

Book and Media Reviews

Second Skins: Painted Barkcloth from New Guinea and Central Africa. Fowler Museum at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). 1 April–26 August 2012. Gallery information available at <http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/>

UCLA Fowler Museum's *Second Skins* exhibition of painted barkcloth by indigenous women artists is a comparison of contemporary works by the Ömie Artists, a collective from New Guinea whose work first received international attention from museums in Australia, with modern twentieth century works largely from the 1970s by unnamed Mbuti artists from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, on loan from American collections. Curators Roy Hamilton and Gemma Rodrigues bring together a beautiful collection of two quite different aesthetics that utilize the inner bark of trees on which to paint designs and images for wearing as cloth and for display as art.

Ömie artist Lila Warrimou (Misaso), whose Christian name precedes her tribal name in parentheses, is a paramount chief of the Ömie women. Her works, including "Mina and Suja at Mount Obo" (2010) and "The Story of the Lost Boy and Ninivo the Bird of Paradise of Mount Ömie" (2010), utilize aspects of traditional male tattoo in abstract but signifying patterns, painted through visual narratives from Ömie polytheistic traditions. The result gives the urban viewer insight into the relationship Ömie have with their mountainous rain-forest environment. That the transposition of tattoos and their spells from skin to cloth, like the

transposition of Christian names for pagan names, might speak of interreligious pressures is displayed without remark.

More purely abstract works by Ömie artists like Felicity Oviro (I'dit)'s "Garosigor'e" (2005), with its columns of dot-in-circle soru'e (tattoo) patterns in transposed positive and negative colors, and Nerry Kemo (Namuno)'s "Obohutaigue" (2005), with its winding geometricals, have a deeply playful wit, referencing light and shadow through minimal gestures.

The beautiful and vital work of Dapeni Jonevari (Mokokari), chief of the Ematé Clan women—such as "Butötudë" (2005), based on the spiderweb; "Mahudan'e" (2005), based on pigs' tusks; and "Savane Dëgirane" (2006), based on the hip bones of frogs—are abstractions whose indices are natural forms but whose meaning arrives through a personal visual language of their own. It should be said as well that these works are communally painted, as documented in the photographs of Drusilla Modjeska, where elder women artists draw in the main designs, and younger women artists fill in colors. One can guess at conversations and narratives one can only hear or see through the paintings.

At the *Second Skins* exhibition, I was reminded of how ephemeral indigenous cultures can become. I grew up learning barkcloth painting in the Sāmoa Islands from my great-grandmother and grandmother, as a small boy collecting red-brown dyes from trees in the Lealataua rain forest that then covered Tutuila Island, a way of life in American Sāmoa that colonialism crowded out. In *Second Skins* there is a curatorial note that

the state of barkcloth painting by Mbuti today is in question because of the civil wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Recently a leader of the Mbuti testified before the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues concerning their oppression by neighbors who treat the Mbuti, also known as Pygmies, as animals to the point of the cannibalization of the Mbuti.

In comparing the visual material cultures of Ömie and Mbuti, the exhibition of a new video edit of twentieth-century media by the late American photographer and filmmaker William F Wheeler made the Mbuti works in vitrines (glass museum cases) seem more contemporary; and the central staging in the Ömie room of a vitrine with a large nineteenth-century book open to an engraving of a bird of paradise framed those works to seem nostalgic and romantic. Such framing engages a peaceful paternalism, which crowds out any political and religious reference from the artworks and their display and marginalizes indigenous works such as these from the landscape of contemporary art.

As work by women artists, in their aesthetics, I think the Ömie and Mbuti works can be compared most significantly to exhibitions in the Los Angeles area such as the recent *ATA: Exhibition of Contemporary Samoan Art* (28 April–4 May 2012) at the Harris Gallery, University of LaVerne, where urban Pacific Islands artists referenced tattoo and barkcloth painting. They can also be compared, in aesthetics and techniques, with contemporary American works of provisional painters who engage themes of feminist critique, non-monumentality,

and provisional materials and composition, like many of the works shown at the *Made in L.A. 2012* exhibition at the Hammer Museum, also on the UCLA campus (25 June–2 September 2012). The rarely acknowledged influence of indigenous works by women artists on contemporary art internationally makes the silent proximity of such exhibitions poignant.

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Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania, by Alice Te Punga Somerville. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. ISBN cloth 0-8166-7756-6, ISBN paper 0-8166-7757-3; xxx + 288 pages, photo, notes, publication history, index. Cloth, us\$67.50; paper, us\$22.50.

The study of indigenous Pacific literatures tends to reflect the oceanic vastness of its scope. Alice Te Punga Somerville's *Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania* combines the oceanic sweep of contemporary anglophone Pacific literary studies with a focused study of Māori cultural articulations of Pacific identity, calling attention to the critical intersections of Oceanic and indigenous identification. By tracing out the ways in which Māori "once were" (and still are) Pacific, the author draws critical attention to the many unspoken disjunctures and unexpected connections between what is understood as "Māori" and what is considered "Pacific," ultimately presenting an elegant and flexible analysis of the discourses surrounding indigeneity,