

Art in the Contemporary Pacific



Figure 1. Tolai tubuan groups arrive by canoe for the Wawargira ceremony, which heralds the opening of the Kokopo National Mask Festival, East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. The dukduk masks are exclusive to initiated men of the tubuan (men's secret societies) of the Tolai people. Field research photo by Susan Cochrane, with permission of the artists.

Throughout the Pacific region—also called Oceania—people have different vantage points, indigenous and non-indigenous, from the past to the present, from which they observe, discuss and value art and participate in their communities' cultural life. The Papua New Guinean philosopher, Bernard Narokobi, posted this notice on his office wall at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby:

Welcome to the University.
The ancient, timeless, eternal
University of Melanesia.
The village
where courses are offered in living.¹

Across the span of oceans and time, what links today's Pacific peoples to each other and the realm of their ancestors, across the space of the Pacific? Is there a language for art that can be shared across indigenous and non-indigenous art and culture systems? We should be prepared to have our ideas about art in the contemporary Pacific challenged.

Multiple types of art, places for display, and inspirations for creative expression exist simultaneously in village, urban and global settings. The selection of images throughout this paper includes some of artworks and performances in their own cultural setting, which are astonishing in their dramatic visual effect and virtuosity. Other images highlight the fantastic journeys embarked on by artists who contribute their vision and imagination to the efflorescence of Pacific art on the world stage.

In its broadest sense, the term "contemporary art" refers to that made and produced by artists living today. For want of a better term, "contemporary art" in the space of the Pacific describes art production and creative expression in countries where a great diversity of indigenous people live in different socio-economic circumstances, with disparate cultures and sets of resources. There is no recognised canon of "contemporary Pacific art," a culturally cohesive creative practice reflecting a common sense of identity, place and time, instead there is a great diversity of artistic activities happening contemporaneously throughout the region.

In a keynote address in 2009, Karen Stevenson, a scholar of Tahitian descent, raised the critical concern of what constitutes "contemporary" Pacific art: how does "contemporary" evade the persistent paradigms of authenticity and primitivism? How can it accommodate the region's plethora of tradition-based practices as well as artworks in introduced media? This approach generates more questions: who are the leading artists of today? By whose criteria of assessment is this determined?²

From her long association with both village-based and urban-based artists in Papua New Guinea, Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris perceived that:

The works are intellectually contentious as they challenge both western and indigenous notions of art. They do not fit neatly into the art historical nor anthropological descriptive categories, contesting definitions of fine arts and crafts, group identity, and material culture.³

From the 1970s, as the colonial era began to recede into history, refreshing winds of change swept across the Pacific, giving the impetus to all concerned with art and thought to speak their mind and create new visions of their world and their place in it. Epeli Hau'ofa, a philosopher of Tongan origin, articulated the self-image of Pacific Islanders as belonging to an interconnected "Ocean of Islands." He dispatched the prevailing view of Western social scientists and economists that the small island states and territories of the Pacific are too small, too isolated from centres of economic growth, and too lacking in resources, ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence, a post-colonial view that continued the entrenched colonial power game of belittling Indigenous people.⁴ Hau'ofa refocused attention on unifying principles:

If we look at the myths, legends and oral traditions, and at the cosmologies of the people of Oceania, it becomes evident that they did not conceive of their world in microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods, named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their way across the seas. The world was anything but tiny. They thought big and recounted their deeds in epic proportions.⁵

Hau'ofa reviews the perspective of European colonialists in their centres of power far from the Pacific who, absorbed in their navigators accounts of voyages across the vast space of the ocean, drew lines across the map to join dotted groups of islands, defining borders in the interests of Western imperialism, dismembering Pacific peoples' widespread and interconnecting systems of exchange and cultural enrichment. He urged Pacific islanders to adopt "the Ocean in Us" and to believe in "a new sense of the region that is our own creation, based on our perceptions and our realities, [that] is necessary for our survival in the dawning era."⁶

From the 1960s, as Pacific Islands countries gained their nationhood and minority Indigenous populations asserted their identity, contemporary art movements emerged and multiplied across the region, especially in urban areas. Although artists who adopt new roles and media may rupture conventional routines and ideologies, both within their home communities and abroad, they act with confidence and resolve to examine critically a wider scope of possibilities within their own societies and to articulate their differences. Across the Pacific many urban-based artists work in and respond to a global environment that is culturally diverse, technologically advancing, and multifaceted. For example in New Zealand, leading Māori artists like Michael Parehowkai and Emare Karaka are urban-based, individualistic practitioners whose work engages with global concepts of the modern and contemporary. Considered equally as "contemporary artists" in the world of Māori practitioners are virtuosic weavers like Christina Whirihana and Veranoa Hetet, who employ traditional media and techniques but innovate with form and style. In the more remote areas of Melanesia, such as Malekula in Vanuatu, which is famous for ritual objects and complex ceremonies, any concept of "contemporary art" as the marketable product of professional artists working with introduced media would exclude extraordinary artistic achievement in indigenous art forms and the virtuosity of many talented individuals.

Exhibitions and publications on so-called "contemporary" Pacific art often favour artworks in introduced materials, such as oil and acrylic paints, plastics and metal, digital media and photography. This has perhaps been a deliberate ploy—it has been necessary to emphasize that Pacific art is not the stereotyped "tribal art" favoured by artefact shops and interior decorators or the "traditional art" in museum collections. At international venues, such as the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art of the Queensland Art Gallery-Gallery of Modern Art and New Zealand's Pasifika Festival, the "new wave" of Pacific painters and sculptors, conceptual artists, performance and video artists, such as John Pule, Lonnie Hutchinson, Michel Tuffery, have shown themselves to be distinctive, sophisticated, witty, critical and very individual. As it continues to get more international exposure, this vibrant and compelling side of Pacific art is increasingly sought after in the uber art world of international biennales.

