

an acknowledgement and honoring of his remarkable achievements as Pacific novelist, poet, artist, and playwright extraordinaire!

Ia manuia le tapuaiga! (Blessed are the nonparticipants; thank you for all the moral support from those not directly involved.)

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No diacritical marks were included in Samoan and Maori words this review at the request of the reviewer. All translations by reviewer.

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Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific. Asia Societies Galleries, New York, New York, 18 February–9 May 2004.

I was drawn to the recent exhibition of “Pacific” art at New York’s Asia Society Galleries both because of its resonance with the thematic of Indigenous art emerging in the world and because the inclusion of New Zealand represents a new, and challenging, step for the Asia Society’s geographical orientation and its usual viewers. Aside from recognizing the presence of Pacific people in New York, the exhibition is a striking expression of the fit between the practices of conceptual and performance art and the circumstances of postcolonial indigeneity and diaspora.

Sixteen years ago, the exhibition of Aboriginal Australian art at this gallery caused a fabulous stir of recognition and response throughout New York. If that exhibition addressed the question of Aboriginal cultural pro-

duction as art, *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific*—thoughtfully curated by Melissa Chiu, herself an Australian—has a very different, political and conceptual edge. Consisting of forty-five works by fifteen contemporary artists, the central frame of this exhibition (accompanied and illuminated by an excellent catalog) lies in the artists’ engagement with influential images of the Pacific forged by eighteenth-century French and English explorers, familiar images of insular, verdant islands with friendly, uninhibited people. The artists—some residents of New Zealand, but including Māori, New Caledonian, Samoan, Fijian, Torres Strait Islander, Rotuman, and Niuean—respond in different ways to the confinements and concealments of the Paradise myth. With different particular histories, coming from different islands, they also represent an emergent “Pacific” identity in the region, one more cosmopolitan and distinct from the themes of the familiar Primitivism so vehemently rejected in critical writing over the past few decades, and also one that does not disclaim its histories.

Different strategies and tactics of engagement are employed. Some of the works play with and subvert ideas of Paradise—drawing attention to the degradation of the Pacific environment that has taken place in the wake of European attention. Others comment on the changing nature of local customs and cultures. They foreground the emerging cosmopolitanism and changing relationships to local cultures cited and distanced through the migrations that have brought so many Islanders to New

Zealand, where twelve of the artists were born or now live. And still others attend to the history of the region since European and US settlement—a history marked by the presence of Christianity and the extraction of resources. *This Paradise* is scarred and brutalized by extraction and threats to local traditions, shadowed by the pains of diaspora, and perceived through the experiences of childhood interrupted. This is post-Primitive, post-tribal art, “cutting and mixing” very different from the Caribbean diaspora in Britain, mainly springing from urban Polynesian settings and, as Karen Stevenson argues in her catalog essay, contributing significantly to the awareness of a new regional identity.

The exhibition is organized on two floors of the building. As one enters the lobby on the first floor, one passes by five models of male security guards—Pacific Islanders in black suits, in a line, arms crossed. Four more are placed to the right, along the stairs, two across the lobby, and one more positioned in front of the elevator. It is certainly impossible to ignore the presence of these figures. The work of Michael Parekowhai, the fifteen clothed, cast-fiberglass figures of *Kapahaka* (2003), transforms the usually invisible security guard into a performance—implied by the use of the word given to traditional Māori performing arts. While these seem appropriate to the heightened security typical of contemporary New York City, the wall plaques inform the viewer that these also “suggest other issues related to the protection of Maori traditions.” I found them to be an appropriate connection to the

famous earlier Māori exhibition, *Te Maori*, at the Metropolitan Museum in 1984, which was distinguished by the presence of Māori cultural authorities and marked by Māori cultural authority itself. Indeed, like the *Te Maori* theme, these figures seem self-consciously to articulate the uncertainty and insecurity of exchange and exhibition. So I understand from a fortuitous informal conversation with Māori art historian Rangihira Panoho, who offhandedly suggested that these figures bring in some of the artist’s kin as protection in an unfamiliar world. Modeled on the artist’s brother, the figures are like having fifteen brothers here to protect the artists. Assuredly, the deeper potentials of the work required more knowledge than many visitors in New York could be expected to have.

However, there is more to the fiberglass figures distributed throughout the exhibition. Three other figures, these wearing tuxedos, are modeled on the artist’s father. Wearing a name-tag that says, “Hello, my name is Hori” (the Māori translation of George and a derogatory term for Māori people), the pejorative connotations of a Māori underclass are powerfully dissonant with the coded refinement of dress for a proper art gallery viewer. As Chiu’s essay notes, “Parekowhai is playfully turning assumptions about Maori people on their head.” How much the New York viewer might recognize this play is, of course, an issue, but the figures certainly raise a question in any visitor.

The themes of different works throughout the exhibition resonate with each other, and together they are

able to communicate even to the previously uninformed. What may suffer most in an exhibition like this, one for which the artists have little history for viewers, may be the specificity of particular works and their depth.

On the second floor, having passed through some of the guards, Denise Tiavouane's 1998 installation, *The Modern Dance (La Danse Moderne)*, pairs two threatened aspects of Noumean life—native forests (cleared for nickel mining) and male dance. The combination of dancing poles (of bamboo) and grass skirts connect the process of mining and clearing with the increasing difficulty for locals to get the stuff of daily cultural life.

In a small gallery to the side, one passes through an installation with wooden carved shells and blue lighting to suggest the sea. John Ioane, a Samoan living in Christchurch, calls this construction *Fale Sa* (Sacred Space). We are informed that it evokes vivid, intense memories of his childhood, with the ocean as a space for healing, and one moves through this to others of his installations—a large wooden statue with metallic paint, tilting fernlike magical plants that absorb viewers in organic forms—resonant of what has been lost in migration and diaspora in search of work. Is this the world of childhood, now imagined, fanciful, and undifferentiated? The forms of sculpture, recognizable in a contemporary idiom, are made to have a Pacific specificity, but without as much bite as some of the other work.

