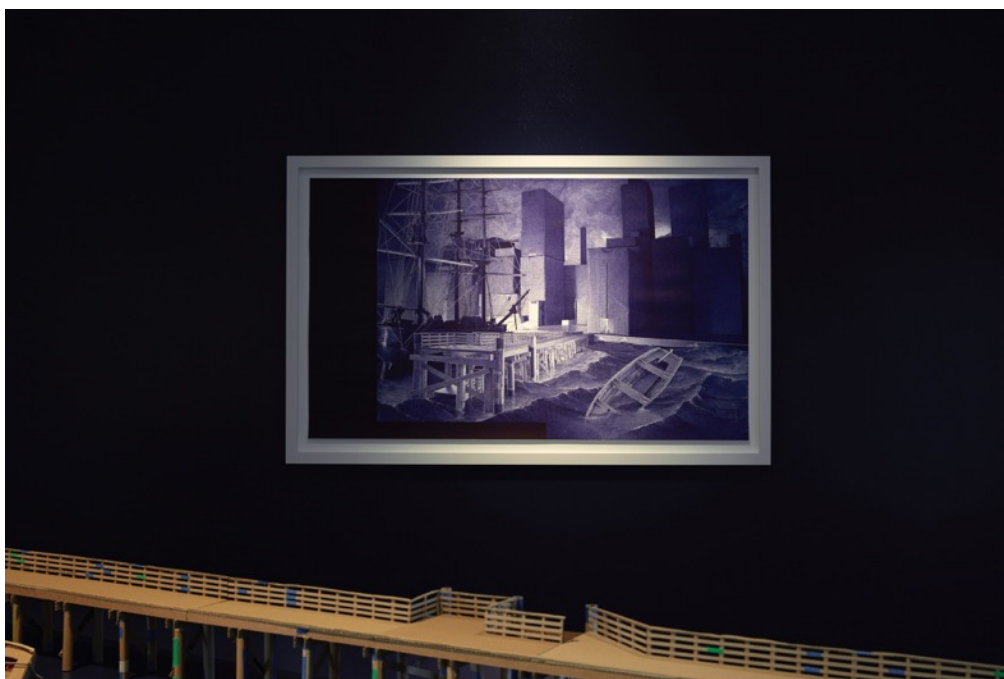
He was also hasty, knowing that his Manukau Land Company was competing with Edward Gibbon Wakefield's New Zealand Company for land and emigrants. These were capitalist ventures, selling land and prospects on inflated claims, boosterism and some almost magical thinking. The Scots on the "Brilliant" had paid for land for which Symonds had no title.



Installation still, *Headforemost*, Te Uru, May-August 2018. Photo: Sam Hartnett

The "Brilliant" took 300 days to reach New Zealand. Ten months. Its first crew walked off it in Ireland saying it was unfit for the journey. Some of the migrants and more crew abandoned the journey in Sierra Leone and Melbourne.

The "Brilliant" arrived in the Manukau in October 1841 to no town, no title, not even any dwellings. The 27 migrants (minus the defectors, plus 4 births on the journey) were invited ashore, provisioned, and helped to build whare by tangata whenua. It was only by force of personality that Symonds kept the project going while trying to obtain title to the land.



Installation still, *Headforemost*, Te Uru, May-August 2018. Photo: Sam Hartnett

Then on November 23rd 1841 a message arrived at Puponga from the Reverend James Hamlin of Orua Bay on the Awhitu side of the Manukau Heads asking the "Brilliant"'s doctor to attend his sick wife Elizabeth. The doctor was not available. Symonds gathered three other colonists and a "Maori oarsman" and some medicines from the "Brilliant" and set off across the Manukau.

The sources are contradictory. Sometimes Symonds and three others, sometimes four. Only two are named. The boat might be the "Brilliant"'s longboat, or its jolly boat. Or pinnace. Or the captain's gig. It might be rowed, or under sail.



Installation still, *Headforemost*, Te Uru, May-August 2018. Photo: Sam Hartnett

Part way into the journey, or on the return,

"A violent and sudden squall struck the boat, which was observed to go down headforemost about a mile from the ship ... Owing to the dangerous sea running it was found impractical to proceed to the unfortunate men and those on the shore were compelled to witness their unhappy fate" as *the New Zealand Herald* reported.

Only the Maori oarsman survived. Or one of the colonists. The bodies were never recovered.

Without Symonds' dynamism the settlement foundered. Families drifted away to the newly established capital at Auckland on the Waitemata. By 1850 Symonds' city was abandoned.