There are many other aspects of current artistic practice in Pacific communities which are equally

as interesting but less widely known and commented on. Every community has its special cultural objects, designs and bodily ornamentation, and their specialist artists are just as highly skilled, imaginative and inventive in their traditional media. Inherited knowledge of the properties of each type of wood, stone, shell, clay, ochre, cane, leaf and plant fibre, plume and animal skin is essential to the maker of any type of object, from the most simple to the most sophisticated, whether for elaborate constructions, the making of ceremonial objects, items of costume and self adornment. Each clan group has specific and often complicated techniques to be learned, whether for carving, painting, weaving (plaiting, knotting, tying), making bark cloth, grinding shells, or preparing oils, dyes and pigments. While Western aesthetic sensibilities are not acculturated to attractions such as the iridescence of shell, brilliant plumage, subtle ochres and oil-shined skin, local audiences are mindful of the skilful combinations of these elements required for ceremonial occasions and critical of the aesthetic effect achieved.⁷

To avoid the thorny terrain of representing disparate cultural perspectives by imagining that there is a collective cultural phenomenon of “contemporary Pacific art,” which is often conceived as a progression from—or somehow oppositional to—“traditional art,” I prefer to use the term “living art.” This descriptor envisages the constant flow of creation currently being produced contemporaneously by today’s Pacific artists of all backgrounds, whatever their preferred media and art making processes, wherever their work is displayed and admired. Admittedly there are clusters of urban-based artists who distinguish themselves as “contemporary artists,” for example the Nawita Group in Vanuatu and Fiji’s Red Wave Collective, whose artistic output and agenda distinguishes them from their tradition-oriented contemporaries. Occasionally a word or phrase arises that becomes popular and widely adopted, as it accurately resonates with the life style and aspirations of a particular group; for example, as discussed below, Pasifika artists and activists in New Zealand are searching for creative and meaningful ways of continuing to be connected to their island cultures while asserting their place in urban societies where they are often a minority group.

LANGUAGE FOR ART

One aim of Pacific artists and intellectuals is to overcome the distinct lack of nuanced vocabulary for discourse on art in the contemporary Pacific and to make a contribution to improving conceptualization and dialogue concerning it. English is a limited language when it comes to understanding and assessing works of art arising from Pacific cultures and their relationship to place and community—apart from the art market. This results in fewer opportunities for mutual exploration, interaction and learning. The first examples—tapa and tattoo—are indicative of the tendency to use generic terms when there are specific words in Pacific languages to describe an art form or practice.

The heritage of tangible and intangible cultural heritage is visible across the islands of Oceania. Beaten and decorated bark cloth, often called tapa, is a pan-Pacific material that is still widely made and used across Melanesia and Polynesia. While the generic name for bark cloth is tapa, each Pacific people have specific names for their types of plain and decorated bark cloth; in Fiji, decorated bark cloth is called masi, in Tonga it is ngatu, kapa in Hawaii and siapo in Samoa. Tapa is a continuing tradition and living art of Pacific people. It is a high status fibre art in Tonga, Samoa and Fiji, where groups of women make the cloth from the beaten bark of paper mulberry and breadfruit trees then paint it with symbolic designs and motifs handed on through generations. In Tonga, great lengths of ngatu, some over 50 metres long, are required for royal occasions such as the funeral of King Georgu

Tupou V. The regalia worn at the investiture of chiefs in Fiji include a specific costume created of several types of plain and decorated masi for each chief. Commoners, as well as chiefs, wear tapa for occasions such as weddings and funerals.⁸



Figure 2. Performance group from Santa Cruz Island, a remote Polynesian outlier in the Temotu Province, Solomon Islands, at the Festival of Pacific Arts, Honiara, 2012. Among the fine arts of Santa Cruz are body tattoos, exquisitely woven fine mats and fans, tapa (bark cloth) dyed with tumeric or painted with fine designs, carved dance accessories. Photo Susan Cochrane, permission of the artist.

Tatau (tattoo) is significant marker of personal and cultural identity for Polynesians, some groups of coastal Melanesians and, until recently, Aboriginal Taiwanese.⁹ Tattoo patterns and the bands of design on pottery and tapa cloth are possibly the most ancient patterns surviving. European explorers were amazed by the practice of tattoo and recorded the appearance of Polynesian men and women with full body tattoo; it was Captain James Cook who introduced the word “tattoo” into the English language along with records and images of its practice.¹⁰ Distinctive patterns, each belonging to a particular clan, have been handed down through generations and can only be used by the people of the clan who own it. Since the 1970s there has been a widespread cultural revival of the practice of full body tattoos in Tahiti and the Marquesas, Samoa, Tonga and among Māori people in New Zealand. In the 1990s-2000s, a number of leading artists of Samoan heritage in New Zealand decided to get the full pe’a as an affirmation of their cultural identity. Greg Semu, Michel Tuffery and Fatu Feu’u proudly wear their heritage on their skin. The Māori artist, George Nuku, wears the moko, including a facial tattoo. Rosanna Raymond is one of the contemporary Pacific women for whom costume and body art are essential to their arts of performance and auto-portrait. In New Zealand, since the 1980s, it has become established practice to incorporate Māori words

and phrases into English text, so that language and meaning become intertwined. Hirini Moko Mead was among those influential in reclaiming and naming Toi Māori (Māori arts):

In summary, Toi is a Māori word that refers to knowledge, origins, and sources, and to art in general. Toi Māori is now used to cover the wide range of creative activities that Māori artists engage in...Toi Māori is also used to refer to all the art forms that contemporary Māori artists are exploring in theatre, music, writing, and visual arts.¹¹

Māori have strict sets of protocol, as explained by Tui Te Rito Mahi for a hui concerned with the art of weaving:

The coming together of Māori and non-Māori works and their makers could be seen as a symbolic hongi, an exchange of the breath of life, for the works reveal much—not only of the individual artists but of their cultural whenu (warp). There are many aho connecting essentially pakeha divisions of contemporary and traditional. Such divisions, through Māori eyes, seem superfluous when one realizes that every maker of contemporary Māori works also makes traditional pieces; which by their very nature enhance our lives today in much the same way as they did for our tupuna for hundreds of years.¹²

One central trait among Māori and Pasifika artists is continuing to value the history and practice of traditional arts, first learnt from master artists then interpreted in new ways by individual artists. As Semesi Fetokai Potauaine points out, it is easy to be locked into our own cultural conventions and descriptions of artworks and processes. Potauaine describes himself as a Tongan citizen residing in New Zealand, who has been exposed to both Western and Pacific knowledge through his education and his art. He explains the basis of his arts practice, which is steeped in Tongan intellectual traditions and aesthetic sensibility:

In Tonga, art is classified into three types, viz. material arts (tufunga), performance arts (faiva) and fine arts (ngaue fakamea'a)...My work across all material art forms has been informed by the Tongan tufunga lalava...As a master art, tufunga lalava is concerned with the production of a huge range of elaborate, complex and beautiful designs (kupesi), involving the abstraction of concrete objects...Art can be defined as a transformation from representation to abstraction, engaging in the production of symmetry, harmony and beauty.¹³

In many Melanesian languages, no single words exist for the Western cultural concepts of “history” and “art.” Nevertheless, the celebration of being, communication of identity, expression of cultural knowledge and cohesion to the land were, and still are, sung, orated, performed, designed, sculpted and made into images. Myths, legends, poetry, songs and incantations, as well as objects and images, narrate cultural values, epics, spiritual beliefs, social customs and the people’s covenant with the land. The Papua New Guinean historian, John Waiko, described the mourning customs of his Binandere people as their “crying,” and this act transferred the personality of the deceased into songs or rhythms that were incorporated into the clan’s repertoire; rhythms were created for drum and dance and melodies for solo voice to keep the dead within the living memory of their kin. Another way of transforming history into songs and songs into history was “crying” for a lost stone club, which then became the story of how it was made, where it came from, how it was exchanged and the battles and hunting expeditions of which it was a part.¹⁴

Contesting Western concepts of art and history with those of Melanesians is a recurring theme in the work of Papua New Guinea scholar and performance artist Michael Mel.¹⁵ In one article on the

theme of indigeneity, which is recurrent in his writing and performance art, he claims that “art from an indigenous context cannot be transferred wholly into another context for reading.”¹⁶

Mel identified three categories in the PNG lingua franca Tok Pisin—kastom (our ways), taim bilong masta (the time of masters, the colonial era) and yumi iet (our future). He noted that for many Melanesians “one of the most popular categories has been the notion of kastom; this refers in many ways to a sense of shared culture.” The second category, taim bilong masta, “relates to the colonial experiences of being treated differently by the colonial masters because we were different in language, behaviour, skin colour and custom.” Yumi iet is the final dimension; in Mel’s words, “the new Pacific is an admixture of confluences...Western influences combined with those of our own hamlets and villages produce a cornucopia that articulates Pacific differences within the Pacific and without.”¹⁷

Kastom is loosely translated as “our way”; it refers to the social systems, cultural activities, knowledge and values inherited from the past, it is not just nostalgia for village life and cultural pride in the ancestors but encompasses indigenous power relations, customs and life styles. Kastom bilong ples signifies attachment to a particular group whose cultural practices are bound to their own laws, society and environment. It is commonly employed in the lingua franca of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands as well as PNG and the Torres Strait Islands; in New Caledonia Kanak people have their equivalent “coutume.” For Torres Strait Islanders, ailan kastom (Island Custom) is used to describe the strong sense of culture shared by Islanders. The Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act (1989) defines it as “the body of customs, traditions, observances and beliefs of some or all of the Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait Area.”

Since the 1970s there has been a continual emphasis on keeping kastom alive in Papua New Guinea. In the 1980s the philosopher Bernard Narokobi considered it a priority, arguing that “with the establishment of our political independence, our first task is to restore our self respect, pride and dignity.”¹⁸ The country’s leaders expressed concern that, because of the dramatic social change and upheaval brought on by the influences of modernisation and economic development, Papua New Guineans risked losing or devaluing their traditional knowledge, customs and cultural activities.

Retaining kastom and belief has proven to be sustainable and viable, offering inspiration in the twenty-first century, although it was, and still is, under stress from governments, foreign corporations financing developments such as logging and mining, churches and aid organisations with their specific goals. The inter-animation of kastom and contemporary culture—and conversely the rejection of kastom as inappropriate to contemporary culture—energizes and creates tensions in all kinds of artistic expression. While recognizing the dynamic of change on all forms of cultural activity, the desire for cultural resilience was expressed by Narokobi:

Will we see our own true size images, or will we see ourselves in the images and the shadows of others?...Like the fruits of our mother earth, we, the potters and the weavers, can and should shape our own history.¹⁹

Kastom is appreciated and employed with a selective eye throughout Papua New Guinea today as citizens of the new nation continually evaluate their emerging national identity and priorities. In May 2011, an important symposium, “Women, Kastom and Modernity” was held at National Parliament House.²⁰ Simultaneously, an art exhibition “Rethinking the Role of Women in Papua New Guinea” was held at the National Library, where prominent artists (all men save one woman), were

invited to reflect on issues of gender equality.²¹ Following a year of concerted effort to increase the representation of women in Parliament and other leadership roles, a move hotly contested by some men in influential positions, the symposium provided the opportunity critically to discuss changing perspectives on *kastom* and how traditional values may continue to empower and disempower women in Papua New Guinea today.