Unquestionably, the most powerful and effective work in the exhibition is the video installation of Lisa Reihana, *Native Portraits n. 19897*. A bank of

small video screens is shaped to symbolize the gateway at the entrance of a Māori courtyard and meetinghouse. The video works shown simultaneously on the screens collectively address the familiar existence of so many nineteenth-century Māori portraits. In preparing this work for New Zealand's Te Papa Museum, Reihana went through a collection of these portraits as a basis for her resignifying Indigenous presence. The tactics of poststructuralism are turned to Indigenous ends, inscribing the Indigenous within the active space of reorganizing what is and has been. Perhaps this makes the video work more accessible in its strategies and representational organization than some of the other work in the exhibition, but the effect is visually spellbinding. There are formally posed portraits of Māori wearing European uniforms and clothing, as the artist dressed her friends in old-fashioned and contemporary outfits and recorded them as if posing. They are no longer the silent, passive ethnographic subjects of the dominant gaze.

There is something powerful to the effect in having *moving* video in imitation of portraits, in having the subjects hold a pose, emphasizing the smallest of movements—suspension of animation. One video sequence reenacts a photographer, with an old camera, telling a woman how to pose. "Lie down here," she is told. "Would you be so good as to remove your clothes?" Then the video cuts to swimsuit photos. Many others in the collection of screens are wearing contemporary clothes, posed as current Māori subjects, in leisure suits and cut-off jean jackets. The installation

reminds the viewer that the old stereotypes still prevail, but the sheer range of images and poses (and the quality of their making) is staggering. One is led into an intricate world of colonial relationships and mimicries, identifications and intimacies, more nuanced and immediate than most other work in the show.

The artists, in their work, put together what many might regard as incommensurable items and identities. Niki Hastings-McFall is represented by a series of works that fit the exhibition and are conceptually playful but seemed more like conceptual one-liners—perhaps too easy, but certainly able to make a point. For example, *Nuclear Rosary Series, Black Rain III* (2003) has flower disks in the form of a rosary, recalling the traditional lei used to welcome visitors, but they glow in the dark—drawing the life-threatening contamination of nuclear testing into conjunction with the introduction of Christianity (the rosary). Hastings-McFall's work also brings together complex identities. A teenager when she learned of her Samoan heritage, she was raised by her maternal grandparents. In another set of works, the *Afio Mai Series*, she has draped and framed in lei reprints of her European grandfather's old photos—following the Polynesian custom of draping lei over the photos of loved ones.

In contrast, the work of painting in the show was the most difficult for the new viewer at the Asia Society Galleries. Often able to take on a high degree of density, this work typically develops its own, very personal images. Shane Cotton's five paintings bring together the iconography of

both Māori and European sources. *Needlework*, for example, presents the island and the Māori body as a pincushion, crowded with the needles of conflicting territorial claims—the Union Jack as well as a cross and five-pointed star representing a Māori guerilla fighter. Others of Cotton's paintings in the show incorporate a range of imagery, paneled as if incorporating a range of totemic ancestors—from square-style tikis, painted scroll designs (usually on the rafters of meetinghouses), Māori words, Christian crosses, and so on. These crowded scenes, mostly in a sepia-toned setting, present a heterogeneous cultural field, where identity might not be easy to pin down.

John Pule's oil paintings, with pencil and ink, were more personal and intimate. Pule was born on Niue and relocated to New Zealand at the age of two. His paintings, such as *Take These with You When You Leave* and *I Had a Mind as Invisible as Light*, are intricate and compelling articulations of the contemporary history of Niue in a manner based on traditional Polynesian painting styles—the segmented picture plane of tapa cloth. Here, the heterogeneous imagery—the churches, cars, and planes—are harnessed directly to a sense of dissatisfaction with what has occurred. In the later paintings, blood-red clouds or islands dominate the field of pictured activity. There is energy and doom, but no good direction.

Clever and impressive, especially for their wit, are works of Michael Tuffery, such as the large steer fashioned out of Pacifica corned beef tins, coming out of a painted box. Entitled

O le Povi Pusa Ma'atoua (Jewel Box of Bulls), Tuffery's construction puts forward a metaphor of the changes that have taken place in Sāmoa, where the adoption of corned beef has led to high salt levels and long-term health problems. Other sculptures recycle fish tins as barracuda or tuna, marking the less-than-desirable substitution of imported herring for the fished-out species native to the Pacific.

Finally, a special favorite of the viewers I interviewed was Downwind Productions' *Historic Waikīkī*. This multimedia presentation and website collaboration between Hawai'i-based Gaye Chan and art historian Andrea Feeser mocks tourism websites in its details by focusing on the brutal side of the American presence in Hawai'i. The virtual tour of Waikīkī is combined with stories of the island's history and anecdotes by residents about their memories and experiences of life on the islands—marking, thereby, the changes that have occurred since

European settlement and questioning the role of tourism in the island's life.

There has been a convergence in Indigenous art in recent years, a convergence in adapting the conceptual and performance art to the situation of the Indigenous postcolonial, combining Indigenous forms with and against those that are now part of the same field of social life. Often familiar as a point of entry to art viewers, this can be a framing that offers new access to the contradictory experiences of Indigenous and diasporic Pacific life—or its familiarity can shortchange and simply mark the deeper currents of change and destruction or renewal. But there is no question that the Indigenous contemporary artistic language has found a satisfying hybridity with its cosmopolitan kin.

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