

Ana Tzarev and Hawaii

By Belinda Thomson

Ana Tzarev's relationship with Hawaii began in 1989. Since then she has returned many times, fascinated by the island group's exuberant local flora and rich cultural traditions. The passion she feels for the place and for Hawaii's legendary hospitality comes across powerfully in her many vibrant studies of its flowers, costumes, customs and rhythmic hula dancing.

In 2003, her study of Hawaiian culture led her to explore a specific episode in its history in four identically-sized, large square canvases. These are painted in her signature style of naif drawing and saturated, heavily impastoed colour, a style indebted to varied sources including her own jewellery designs and, perhaps, the Russian avant-gardists Mikhael Larionov and Natalia Goncharova. These four imagined scenes deal indirectly with the demise of the royal family of King David Kalakaua (1836-91), Hawaii's last monarch, and veer from the historically plausible to the frankly magical. In one, Princess Ka'iulani, seated in a pink dress of the latest Parisian fashion, attends to a reading by an equally spruce Robert Louis Stevenson; in another, set in a room in the newly-constructed Iolani palace, her aunt, Queen Lili'uokalani, the late monarch's sister, falls asleep over the quilt she has been sewing; a third presents Princess Ka'iulani galloping headlong on a white pony; the final scene and dénouement, as it were, shows Ka'iulani ascending into the sky to be greeted by her late mother.

What prompted this curious sequence of narrative works? Although they concentrate on female domestic life, eschewing the male world of political manoeuvrings, Tzarev's seemingly innocent, peaceable subjects allude to a highly controversial period in Hawaii's history in which women played a key role. In the late 1880s and 1890s, colonialist interests in the vast, relatively undeveloped region of the Pacific were at their height. Britain, France, Germany and the United States were all vying for trade and cultural influence. As steam superseded sail, their commercial shipping needed coaling stations: hence the importance of Hawaii for American entrepreneurs and agriculturalists, a group of whom, in 1893, banded together to push the new queen off her throne. For what is not immediately apparent from the celebratory aspect of Tzarev's paintings is that Lili'uokalani is under house arrest, or that, four years later, Ka'iulani has been stripped of her promised throne and is on her final, fateful ride before her premature death aged only 23. That same year saw Hawaii's annexation by the United States.

The painting of Ka'iulani with Stevenson opens the historical se-

quence, and calls to mind that for a number of nineteenth-century writers and painters the islands of the Pacific offered great allure. [As well as Stevenson himself such notable visitors or longer-term settlers included the Americans Hermann Melville, Henry Adams and John La Farge, and the Frenchmen Pierre Loti and Paul Gauguin. All were eager to meet the Polynesian islanders, lauded since the voyages of Captain James Cook and Louis de Bougainville for their beauty, dignity, and carefree, untrammelled existence.] Stevenson set sail from San Francisco in 1888, eventually settling on Samoa where he died in 1894. Dubbed by the locals Tusi Tala, teller of tales, for Stevenson, this 'voyage to the South Seas and ... visitation of savage and desert islands' was the fulfilment of a youthful dream, a matter of putting behind him the 'chimney stacks and telegraph wires' of modernity.

Whilst aware of earlier artistic encounters with the Pacific, Tzarev has wisely not attempted any stylistic imitation. Interested, like Gauguin, in celebrating vulnerable traditional crafts and customs and exploring suggestive narratives, she does not venture, in these Hawaiian works, into philosophical and spiritual terrain, nor stray into critiquing white traders and colonialism like Stevenson's South Sea Tales. But despite its heightened tropical setting - banyan trees against a vibrant sunset - Robert Louis Stevenson reading to Princess Ka'iulani deals with a documented and fascinating relationship. The protagonists met in early 1889 during Stevenson's five month stay on Hawaii. The author - together with his extended family, his American wife Fanny, his stepson Lloyd and his intrepid widowed mother Margaret - was greeted by King David and his court as the world-famous luminary he had so recently become. His step-daughter Belle, her husband Joseph Strong and their son had been living in Honolulu for some years, where Strong was employed as a mural painter by an American industrialist. King David Kalakau being childless, next in line to the throne after his sister Lili'uokalani was their young niece, Princess Victoria Ka'iulani, who had recently lost her own mother, Miriam Likelike. Ka'iulani's beauty, talent and the bizarre coincidence of her having a fellow Edinburgh Scot for a father, Archibald Cleghorn, doubtless aroused Stevenson's interest and concern, imminently destined as she was to depart for Britain to complete her schooling. Stevenson initiated her into the delights of English literature, reading to her, as we see in the painting, and dedicating a poem, 'Forth from her land to mine she goes.' He also ordered specially-bound copies of his own publications to be made available to Ka'iulani once she reached England.





Robert Louis Stevenson Reading to Princess Ka'iulani, 2003

oil on linen

76¾ x 76¾ in. (195 x 195 cm)



Princess Ka'iulani's Last Ride, 2003

oil on linen

76¾ x 76¾ in. (195 x 195 cm)

PREVIOUS PAGE:

Queen Lili'uokalani's Quilt, 2003

oil on linen

76¾ x 76¾ in. (195 x 195 cm)

To be sure Tzarev's treatment is fanciful in its stylised colour and drawing, and in the sense that the actual encounter occurred when Ka'iulani was a girl of thirteen rather than as she appears here, already the fashionable sophisticate produced by her schooling and travels on the Continent. Whilst in Britain, Princess Ka'iulani learned the news of her uncle's death and subsequently of her aunt's deposition and house arrest. Lilio'ukalani's mute protest to her reduced circumstances was expressed in the remarkable quilt she sewed during those months, which has since become a Hawaiian national treasure. The nineteen-year-old Princess Ka'iulani's took more vocal form. Emboldened, perhaps, by her brief friendship with Stevenson, the 'Tame Celebrity' as he was familiarly known, she overcame her shyness and confronted the usurpers of her throne in person. In 1893 she disembarked in New York, intent on presenting her people's case to the government in Washington, delivering a powerful and emotive appeal to the press and to President Cleveland. Although her stand was ultimately in vain, her words and courage enforced a governmental review of the situation and had certain American journalists who, only weeks before, had spoken of the 'barbarian' peoples of Hawaii, eating their words, enchanted by this elegant young lady and her eloquent appeal, 'a poor weak girl with not one of my people with me and all these 'Hawaiian' statesmen against me'.

This particular scene did not, apparently, suggest itself to Ana Tzarev, perhaps because it lacked the colour and tropical setting to which she so responds as an artist. But her attraction to this beautiful Hawaiian heroine, whose short operatic life has of late inspired a play and a film, has resulted in an extraordinary group of paintings whose narrative suggestiveness is a match for their energetic execution.

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