Joseph Jenner Merrett, *Te Waro* (April 1841)

There are no formal portraits of William Cornwallis Symonds. That's him second from the left in this image – wearing the white hat. He's remembered in the naming of Symonds Street, Auckland, and Cornwallis itself.



Dr. John Johnson, *Entrance to the Harbour, Manukao (sic), from Puponga Head* (1841) National Library Collection

This 1841 ink drawing of the view from Puponga was almost certainly made before the "Brilliant" arrived; it isn't visible in the bay – and there is clearly no town. The story of the title to the land is long and complicated, but in the early 20th Century the son of one of the "Brilliant" colonists bought the land and donated it to the city as a park. That was when the monument to the "Brilliant" migrants was built. As far as I can determine the land has never been offered back to its original owners.



White's Aviation, aerial view of Cornwallis, 1949

Cornwallis Wharf is an odd survivor: it is a replacement for the original which was one of sixteen wooden wharves that once served the Manukau. The harbour's quirky currents delivered sailing ships to Cornwallis, as well as wreckage and dead from the Manukau Bar. This is a White's Aviation photograph of Puponga/Cornwallis from 1949 and shows an earlier incarnation of the wharf. It had become so dangerously dilapidated by 1954 that it was partially demolished.



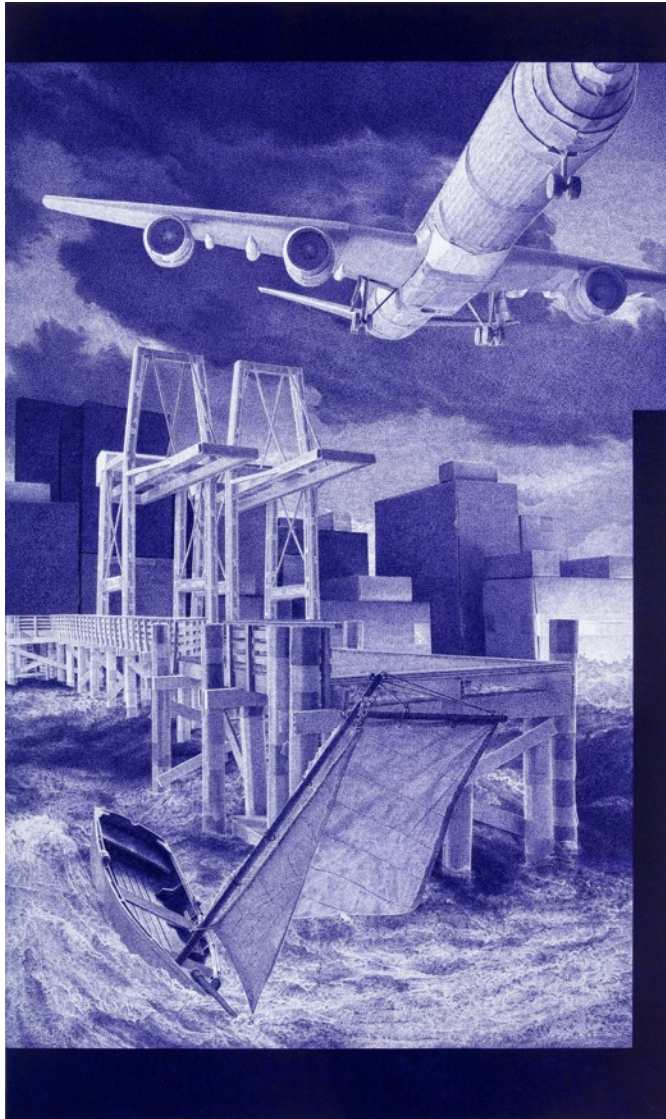
Cornwallis Wharf, December 2017

The replacement, the current wharf, was built by fundraising and volunteers in the 1990s.