FESTIVALS—FROM VILLAGE TO GLOBAL

Each indigenous artistic system operates within its own contemporary framework, very much part of its place and time. For example, throughout Melanesia, distinctive art forms express characteristic local cultures in village communities that are linked by language, kinship and environment. In the urban zone, principally metropolitan centres in New Zealand and Australia and the capital cities of island nations, artists extend their chosen genres of painting, sculpture, digital media, installation and performance to new dimensions. Urban artists' creative work may also reflect contested loyalties to tradition and modernity. Globalisation pulls all the peoples of the world into closer orbits. Pacific artists from village and urban backgrounds have reached the uber-sphere of international biennales and new audiences for their art.

Villagers' horizons are not limited, there are interconnections and pathways between village, urban and global settings where art and cultural pride is displayed. The discussion of festivals provides a lens to view the inter-animation between *kastom* and contemporary art in this range of different cultural environments. Festivals can have agendas apart from their program of spectacular performances; Melanesia 2000, developed by the Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1975, was the turning point in claiming the recognition of Kanak people and their culture in New Caledonia. In Melanesian village communities where *kastom bilong ples* remains the basis of community life, the chief motivation for art making and performance is ceremony rather than to serve the interests of the global art market.²² Communities stage elaborate ceremonies which are important occasions with social and spiritual dimensions, often entailing the creation of complex sets of art objects and sustained performances. Some ceremonies serve to ensure the continuing fertility of the land and its harvests, others to mark transitions in the human life cycle, such as the initiation of young men, bride price (marriage) and funerary rites, which involve considerable time and resources. Collective creativity is about common purpose and joint endeavour in the production of cultural objects and events that contribute to community life rather than accentuation on the individual. Members of a community—or specific groups within a community, such as men's secret societies—employ a shared vocabulary of forms, patterns and symbols. Whether permanent or ephemeral, the art forms they produce to mark special occasions contribute to a sense of wellbeing and belonging among the members of a society.

Throughout the Pacific, the regional, national and international festivals have become popular events for showcasing public performances by distinctive cultural/linguistic groups. At the community level, secular mini-festivals occur frequently in local contexts; every school has its culture day, every church its fete, extended families and clan groups celebrate events in the life cycle. Regional and national festivals are larger-scale events that celebrate the resilience of valued traditions, as well as an eclectic mix of contemporary culture in Pacific societies; for example, the Goroka Show and Mt Hagen Show, which are both held annually in the populous Highlands provinces of Papua New Guinea.

Called “sing-sings” in Tok Pisin, these are a form of cultural pride, where clan-based performance groups compete for attention. Each group displays their magnificent costumes and choreography in contemporary interpretations of traditional forms specifically developed for public performances. While clan groups innovate with costume and develop new sing-sing for their repertoire, there is no need to align their inherited forms of creative expression with those of the Euro-American art world. However, on the outskirts of the Goroka Show or any other festival in PNG, local reggae groups, discos and radios blaring pop music are all the rage.

Since it was established in 1991, Samoa’s Teuila Festival has grown to become one of Samoa’s most celebrated annual events, and one of the South Pacific’s biggest cultural festivals. The program for 2012 highlights the alignment and interaction between fa’a Samoa (Samoan ways, similar to kastom) with activities introduced from elsewhere that are now integrated into Samoan contemporary culture, including the choral exhibition, traditional Siva Samoa and upbeat dance competitions, Chief’s Fiafia Polynesian spectacular, Ailao Afi/Fire Knife dancing, Umu (Samoan ground oven), tattooing and carving demonstrations, International Paddling, Celebration Concert and Miss Samoa Pageant.²³

Some festivals mark turning points in Island history, like the annual Coming of the Light, which heralds the arrival of Christianity in the Torres Strait Islands in 1873. The mission dress and social conduct that strict Christian denominations introduced to South Pacific communities fundamentally changed social organisation and modes of expression, including dress, dance and festivals. Today’s modest attire does nothing to arrest the expertly choreographed dancing and choral singing. Some sets of dances require ingenious “dance machines” that clap open and shut with hand movements; other groups of performers sport the elaborate head-dresses made by experts that clearly denote their island of origin. The scarcity of resources means that the TSI are often innovative creators—plywood, flattened tin, chicken feathers, wire and fishing line are incorporated into masks and dance machines; bottle tops tied together make good leg rattles; blue plastic strapping removed from freight is expertly woven into baskets.

In the 1970s in New Caledonia, some Kanak leaders felt the need to revitalise elements of cultural life that had been diminished, were lying dormant or had been discontinued after more than a century of colonial administration, mission influences and the incursion of increasing numbers of immigrants to New Caledonia. The leader of the FLNKS, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, realised that “culture is the key element in regaining Kanak esteem.”

The Melanesia 2000 festival organised by Tjibaou was considered a formative moment in the assertion of Kanak identity in New Caledonia.²⁴ It was one of Tjibaou’s first appearances in the public arena and it is significant that he made this a cultural drive, rather than a political one. The timing of Melanesia 2000 coincided with independence celebrations in neighbouring PNG, which reinforced to Kanak leaders just how far they were from achieving the same goal. Tjibaou moved to have Kanak culture made known and recognised by the French and other inhabitants of the country, who were mostly ignorant of Melanesian realities. As he said, “The profound motivation behind this festival is the belief in the possibility of commencing a deeper...and continuing dialogue between European culture and Indigenous culture.”²⁵

The Festival of Pacific Arts (FoPA) is arguably the world’s largest indigenous arts festival. Across the Pacific, FoPA is the most highly anticipated event, the international festival designed by Pacific

people for Pacific people.²⁶ For the host countries, especially small island states like Palau, the Cook Islands, Western Samoa and the Solomon Islands, holding the festival has been the biggest cultural event in their country.

