

Tony de Lautour

b.1965

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Tony de Lautour refers to a series of similar paintings to *Shore Party* as being ‘revisionist’. That is, he buys cheap amateur paintings from op shops, usually of New Zealand landscapes, and then he adds his own twist – creating a painter’s version of a ‘remix’ or a ‘mash-up’. For de Lautour, these unfashionable leftovers of second-hand stores operate as Readymades, in the same way that Marcel Duchamp used a porcelain urinal and a bottle rack as pre-made art objects. Only, de Lautour doesn’t just put these paintings straight into the gallery as they are. He ‘revises’ them, giving them new meanings, adding strange characters to their otherwise predictable surfaces.

In *Shore Party*, the previously peaceful landscape has been invaded by a rowdy bunch of – well, it’s hard to say exactly what these creatures are. They look like a cross between men and lions, perhaps referring to the proud British lions on colonial coats of arms. But these animals are far from proud; smoking, drinking, waving guns around, they are hooligans rather than upstanding members of the British Empire. Perhaps the artist wants to remind us that many early settlers, rather than civilising the South Pacific, turned it into a den of iniquity.

De Lautour is always interested in the way national icons (e.g. a kiwi or a lion) can be debased with the addition of cigarettes, booze and weapons. He cheapens his characters further by painting them badly – hooligans don’t deserve finesse. So his rampaging lion-men look more like wookies from *Star Wars*, or the Berenstain Bears with a hangover! *Shore Party* has a very different atmosphere to Bill Hammond’s paintings of birdmen waiting for the arrival of humans to these islands. Hammond’s creatures also smoke and drink, they even play pool, but they are sophisticated, complex individuals, painted with fine attention to detail.

De Lautour’s creatures, however, are rough-as-guts, both in their actions, and in the way they have been painted. They lie in their own vomit, help themselves to more liquor, and shake their rifles at approaching sailing ships. Perhaps these ships contain more lion-men, who will be disgusted by the ‘savage’ behaviour of their countrymen. De Lautour’s lion-men have ‘gone native’, which is how colonisers saw fellow Brits who gave up the rigid moral codes of their homeland. This was an unfair view of ‘native’ life, however, for Māori had their own social codes, and saw these young Pākehā hooligans as disruptive and dangerous.

In those days, the South Pacific was known as the ‘Antipodes’ which means ‘opposite’, since it was the furthest possible place from England. In the popular imagination, this was a place where all the laws of Europe were reversed. Just as water goes down the plug hole in the opposite direction, so people thought that in the southern hemisphere, people would live like animals and animals would live like people. British author Samuel Butler wrote a book called *Erewhon* (‘nowhere’ nearly spelt backwards), about an imaginary race in the South Island whose society was based on opposite moral codes to those of Europe. *Erewhon* was a critique of existing social structures, as well as an illustration of culture clash. Curious travellers bring bad habits and disease with them, turning pristine places into rubbish dumps.

Tessa Laird

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Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*
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