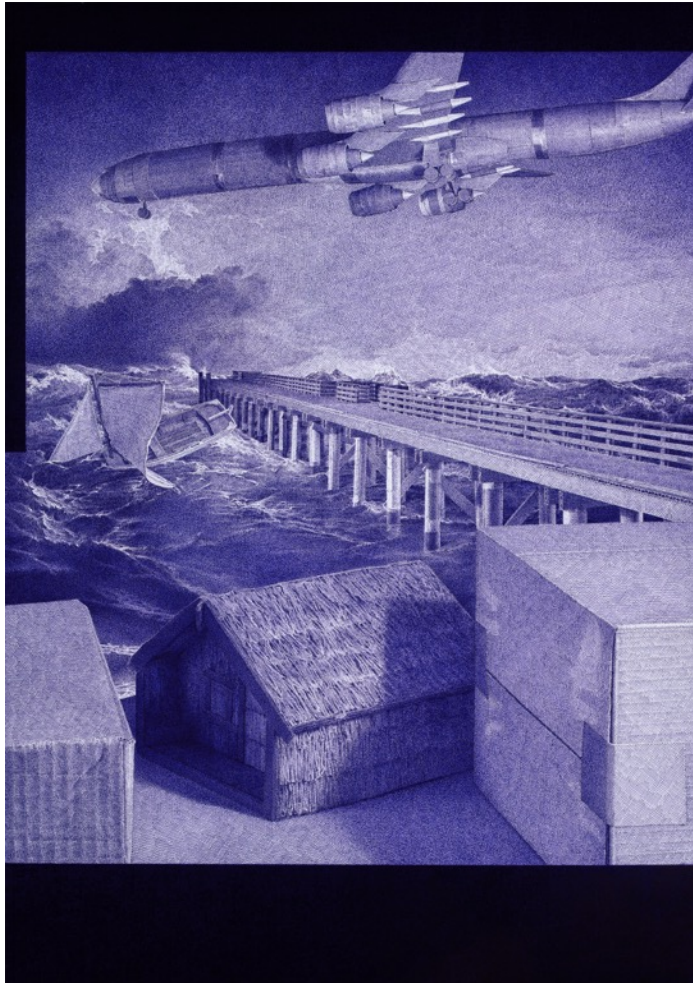
Unsettlement, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 900 x 1520mm

The airport is the modern wharf. Both act as hinge in a migrant narrative; between danger and safety, motion and stasis, travel and destination. So I take the wharf as a metaphor for that step from old life to new, and the Cornwallis wharf with its patchy history as a scaffold on which to hang my re-imagining (re-imagining) of the William Cornwallis Symonds story. Re-imagining invites the counterfactual: If Symonds had lived. If he had acquired title to Puponga. If the settlement had thrived. Between that fiction and the truth is an un-city of unschools and unbanks, unhouses and lives unlived. It is this unhistorical hypnogogia between waking and sleeping that attracts me to the Cornwallis story and the resonances between then and now, them and us.



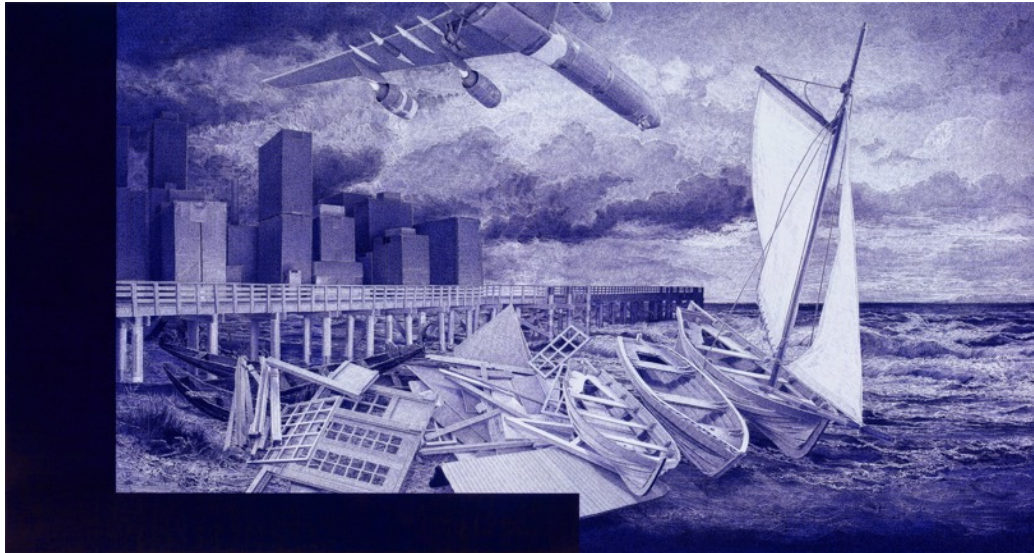
Capitalise, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 1285 x 765mm

So these drawings are in no way documentary. They are hopelessly subjective. And I am no historian – I scavenge rather than research. I can't remember when or how I first encountered the story but I came to the historical record via a previous suite of drawings called *Opposite Shore*, and a subsequent investigation of my own migrant heritage. Colonisation has been superceded by globalisation, just as the sailing ship has been superceded by the airliner. The hopeful journeying endures, largely unchanged, and the *Headforemost* drawings are really about this inheritance, this familiarity between the middle of the 19th Century and the early 21st.



Conveyed, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 1085 x 765mm

I have devised a contorted and compulsive process to realise what I imagine. From an initial loose drawing I research historical works of art of similar composition and content, I make models of the structures I need out of found materials, I pose the models in dioramas, photograph the dioramas and montage the photographs with the period imagery. I draw the final ballpoint drawing from that montage.