In the post-colonial era, as Pacific Islands became sovereign nations in the 1970s and '80s, their leaders expressed concern that, because of the dramatic social change and upheaval arising from modernisation, political change and economic development, Pacific Islanders might lose or devalue their traditional knowledge, customs and cultural activities; young people especially were attracted to new forms of entertainment and urban culture, traditional customs and ceremonies languished among those caught up in urban drift, poverty and marginalized lifestyles. Up to 3000 participants from twenty-seven Pacific countries arrive in the host nation, with thousands of locals contributing to the festivities, whether as participants, hosts or enthusiastic spectators. The theme of the 2012 FoPA hosted by the Solomon Islands, "Culture in Harmony with Nature," emphasized the desire of indigenous people to retain their tangible and intangible cultural heritage and social values. It was popular with Solomon Islanders, who recognise the direct articulation between cultural diversity and biological diversity. John Wayne, a notable sculptor and one of the leaders of the Solomon Islands Western Province delegation, said the theme was an accurate reflection of the contexts and recurring patterns of the cultural life of small communities like those of the Marovo Lagoon, which have a symbiotic dependence with their environment and all it provides.²⁷

FoPA is a massive showcase for all art forms, a valued meeting place for exchange and dialogue. More than an arts festival, FoPA is a huge celebration of resilience and sharing, an incubator of future talents and repository of precious memories in what Hau'ofa called "our Ocean of Islands."

PASIFIKA

A strong collective identity "Pasifika" has been forged since the 1980s. Initially it acknowledged the vitality with which New Zealand-born Polynesians responded to life in New Zealand, trying to make their voice and vision heard on a playing field already crowded with outspoken Māori artists and Pakeha (New Zealanders of European and other heritage). Stevenson commented that, "the concept of urban Polynesian is one frequently used in New Zealand. The combination of an urban lifestyle with a Polynesian mind set is the reality of many as they forge an integrated, yet distinctly different, life."²⁸

Pasifika rapidly became popular throughout the home islands and spread among the diasporic communities in Australia and the USA. By the end of the twentieth century, identifying as Pasifika was widely acknowledged as the right vehicle to escape the racial, linguistic and cultural confines imposed by Western theorists, who imagined Pacific islands societies as "hybrid" and "post-colonial" and questioned their "authenticity."

At the time of the second Asia-Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1996, curator/provocateur Jim Vivieaere, of Cook Islands/New Zealand heritage, commented that:

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.²⁹

What does Pasifika mean to the Pacific artists who are continually inventing and re-inventing it? Current issues move beyond issues of race and place, beyond the post-colonial and the post-modern,



Figure 3. Set of Arawe performance masks collected at the 2011 National Mask Festival by the curators of the Queensland Art Gallery-Gallery of Modern Art for the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, 2012.

interpreting new technologies, attitudes and ideas. The continual reappraisal and redefining of Pasifika art has enabled the steady growth in the number of artists referencing a Pacific identity and developing their art into a distinct movement.

Pamela Zeplin, an Australian art historian with a strong commitment to promoting contemporary Pacific artists, commented on Pasifika artist's innovative use of digital media, the internet and social media as forums for their art:

Pacific “territory” may be dynamic, multiple and fluid but it’s also fraught with complicated theoretical, cultural and practical considerations of identity, authenticity, place, power, and community protocols that sometimes prove incommensurable with capital A art systems. Although “tradition” is now acknowledged as continuing and contemporaneous, how is a metropolitan gallery full of fine mats, bilums and/or performances—as in “Pacific Storms”—curated and/or understood? Or, how do specific local references—as in Eric Bridgeman’s transgressive videos referencing PNG masks, or Keren Ruki’s Māori cloaks of dingo skin—navigate the consciousness of new audiences? Ignoring official “boundaries,” younger artists are already bouncing work and ideas around the Internet, promoting, curating, archiving and critiquing through blogs like Pacific



Figure 4. Eric Natuovi, (Vanuatu). Ephemeral environmental installation created for *Floating Land-Rising Sea*, an event which drew together Australian and Pacific artists concerned with the effects of climate change on fragile coastal environments at Lake Cootharabara in the Noosa Biosphere reserve, 2009. Photo Susan Cochrane, permission of the artist.

Arts Alliance, Masalai Blog, Urban Viti, iCi, Beyond Pacific Art and Colour me Fiji.³⁰

Pasifika artists do not shy away from global issues, especially issues that present real and present danger to their home communities—climate change, HIV-AIDS, violence and conflict, corruption. Another attribute of Pasifika is deconstructing romanticized clichés around “romantic islands, noble savages and dusky maidens.” Juxtaposing tourist clichés with traditional Pacific art forms, Rosanna Raymond, Ani O’Niell and Niki Hastings-McFall intrigue with their cross-cultural contradictions of what iconic Pacific objects symbolize to Pasifika people and Western audiences. As Stevenson commented on Hastings-McFall’s series featuring the popular Pacific flower lei (garland of flowers given in greeting, also frequently worn as part of dance costume)

Flowers, so benign yet so aesthetically pleasing, embody a tourist icon, a cultural reality, and a conflict of interests. In some islands, the church prohibited the wearing and intertwining of flowers in young women’s hair. They believed that this might have rendered them too attractive. In contrast the myth of the dusky maiden—always with a flower in her hair—available and consenting, is a Western perception that has survived missionisation. Using a discarded tourist icon—the cheap

\$2 lei...The colours are rich and sensual and scream “Pacific.” The contradictions abound. The unreal synthetic nature of tourism is highlighted and Hastings-McFall asks her viewer to draw the line between the myths and realities that make up the Pacific.³¹

PACIFIC ART ON THE WORLD STAGE

Multiple challenges face metropolitan art museums’ engagement and collaboration with Pacific cultural organisations and creative partners and those striving for the more opportunities to present and promote Pacific artists internationally. Among these is the fact that, without a shared language for indigenous art forms, responses to Pacific artists’ creative interactions with their contemporary culture, values, and identity may be limited. Clearly many developing Pacific nations, even large ones like Papua New Guinea, lack a government-funded support system for the arts, such as that offered by the Australia Council for the Arts and Creative New Zealand. This is a significant hurdle; without the contribution of a major corporate sponsor or philanthropist, opportunities for Pacific artists are frequently stifled. There is also a perception that they are far away and expensive to visit, and that there is a heightened level of health, occupational safety, and security risks travelling around remote areas in “third world” countries.³²



Figure 5. Teddy Balangu (Sepik, Papua New Guinea) is a master sculptor in the latmul tradition. These elaborate mwai masks, which are used in harvest ceremonies, were on display in the haus tambaran (initiated men’s house) in his home village of Palembei in the mid-Sepik. Teddy also regularly exhibits alongside Northwest Coast American Indian artists in Vancouver, Canada. In the documentary film, *Killer Whale and Crocodile*, carvers from these two great carving traditions exchange visits to each other’s countries. Field research photo by Susan Cochrane, with permission of the artist.

