

Book and Media Reviews

Project Banaba. Exhibition, Carriageworks, Sydney, Australia, 17 November–17 December 2017.

Coinciding with the seventy-second anniversary of the relocation of the people of Banaba to Rabi Island, Fiji, an extraordinary exhibition by Katerina Teaiwa, brought to light the trauma and dislocation of the Banaban people and Australia's inextricable role in the destruction and dispersal of their land and culture for fertilizer. Commissioned by Carriageworks, Sydney, and curated by the interdisciplinary Samoan artist Yuki Kihara, *Project Banaba* was a reanimation of rare and recently declassified photography, film, and archival material, refined into an intimate and creative visual historical voyage. The exhibit was in a sense a remastered narration of diverse records covering early European photography of life on the island through to the intense period of phosphate mining that led to the destruction of the island's landscape and the community's subsequent displacement to Rabi, Fiji.

Teaiwa, herself a descendant of the Rabi-Banaban community, has delved deeply into the stories of her ancestors and their histories, extending the research that formed the foundation for her 2015 publication *Consuming Ocean Island*. As the artist argued in her book: "If the very ground of one's identity is mined, shipped, and dispersed across foreign landscapes, then 'all worlds' truly do become available for Banabans to route, root, articulate, and seek" (Teaiwa 2015:181). *Project Banaba* can be seen as an extension of this reflection, a materialization of the routes and articulations of the

human emotive experience underlying the reality of its current indigenous descendants.

Within the exhibition, viewers moved through the sobering darkness of Carriageworks' warehouse hall, which had been divided into three aesthetic domains: a central voluminous curtain series, a three-screen video playing on the perimeter wall farthest from the entrance, and a coral reef-like assemblage of photographs, reminiscent of a salon. With a contextual narration offered at the entrance, formal written information was minimal. Separate explanatory labels were provided for the three domains, each containing its own thematic elements, but these were easily lost in the dark, industrial expanse of the room. A simple map of the region was included on the wall, plotting Katerina's research movements and the forced migration of Banaba's people and land. Throughout, there was no conclusive, unilinear, or chronological narrative but rather a concerted layering of material histories, relationships, and aesthetics. This nonlinear stylization captured the sociocultural fragmentation, juxtaposition, and reclamation of identity and culture inherent in Banaba's history.

The core element of the exhibition was formed chiefly of voluminous curtains of archival images printed on voile, dominating both the visual and physical movement throughout the space. To view the other pieces, one had to move through tonally bleached scenes of life on Banaba: summarily, fishermen, schoolchildren, miners, and ancestors. The transparency of the voile provided a ghostly aesthetic to the dark space, with the

irregular layering of the sheets and focused spotlights allowing the background images to become visible as shadows.

These lighter, ethereal forms were contrasted with the harder “facts” that grounded the story of phosphate extraction, represented on coarse hessian sacks. Stylized as commercial phosphate packaging, these sacks hung from the ceiling and displayed key dates, quotes, company crests, logos, and maps of Banaba on the front. The backs were embroidered with calico silhouettes that formed bone-colored reliefs of the rock pinnacles created through the phosphate mining process. These textual elements integrated information inscribed on the objects themselves, thus avoiding the need for excessive contextualization. It invited the audience to engage with the historical facts, words, multiple voices, and texts as artworks themselves, as well as the coarseness of such “academic” information to capture the truth of Banaban history.

The hessian and calico dually functioned not only as a voice of the island’s history but also its materialization. The calico was an allusion to the material of uniforms worn by colonial officials and phosphate management staff and workers. The hessian sacks were a direct reference to the transportation and packaging of Banaban land/ancestors to become superphosphate, fuelling the primary agricultural industries of Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

Visible through the curtains as one entered, the second element of the exhibition was a three-screen, projected video montage approximately

seven minutes long. A projection of spliced footage and sound, it was composed from archival material and Teaiwa’s own research, including mining activities, dancing, historical reenactments, and the lives of Banaba’s descendants over a period of one hundred years. The video’s nonlinear form again evoked the intensity of the island’s physical and sociocultural fracturing and displacement over time. Synced to the jingles of agricultural commercials, lapping waves, song, industrial clangor, children’s chants, and lastly recitation of poetry written by the artist’s sister Teresia Teaiwa, the video’s soundscape resonated and echoed eerily through the space, providing a soundtrack to the whole exhibit.

The final element of the exhibit comprised a collection of framed photographs that provided a brighter visual and conceptual contrast to the predominantly subdued palette of the other elements. These were images of kinship, land, family members, and life on Rabi that rooted Teaiwa’s own specific positionality. Peppered with smaller reproductions of colonial photos in a white palette, their irregular arrangement suggested that of a domestic wall of family photos. Their smallness invited one to move closer, offering seeds of resilience and drawing the historically heavy narrative into the present. The present was evoked through intimate photos of family on Rabi and, in particular, the new generation of Banabans, including Teaiwa’s own children.

