The Island Race in Aotearoa

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Contemporary Pacific Island Art in New Zealand is like a three-legged race. It is both a novelty and a handicap event, with the Pacific Island artist facing the demands of partnership and timing. The artist is tied to his community on one side and his new audience on the other, uncomfortable about working alone in the Western tradition of individual statement, and at the same time constricted by the art world itself, which offers only a narrow opening - a vision of an imagined Pacific Island world - through which the work is admitted to a public space.

Pacific Island Art is a convenient label for a diverse range of forms by a culturally diverse peoples. There are seven main Pacific Island communities in New Zealand, from Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and Fiji; a migration that began in the 1940s, resulting in its present population of 180,000. The exoticism of Pacific Island imagery became visible in the mid 1980s and artists who sought to define themselves through cultural 'markers' impacted on the contemporary art scene with their references to traditional designs and motifs from tapa, tattoo, lapita pottery, weaving and a re-working of a Pacific Island storyboard, religious and mythical.

A number of external factors have opened a receptive arena for Pacific Island Art in New Zealand. First was the striking resurgence of Maori nationalism and the revival of Maori art and culture. Second, the metropolitan interest in art on the margins. And, third, the implementation of the Pacific Islands Arts Committee of the Arts Council of New Zealand.

Some of the milestones along the road of the Maori Renaissance also mark the path taken by Pacific Island artists in New Zealand. The emergence of a contemporary vernacular in both Maori and Island art has followed the same general pattern, but there are important differences. The very diversity of the Island artistic cultures, their immigrant status and their discrete histories of contact mean that their works exist in a different temporal and cultural space.

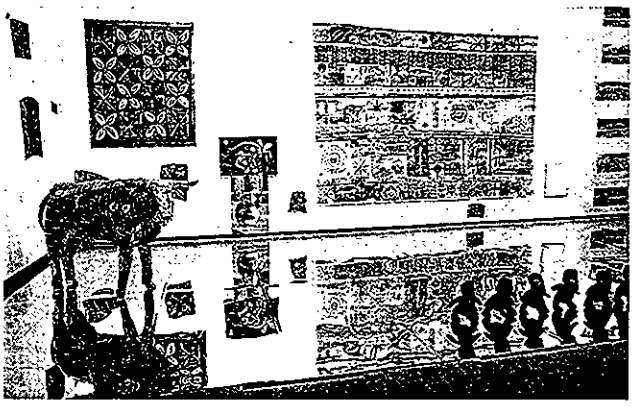
Thus exhibitions based on the Pacific Island Other become cultural zones - display cases under the scrutiny of a gallery audience and marginalised outside both Maori and Pakeha Contemporary Art.

While many Pacific Islanders retain kinship ties and rituals that link them to their homelands, others who were born in New Zealand, have a more filtered relationship with their origins. And for some second or even third generation New Zealand-born, these links have become extremely blurred or even severed completely.

Like Maori, their cultures are multi-layered and characterised by their interactive forms of song and dance, food, handcrafts and lifestyle. Even the purest manifestation of these cultures, the art object, should not properly be seen as the preserve of the art galleries and museums, but should hold on to its place within everyday communal experience in the region of the domestic and shared.

Nevertheless Pacific Island artists need to make and sell their work, and take advantage of the current shift. The modern tribal art market, established by dealers and entrepreneurs shapes the taste of buyers and the market is now able to offer colourful pan-Pacific imagery to replace the so-called 'hallway' Tapa cloth.

The artworks make attractive displays, allowing the audience to find the common threads of different cultures and different languages manifest in them. This allows the audience - as much as the artists - the chance to invent an imagined Pacific Island community, to the detriment of more personal statements drawn from the divisions and tensions of race, the power of the Church or corrosive effects of socio-economic problems.



Bottled Ocean exhibition at Wellington City Gallery, 1994.

The first contemporary Pacific Island Art exhibition in New Zealand was initiated by a Pakeha photographer in 1984 who celebrated his travels by imaging the Polynesian; the actual work of the Polynesian artists that celebrated another reality, was in some sense subordinate to his.

Although local community centres, dealer galleries and the artists themselves over the next few years organised various group and one-man shows, the first significant exhibition *Te Moemoea no Iotefa* (The Dream of Joseph) was instigated by a provincial city gallery in 1990. This showcased ten contemporary Pacific Island artists; their work was displayed side by side with Maori and Polynesian artifacts from museums, modern Maori and Pacific Island art works in traditional style, and the work of eight Pakeha artists who had similar subjects and employed similar motifs. It was a large and comprehensive show whose ethnographic context made it accessible to a new viewing public.

In 1993, the Museum Directors Federation of New Zealand auspiced the first survey of Pacific Island contemporary art, under the working title of *Bottled Ocean* which I curated and designed. This exhibition was installed in the main galleries of five major cities. With almost 30 artists selected there were more than 120 components including painting, sculpture, textiles, ceramics, photography, video, jewellery, and computer graphics. My intention was to make all the works into one work, a flexible collaborative installation. The audience was distanced by a perspex wall that met a mirrored floor, forming an ironically enlarged display case. The emphasis was on concentrated presence, rather than individual privileging.

Such exhibitions allow the involvement of the wider Pacific Island community in preparing for the openings, marked by ritual, prayers, music, dance, and are attended by many who may be visiting a gallery for the first time.

Today the art of the Pacific Islanders is still trapped within its category. The display cases of the institutions have not been shattered. Yet the very act of exhibiting demonstrates that the making and the appreciation of art is a dynamic process. Institutions are caught by a need to both legitimise themselves and acknowledge (and perhaps attempt to control) the art of the migrant communities. The difficult three-legged race of the Island artist is still being run.□