

Hailans to Ailans: Contemporary Art of Papua New Guinea. Exhibition, Alcheringa Gallery, Victoria, British Columbia, 5–26 November 2009.

On 5 November 2009, the Alcheringa Gallery in Victoria, British Columbia, opened the art exhibition “Hailans to Ailans” (Tok Pisin for “Highlands to Islands”), kicking off a weeklong series of associated events throughout the city as well as in Vancouver. In all directions, the artwork filled every free space with organic vitality: a carved vessel for pushing through Pacific-fed waters; wood and reclaimed metal shaped into forests of sculptures and masks; purselike sacs recalling generations of women weaving fibers into the womb that sustains their culture; and framed lines, shapes, and figures telling stories of cultural negotiations and urban identities.

Curated by Dr Pamela Rosi and Dr Michael Mel, and produced in collaboration with the Alcheringa Gallery and the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, “Hailans to Ailans” was a two-part international exhibition that first premiered in September 2009 at the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery in London. In Victoria, part two included works by Papua New Guinean artists Teddy Balangu, Tom Deko, Kaua Gita, Cathy Kata, Michael Mel, Martin Morububuna, Bepi Pius, Lucas Tangun, Michael Timbin, Otto Timbin, and Claytus Yambon, as well as Coast Salish artists lessLIE (Leslie Sam) and John Marston. (Rosanna Raymond’s work had been included in part one in London.)

The significance of this exhibition was the joining of contemporary art made by indigenous peoples who

historically had no connections with one another, yet whose cultures and art are all informed by their relationships to the Pacific and to the diverse lands and life that rise from it. In the exceptional catalog, Pamela Rosi indicates that cultural exchange between the artists was an important part of the exhibition (12). For years, Rosi, Mel, Hossack, and Alcheringa Gallery owner Elaine Monds have painstakingly brought global attention to Papua New Guinean art, lifting the artists out of anonymous obscurity. To this end, the PNG portion of “Hailans to Ailans” particularly highlighted the spectacular work of master carvers from villages along the Sepik River.

Among the many outstanding pieces, including those of Kaua Gita, Lucas Tangun, and Michael and Otto Timbin, Teddy Balangu’s striking sculpture *Killer Whale and Crocodile II* is important for its quality and complex composition (figure 1). It features a PNG man flanked by representations of Killer Whale (important for the Coast Salish people) and Crocodile (significant to Sepik River clans). Side by side, their positions suggest peace between them, a testament to Balangu’s respect for the Coast Salish and particularly his friendship with master carver John Marston. Marston’s 2006 PNG visit and collaborations with Balangu were the focus of a stunning 2007 documentary, also titled *Killer Whale and Crocodile*, by Gumboot Productions and Arthur Holbrook Productions. The film was looped continuously in the gallery throughout the exhibition, and a special screening of it was provided at the University of Victoria on 6 November 2009.

Since that PNG visit, Marston



Figure 1. *Killer Whale and Crocodile II*, by Teddy Balangu. 2009. Kwila wood, shells, bush fiber, and natural pigments, 122 × 38 × 23 cm. Photo by Janet Dwyer. Courtesy of Alcheringa Gallery.

often incorporates suns or moons in his carvings to communicate “sharing across . . . the Pacific,” as Elaine Monds states in the catalog (69). Marston’s mask titled *New Moon* is a superb example. Left unpainted,

Marston subtracted shapes completely through its surface, leaving curvilinear triangles and new moon-like crescents of negative space. The overall effect suggests the highlights and shadows across the moon’s surface. Marston sanded the wood into an ultrasmooth yet non-glossy texture. Without enhancement, the pale yellow tones of the wood grain look bright, communicating the luminosity of his natural subject.

Marston also collaborated with Claytus Yambon on a canoe that is still in progress in the gallery. Yambon has created a PNG exterior design that Marston will carve, and Marston will paint a Coast Salish design to cover the interior. In addition to the canoe, Yambon provided several sculptures for “Hailans to Ailans” that reference PNG mythology.

Martin Morububuna’s painting *Navaleta (Legacy of the Dead Brother and Daughter)* is an attention-getting portrait of a woman mourning the impending death of her clan. The work communicates the woman’s grief with exquisite stillness. In contrast, his painting *Fever of Milamala: From Planting to Harvest to Farewell of the Spirits* is a celebration that reflects not only Morububuna’s early training as a traditional carver but also Cubist approaches, as both carving and Cubism give attention to all sides of a subject. On 8 November 2009 I conducted an interview with the artist in Victoria. He noted that the repeated diamond shapes in this painting refer both to Cubism and to the patterns he incises across his woodcarvings.