Pamela Rosi, a curator who has consistently found ways to present and promote PNG artists in the USA, commented on the agency of contemporary artists as “cultural ambassadors.” In the 1980s and 1990s, several artists—including Larry Santana, whose paintings depict topics related to tensions between modernity, tradition, and social alienation—received some support from the PNG government and other agencies to represent their art and culture in the US. Rosi commented that, while American audiences received artists like Santana enthusiastically, critics initially raised doubts about the authenticity of contemporary art as a valid expression of PNG culture. In turn, this led to her questioning of the role of “Western gatekeepers’ to categorise, stereotype, and devalue contemporary PNG art in the global market.”³³

In Australia, Europe and the USA, public institutions have lagged in developing collection policies for contemporary Pacific art—the living art of today—, and there has been little interest among leading private galleries in promoting the work of the artists mentioned here. New Zealand is the exception, as it has a highly geared “art machine” for the presentation, promotion, and publication assisting Māori and Pasifika artists towards international “name” status.

In comparison with the high status of older masterpieces of “Oceanic art” in museum collections, contemporary art from Melanesia had made little headway in the

international art world by the end of the twentieth century.⁴³ “Oceanic art” in European and American museums and private collections is commonly considered to be “traditional” art (previously designated “primitive” art), and valued the more so when it is judged “authentic,” that is, untainted by outside influences. “Traditional” art was perceived as a category of highly regarded objects from Polynesian, Micronesian, or Melanesian cultures that have features typical of their region of origin and demonstrate superior formal and aesthetic qualities. Preferably old and rare, they suited the Eurocentric notion of ethnographic authenticity, with their desirability confirmed by Western scholarship, connoisseurs, and the art market. Many renowned “authentic” pieces became highly valued because of their connections with artists and movements of modern European art and the collectors who acquired such “masterpieces.” Pacific Islanders and their cultures were spoken for and written about by Western experts. Museum collections became remote from their source communities and stereotyped concepts evolved around them.

Since the 1990s, residency programs for Pacific artists have become a feature in several major Western metropolitan museums which hold important early collections of Oceanic art, including the British Museum in London, Musée Quai Branly in Paris and the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Indigenous visual artists, performers and writers were invited to these museums to investigate their historical collections—especially to look for connections with objects from their community. The artists have proved to be ingenious with new perspectives and interpretations, which add to the narrative of objects since they left their country of origin. Each artist brings their singular vision to the task of reconnecting the neglected objects of early ethnological expeditions to the living cultures of their communities. Some artists elect to place significant objects from their own cultural heritage at the centre of their work, such as Denis Livinai from Papua New Guinea and Ralph Regenvanu from Vanuatu, at the British Museum’s Melanesia project.³⁵

In 2006, at the venerable Cambridge University Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, a group of Pasifika artists³⁶ self-curated the exhibition *Pasifika Styles*, inserting their pieces in new media as imaginative reflections alongside ancient masterpieces of Oceanic art. *Pasifika Styles* presented aspects prevalent in contemporary Pacific art—performance, installation, body art and adornment, digital media—to challenge the past notions of identities, material culture, time and place such as the “ethnographic present,” “authenticity” and the “anonymity of tribal art” exemplified in CUMAA’s classic nineteenth century displays. The challenge for these Pasifika artists was to find a relationship with their ancestors while presenting themselves as individual Pacific artists. The gateway into CUMAA was through George Nuku’s clear perspex *Out of Space Marae*, an ethereal simulation of the entrance to a Māori whareniui (meeting house). Lisa Reihana placed headphones on a carved Māori figure in a display case, with dramatic digital projections as a backdrop. Rosanna Raymond created a cosy *Living Room* in the mezzanine, defying the concept of the museum as a place preserving dead cultures. *Pasifika Styles* was a pivotal example, exploring how artist’s collaborations with museums can break through encultured and taught ways of thinking and seeing to develop new knowledge, dismantle art speak and use engagement through art events so that the museum becomes a more stimulating environment.

The second type of residency program is where invited artists have the opportunity to work in a different cultural setting, experiment with new ideas and/or material, to meet and perhaps to collaborate with local artists and to create experimental artworks on site. A large-scale residency project was devised for the inauguration of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre (TCC) in 1998, where twenty-

five artists from Pacific countries joined with New Caledonian artists in the creative encounter Wake Naima (Creating Together). TCC is now a hub for contemporary art, music and performance in the South Pacific.