Landed,

2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 790 x 1475mm

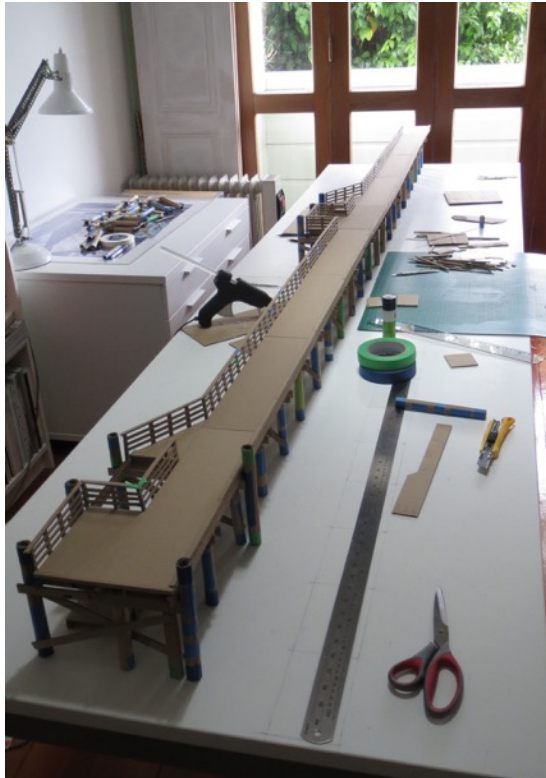
The original intention was to make the Cornwallis models out of materials found on the beach and in the car park at Puponga. My daughter and I went there in December expecting to gather discarded packaging, paper, plastic and ice cream sticks, but we found none. Which is probably a preferable outcome.



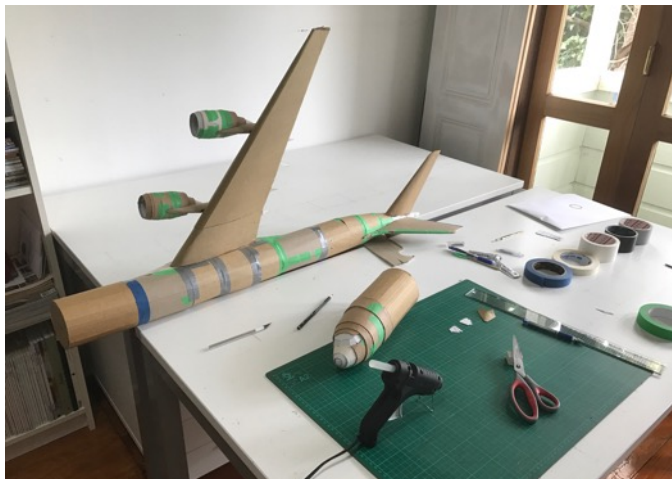
So the *Headforemost* models were made out of the contents of the recycling bin at home, and a stack of flattened cardboard boxes found outside Glengarry Wines.



The models are process only, and as part of that process are destroyed at the conclusion of a suite of drawings. There is a simple pleasure in making something out of nothing, the timeless alchemy of transforming base materials into art. This has its obverse in the return to nothingness at the end of the drawing process when the models are dismantled or recycled. In the past I've made models out of Meccano, matchsticks and ice cream sticks but the ephemerality of paper and cardboard seemed most appropriate for Symonds' planned but unbuilt city.



I made three versions of Symonds' little boat, a container crane, a three-metre long model of the wharf, and a modern "Brilliant", an Airbus A340. With Te Uru's curatorial staff the decision was made early on to exhibit the models with the drawings.



All my work reaches back to the Sublime. In another echo from the 19th Century, we are again painfully conscious of the power of nature and the futility of our efforts to control it. The Romantic notion of the Sublime, that frisson of thrilled threat, is again cogent. The 19th Century Sublime pitted puny humanity against mountainous seas, colossal peaks and cataclysmic storms in words and images. I borrow liberally and literally from the Romantic impulse in 19th Century painting, and for the *Headforemost* drawings quote verbatim from five specific New Zealand paintings of the colonial era.

The first drawing in the suite is *Unsettlement*, and quotes from Captain Thomas Robertson's *The Full-rigged Ship 'Caribou' Off the Otago Coast, Tairi Head on the Starboard Quarter* (1867).