During an artists’ panel at the University of Victoria on 6 November 2009, Artist lessLIE spoke eloquently

of commonalities between Coast Salish and PNG culture, pointing out “the similarity in their geometric designs, the ability to recognize people’s territory by their art, pressures of colonization, conversion in religion, and the cultural effects of consumerism.” lessLIE considers himself an “urban native” and conceptually is interested in Salish design as a visual vocabulary of that experience.

Many of the artists, including Tom Deko, challenge the categorization of PNG cultural art as traditional and not contemporary. As Rosi notes in the catalog (12), this exhibition “advocates a continuum between the two.” Each of Deko’s sculptures represents an aspect of traditional village life and responsibility, yet the media and methods he used to create them are not traditional (figure 2). Deko ripped, scorched, soldered, and twisted the metal into surprisingly delicate figurative forms—a fitting comment on the rapidly changing cultural affairs in Papua New Guinea. A note to the Alcheringa Gallery staff: Deko’s works were situated a little too low and close together for optimum viewing.

It was wonderful to see a variety of Cathy Kata’s bilums. Overall, there were not enough women artists represented in the exhibition in Victoria. For the sake of cultural exchange, the addition of paintings, carvings, or textile art by Coast Salish women would have been dynamic. Kata’s largest bilum was one of the standout pieces in “Hailans to Ailans.” Hung between two pillars and decorated with shells, animal bones, and bits of brightly colored paper wrappings, the bilum seemed to represent changes



Figure 2. *Manus Singing I*, by Tom Deko. 2009. Recycled metal, copper wire, 108 cm. Photo by Janet Dwyer. Courtesy of Alcheringa Gallery.

in PNG society moving back toward PNG traditions.

A few nights after the exhibit opened, the ultimate cultural exchange happened at the “North to South Pacific Theatre and Dance” event at Wawaditla (Mungo Martin House). A series of First Nations blessings, songs, and dances welcomed the audience and especially the visiting Pacific Islanders to their ancestral lands. The first dancers entered as if arriving in canoes, pushing the air aside like water. Later, Pacific Islander dancers responded, demonstrating good fun and vigor through Samoan slap dances and a Māori haka. Finally, a

path of colored fabrics was stretched around the fire. Then Michael Mel stepped onto it and began his magic. As if coming full circle with the first dancers, Mel slowly paddled an imaginary canoe into the space. His solitary figure then enacted the crushing challenges to PNG traditions and yet somehow his performance spoke for all indigenous peoples. In the end he made the audience face their own stereotypes, encouraging enlightenment and change.

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*American Aloha: Cultural Tourism and the Negotiation of Tradition*, by Heather A Diamond. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-8248-3171-4, xv + 261 pages, illustrations, references, index. Cloth, US\$55.00.

*American Aloha* explores the politics and poetics of cultural production through a detailed account of the making of the Hawai'i program for the 1989 Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF). Interlinking archival sources, conversations, interviews, and documents saved by program organizers, the author, Heather A Diamond, presents a critical, multi-vocal case study that explores tradition, representation, cultural commodification,

identity, tourism, sovereignty, and nationalism through the processes and outcomes of culture brokering for public consumption. Although she was not present during the actual planning and execution of the festival, Diamond capitalizes successfully on her outsider position to analyze data from multiple viewpoints. The resulting text is a nuanced analysis of the meaning and purpose of folklife festivals that simultaneously examines the complexities of Hawaiian identity as it is naturalized, romanticized, and politicized by those who have it, don't have it, or fit somewhere in between.

The themes presented in *American Aloha* begin from the premise that, from beginning to end, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is shaped by contradictions between the ideologies and practices. The annual festival promotes postmodern liberal values of difference, yet it is part of a legacy of exhibiting peoples along a continuum of savagery to civilization to justify assimilationist policies of the past. With the intent of bringing the periphery to the core, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival showcases cultures as destinations hosted by local culture brokers, but Hawai'i cannot literally be toured on the Mall in Washington DC. The program is designed to display the cultural diversity of America under a national model of multiculturalism, but for the 1989 festival organizers hand selected culture brokers they deemed "representative" through ethnographic practices that constructed artificial ethnicities for display and denied complex identity politics that could have subverted naturalized power structures between mainland