Increasing opportunities for artists and host institutions are assisted by access to cheap flights, universal use of computers and internet; as a result of this arts interchange, the Pacific arts community and audiences for art are becoming increasing literate in understanding their Asian



Figure 6. Brett Graham, (Māori, Aotearoa New Zealand) *Lapita*, 1999, installation of three sculpted stone forms representing Melanesia, 80x30x220cm, Polynesia 80x30x220cm and Micronesia 80x30x220cm. Commissioned by the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, New Caledonia. Photo Susan Cochrane, permission of the artist.

neighbours, and vice versa. Pasifika artists Michel Tuffery and Jim Vivieaere were the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts (KMFA) first artists-in-residence in 2007, a program which has engaged in a continual procession of exchange between Aboriginal Taiwanese and Pacific artists who enjoy the challenge of art making in a new context, improvising from their multi-dimensional practices.³⁷ Creative interaction with local artists and viewers, within a different cultural context and unfamiliar artistic community, is integral to the success of the project.³⁸ Lin Chih-Ming and Kulele Tapiwulan, were artists in residence at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in 2008 and held an exhibition of their completed art, *Sur la trace de nos ancêtres austronésiens* (Following the Traces of our Austronesian Ancestors). What seemed most remarkable to New Caledonians was the ancestral links between the Austronesian peoples across the vast Pacific Ocean—no one had imagined the Kanak people sharing a cultural heritage with Aboriginal Taiwanese. A reporter asked whether, after such a long passage of time, there were still some commonalities between them? Kulele responded: “Once lost to each other we are now reunited, hand in hand. Art has no frontiers, neither does humanity. Sharing is always possible.”³⁹

World stages, such as the Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) hosted by the Queensland Art Gallery-Gallery of Modern Art since 1993,⁴⁰ are points of intersection

between the living art and culture experienced every day in Pacific communities and its reception in the outside world. Despite the occasional success stories, relatively few have made their name internationally, a step that requires invitations by leading galleries to show their work in solo or in select group exhibitions, or being invited to participate in international biennales of contemporary art. Perhaps it has been a conundrum for the “gatekeepers” of the Western art world, such as the directors of international biennales, to accept Pacific Islanders’ distinctive inter-animation of visual and performing arts into their predominant conventions for the display and dialogue of contemporary art. Although the APT is only one among many international biennales and triennials, it has hosted more Pacific artists than any other similar event, and accepted their diversity of indigenous

art practices.⁴¹ Pasifika artists have been invited because they have established “name artist” reputations. John Pule and Michael Parekowhai have made repeated appearances. For others from PNG and Vanuatu, their renown in their local community is the key factor for their selection. While the APT may only be a blip on the entire world stage, over its twenty-year history it has established a significant presence within the Asia Pacific region, and raised considerable interest by courageously presenting the unknown and the unexpected alongside high-profile artists.⁴² Lisa Chandler discerned an “Asia-Pacific Effect,” finding that, in the 1990s, the APT series assisted in “[the] creat[ion of] an alternative art circuit for practitioners who may have been excluded from similar events in Europe and America, while also providing a conduit to such prestigious international exhibitions.”⁴³ Michael Wesley underscored the attitudinal shift occurring from 1990s to 2010s, noting that the rebalancing of art politics in the Asia Pacific region follows the geo-political dynamic of the rise of Asia and the worldwide technological revolution of the Internet and mobile devices.⁴⁴ In the flux of international art world trends there is a recognition that not all peoples follow the Western pathway to modernity and conform to Western codes and criteria for art; Asian and Pacific artists won’t compromise their divergence. Rex Butler suggested that in its twenty-year history, the APT has effectively removed the blinkers of Western art history and demonstrated that, “art today is absolutely global and contemporary...there is no longer any centre of art against which we can judge the rest of the world and no history of art against which we can measure the present.”⁴⁵

Influential academics, art curators, and museum directors now concur that, throughout the world, communities of people live differently and employ different ways to express their experiences and visions. The arts and cultures of all peoples of the world are constituent parts of the human story, a worldwide cultural history rich in diversity and interconnections. Adventurous art museums and astute curators are opening their doors and minds to the vibrant Pacific, and their audiences are attracted to compelling art that brims with sensation and spectacle.

Although the phenomenon of globalisation has pulled all the peoples of the world into closer orbits, multiple contemporary realities exist under the umbrella of “world art.” The contemporary Pacific takes its place within world art with the continuity of its own *kastom* that reflects the past, envisions the present, and will shape its future. In the words of the philosopher, Bernard Narokobi, “Our art should be seen and enjoyed and our artists appreciated for what they are and not for what or whom they resemble.”⁴⁶

Susan Cochrane - has achieved recognition as a writer and curator on Indigenous Pacific art in Australia and internationally over thirty years as an independent researcher, curator and writer. Growing up in Papua New Guinea gave her a special interest in her own generation of artists and their remarkable achievements. She has undertaken many collaborative projects with Indigenous artists, academics and museum professionals, resulting in landmark exhibitions and publications on art in the contemporary Pacific.