Unsettlement, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 900 x 1520mm



Capt. Thomas Robertson *The Full-rigged Ship 'Caribou' off the Otago Coast, Tairi Head on Starboard Quarter* (1867) Te Papa Tongarewa



Capitalise, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 1285 x 765mm

The second, *Capitalise*, quotes from both John Gully's *Running for Milford Sound* (1880) and John Gibb's *After the Storm, Timaru Beach* (1883).



John Gully *Running for Milford Sound* (1880) Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tamaki



John Gibb *After the Storm, Timaru Beach* (1883) Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tamaki

There are few paintings of the Manukau from this period, perhaps because it has no mountains or deeps or foaming cataracts, but by far the most Romantic is Richard Brydges Beechey's *Wreck of HMS Orpheus on Manukau Bar New Zealand February 1863* (painted in 1867)



Richard Brydges Beechey *Wreck of HMS Orpheus on Manukau Bar, New Zealand, February 1863* (1867) New Zealand Maritime Museum

depicting what I think still counts as New Zealand's worst maritime disaster with 189 lives lost. I've quoted it here in the third *Headforemost* drawing, *Conveyed*.



Conveyed, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 1085 x 765mm

The wreckage of the *Orpheus* washed up at Cornwallis, as did some of the dead – the graves of three are on Karanga a Hape Peninsula. Some of the living are said to have washed up as there well and to have taken the opportunity to escape military service and to slip, renamed, into civilian Auckland.

The fourth drawing, *Landed*, quotes from Nicholas Chevalier's *Cook Straits, New Zealand* (1884).



Landed, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 790 x 1475mm



Nicholas Chevalier *Cook Strait, New Zealand* (c.1884) Te Papa Tongarewa

There are just these four drawings in the suite, but they are large, and they are drawn in ballpoint pen.

The process is long and arduous – the largest drawing took about ten weeks. Every mark is a ballpoint pen stroke and the borders are an accumulation of up to eleven “coats” of marks.



I haven't found an easier way to manifest what I see in my mind's eye, and the technique consciously refers to printmaking techniques of the Romantic era.



Landed, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 790 x 1475mm (detail)

I chose ballpoint pens for their ubiquity and democracy. They are humble and quotidian and an unexpected tool for art-making.



Landed, 2018 ballpoint pen and correction fluid on paper 790 x 1475mm (detail)

For the titles I have used single ambiguous words to reflect my ambivalence about the whole Colonial Project. Stories like Cornwallis and Symonds raise mixed feelings today; we no longer see them as simple settlement narratives of "huddled masses yearning to breathe free". We have a longer perspective of the price and harms of colonisation and feel some unease at the actions and attitudes of the colonists and the rapaciousness with which they seized opportunity. Symonds himself is an imperial type – heedless, ambitious, tireless, hero and villain, white hat and black.

He was clearly loyal to the Scots of the "Brilliant" despite his deceptions. My own ancestors arrived at about the same time to an equally doomed venture in the far North – a church group on unfarmable land that soon disbanded and dispersed. I've migrated briefly a couple of times and know the heady limitlessness of a new place, of reinvention; redemption even. But I also know the feeling of displacement or misplacement. And knowing that Home is not elsewhere does not allay the post-colonial unease of not being entirely at home here either. This, I suppose, is the migrant legacy that I think shades these images.

The title of the suite is from that *New Zealand Herald* account of Symonds' death. *Headforemost* is an archaic version of 'headfirst', and I take it to also mean 'headlong' like Symonds' progress and all migrants' flight into the future.

Unsettlement is for Symonds' unbuilt city and for unsettled, ill at ease.

Capitalise is to take advantage of, and to make money. And it was Symonds' grand vision for Cornwallis that it would one day be the capital city of New Zealand.

Conveyed is a word from the documentary sources – the land was "conveyed" to the Manukau Land Company. It also means carried or transported. And an idea is conveyed.

Landed is to have land, and to have stepped ashore. In a post-colonial society there will always be a tension between landed and unlanded, between arrivals and occupants, tau iwi and tangata whenua. Indeed the modern movement of populations is causing landed/unlanded conflicts all over the world. The Scots on the "Brilliant" landed but were unlanded. Symonds and the other colonists in the boat remain perpetually unlanded.

So, if the text of this suite of four large ballpoint pen drawings is the drowning of William Cornwallis Symonds in the Manukau on the 26th of November 1841 and the failure of his settlement at Cornwallis, then the subtexts are in those reaches and resonances, the migrant legacy, the search for home, and for emotional security.

Na reira – karanga mai, mihi mai. Rau rangatira ma, tena koutou, tena koutou, kia ora whakahuihui koutou katoa.

The drawings are on view at Sanderson Contemporary in Newmarket until the 14th, and the whole installation with the models will be at the Tauranga Art Gallery over summer.