The various elements of this exhibition thus excavated a visual history, tracing the destruction of 90 percent of the island’s surface by British colo-

nial officials and New Zealand and Australian companies for phosphate, and engaging in a critical conversation with this history—blending stories of people with the materials and graphics of the industry. *Project Banaba* is not Teaiwa's first creative endeavor in translating the voices and histories of Banaba's past. But this most recent manifestation of her characteristic fashioning of critical, creative scholarship brings renewed consciousness of Australia's involvement in that history and building on her past New Zealand-focused collaborative installation piece, *Kainga Tahi, Kainga Rua* (*First Home, Second Home*). Created in 2003 with the Māori artist Brett Graham, *Kainga Tahi, Kainga Rua* captured New Zealand's involvement with Banaba's destruction. Graham's work entailed ten monumental vessels/coffins covered in phosphate, each representing two million tonnes of shipped phosphate. Above these floated three large, rusted steel cylindrical forms on which were projected graphics of crop dusting and industrial activities.

Project Banaba elicits a less monumental, more intimate relationship between the exhibition's subject and its audience, serving as a physical translation of the artist's life, history, and ancestors in creative form. One could not help but feel the obvious connection to the industrial genealogy of Carriageworks' space as a former industrial railway yard, since trains were crucial in the dissemination of superphosphate and profit gouged from Banaban land across the expanse of Australia and beyond.

The exhibit raised many wider questions and offered a number of

lessons as echoes of the past resonated in the present. It suggested similarities with current Australian involvement in resource-extraction projects in Melanesia and with human-induced environmental displacement and potential human and cultural movements by Pacific peoples in the face of climate change.

As a Samoan-Australian Pacific studies student who lived on Nauru as a child, I am painfully familiar with the history of phosphate extraction in the region. However, I wonder if the audience experience might have depended on the viewer's familiarity with the subject matter and Teaiwa's scholarship. If a viewer had not read her book, or perhaps missed the smaller labels in the darkened space, they would be less cued in to the specific meanings of the layered values found in the elements, and perhaps less admiring of the subtly referential fibers of the curtains.

Despite rather heavy content, with dark walls that could have easily generated a funereal atmosphere, the exhibition was cleverly balanced with gestures of movement, life, and ongoing creative resilience. Distilled from Teaiwa's inclusion of contemporaneous elements of dancing, singing, and images of her own family and translocal community on Rabi Island, this revealed a continued dynamism and optimism to Banaba's story.

Project Banaba was a thoughtfully curated achievement, being both Katerina Teaiwa's first solo art exhibition and a true homage to the ability of interdisciplinary approaches in Pacific studies to breathe life into academic research by reaching out creatively to new audiences from

beyond the paywalls of academic journals.

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Holo Moana: Generations of Voyaging. Exhibition, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 4 November 2017–24 June 2018.

Holo Moana: Generations of Voyaging offered visitors a narrative about the centuries-long legacy of Oceanic voyaging. The show, housed in the Joseph M Long Gallery at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, covered a lot of territory: embracing and disseminating indigenous knowledge, exploring the ways in which cultural exchange allows communities to gain a deeper understanding about themselves and the world, and examining the impact of technology on tradition and culture.

As a collaboration between the museum and the Polynesian Voyaging Society (pvs), the exhibition centered on the impact of the *Hōkūle'a* (Star of Gladness), a canoe designed in the 1970s that utilized ancient Oceanic techniques and materials in its construction. Ben Finney, Tommy Holmes, Herb Kāne, Nainoa Thompson, and others came together at the pvs to recover Polynesian voyaging traditions, looking to Pius "Mau" Piailug, a Micronesian navigator from Satawal, to help piece together this lost past and design the *Hōkūle'a*. The founding of the pvs and the first expedition of the *Hōkūle'a* from

Hawai'i to Tahiti (and back) in 1976 led to several expeditions without the use of modern instruments throughout Oceania. The *Hōkūle'a* embodied ongoing efforts to (re)situate way-finding knowledge within Hawaiian culture, history, and identity. In 2014, the *Hōkūle'a* embarked on her first worldwide journey; the opening of *Holo Moana* celebrated the endeavor's conclusion as well as the people met, events attended, and stories learned along the way.

Manu ihu, Manu hope (1976–2012) commanded one's attention when entering the exhibition. Situated in the center of the gallery, the *Hōkūle'a*'s curved bow (*manu ihu*) and stern (*manu hope*), with its moniker inscribed at the base, transformed the room into a still ocean. This stillness was broken by a digital projection display of contemporary navigators in action on its mast and sail. The piece literally and figuratively anchored the physicality of the *Hōkūle'a* in the museum space. While *Manu ihu, Manu hope* offered only a semblance of the ship's grandeur, smaller models, including *Hōkūle'a* (undated), *Canoe Model, Yap State* (Micronesia, undated), and *Wa'a Mau* (1976), summoned the viewer to explore the diversity of Oceanic canoe shapes and forms. The models aided the visitor in visualizing the vessels' size and scale, communicating their layout and spatial interrelationships in three dimensions.

The sheer number of artifacts within the small gallery proved overwhelming at times, but the diversity of the objects illustrated the historical continuum between ancient Oceanic voyaging and the origination of the