1. <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources/1983-Bernard-Narokobi-Melanesian-Way.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2016).
2. Keynote address at The Big Island Workshop, University of Wollongong, 26 November 2009.
3. Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris, "Gender, Location and Tradition: A Comparison of Two Papua New Guinean Artists," in Venbreux, E. & P. Rosi, (eds), *Confronting World Art Special Issue of Visual Anthropology*, 17:3-4, 2004, 273.
4. Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6:1, Spring 1994, 150
5. *Ibid.*, 152
6. Hau'ofa, 33.
7. Jutta Malnic and John Kasaipwalova, *Kula: Myth and Magic in the Trobriand Islands* (Sydney, Cowrie Books, 2000) 60, on ideas of beauty and adornment in the Trobriand Islands
8. Wedding costumes and funeral lengths of ngatu. Illustrated in exhibition catalogue, Joan G. Winter, *Talking Tapa: Pasifika Bark Cloth in Queensland* (Southport, QLD, Keeaira Press, 2009).
9. In Taiwan Atayal tribal women and men wore facial tattoos as a symbol of maturity; the last tattooed Atyal woman was 104 in 2011 when she participated in a staged tableau composed and photographed by Pasifika artist Greg Semu. Semu, of Samoan heritage, has extensive tattoos which were of great interest to the elderly woman who had thought she was the last person in the world to be tattooed. Personal communication, Pei-ni Beatrice Hsieh, Taiwan, 10 October 2013.
10. Judith Levin, *Tattoos and Indigenous People* (New York, Rosen Publishing Group, 2009) 26-64
11. Hirini Moko Mead, "Māori Art Restructured, Reorganised, Re-examined and Reclaimed," *He Pukenga Korero*, 2:1, 1996, 1-7. 3.
12. Nga Kaupapa Here Aho (fibre Interface) website of exhibition. Introduction by Tui Te Rito Maihi. Te Taumata Gallery Auckland, 9 Oct.-5 Nov. 1992. (accessed 12 August 2009, since deleted).
13. Artist's statement, Commonwealth Arts and Crafts Awards, May 2008.
14. Waiko unpublished paper, Pacific History Association Conference, Canberra, July 1985.
15. Michael Mel, "Ples bilong Mi: Interfacing Global and Indigenous Knowledge in Mapping out a Pacific Vision at Home and Abroad," *Pacific Arts*, 25, December 2002, 42.
16. *Ibid.*, 5.
17. Michael Mel, "Introduction" in Susan Cochrane, *Bérétera: Contemporary Pacific Art* (Sydney, Halstead Press, 2001) 1-9.
18. Bernard Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way* (Port Moresby, Institute of PNG Studies, 1983) 12.
19. *Ibid.*, 5.
20. It was held under the patronage of Dame Carol Kidu, who was then the only female Member elected to Papua New Guinea's National Parliament. Following a concerted campaign, three women were elected to the National Parliament in 2012.
21. Symposium programme and Exhibition Programme posted on Nicolas Garnier's blog [http://nicolasgarnier.over-blog.com/\(viewed 12 March 2012, blog since discontinued\)](http://nicolasgarnier.over-blog.com/(viewed%2012%20March%202012,%20blog%20since%20discontinued)).
22. Objects made for ceremonies may be sold after their use, for example the Tubuan Kamut Mut masks collected by the Queensland Art Gallery from the National Mask Festival, Kokopo, East New Britain in 2011 and subsequently displayed in the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 7 in 2012. There are also established market places and outlets where artists and artisans sell works made for sale, an important source of income.
23. Teulia Festival 2013 at <http://www.teulifestival.com/>.
24. Jean-Marie Tjibaou, "La culture, élément clé de la reconquête kanak," cited in Caroline Graille "Patrimoine et Identité Kanak en Nouvelle Calédonie," *Ethnologies comparées* 2 (Printemps, 2001) 1.
25. Alban Bensa, *Chroniques kanak*, numéro spécial Ethnies, 10:1995, 18-19.
26. FoPA originated as the South Pacific Festival of Arts in Fiji in 1972, when the Fiji Arts Council and the South Pacific Commission (now the Secretariat of the South Pacific Community) facilitated the first festival.
27. Personal communication, Honiara 10 July 2012.
28. Karen Stevenson, *The Frangipani is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985-2000* (University of Hawai'i, Huia Publishers, 2008) 160.
29. Jim Vivieaere, "The Island Race in Aotearoa," *Artlink*, 16:4, Indigenous Arts of the Pacific issue, 1996, 57.
30. Pamela Zeplin, "Not Lost at Sea: Tempests, Turbulence and Tranquillity in Contemporary Art of the Pacific," *Journey to the Ancestral Realm*, exhibition catalogue (Kaohsiung Taiwan: Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, 2009) 72.
31. Stevenson, 9.
32. In 2008, the Directors of the QAGOMA and Queensland Museum were offered places in a Trade Mission to PNG. Although opportunities to meet artists in their own environment were limited, the Queensland Government of the time was concerned by the occupational health and safety risks that curators undertaking extended fieldwork may face in remote areas. Tony Ellwood (then Director of QAG), personal communication with the author, 30 November 2008.
33. Pamela Rosi, "Deploying Papua New Guinea Artists as 'Cultural Ambassadors' in the Global Promotion of Contemporary PNG Art: Evaluating Larry Santana's Visits to the USA." Paper presented to IX Pacific Arts Association Symposium 7 July 2007, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. In 2008, Rosi co-curated with Michael Mel *Hailans to Ailans*, an innovative touring exhibition that morphed into different forms at each venue: Rebecca Hossack Gallery

- in London, Alcheringa Gallery in Victoria, Canada, and the De Young Museum in San Francisco, US. Sadly, *Hailans to Ailans* was not toured to Australia or New Zealand.
34. German curator Eva Raabe has commented on how difficult it is in Europe to get the work of urban-based painters Martin Morububuna and Joe Nalo accepted as contemporary art, rather than as of merely ethnographic interest. See Raabe, "Modernism or Folk Art? The Reception of Pacific Art in Europe," *Art Monthly Australia* (Special issue on the Pacific), July 1999, 21.
 35. The Melanesia Project ran from 2005-10. "Focusing on the important but largely unstudied Melanesian collections in the British Museum, this project aims to bring new perspectives to both the study of indigenous art, and the understanding of ownership, heritage, and relations between museums and communities." https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/melanesia_project.aspx
 36. See participating artist's profiles on Pasifika Styles website <http://www.pasifikastyles.org.uk/artists/>
 37. Petelo Tuilalo, "Everything Ends! The World Can Wait" in *Beyond the Boundary: Contemporary Indigenous Art of Taiwan*, exhibition catalogue (Noumea: Tjibaou Cultural Centre, 2013) 21-4.
 38. KMFA has been active for two decades to promote indigenous Taiwanese artists at the local and regional level. In 2006 it initiated the Austronesian Contemporary Art Project to unite Taiwanese artists with their Pacific cousins and developed a longterm collaboration with the Tjibaou Cultural Centre.
 39. Kulele, cited in *Les Nouvelles Caledonniens*, 6 October 2008 (my translation).
 40. The institution was formerly the Queensland Art Gallery; the Gallery of Modern Art was added in 2006, and the name changed. Initially called the Asia-Pacific Triennial, the hyphen was symbolically dropped when Pacific voices spoke out about being an appendage to Asia.
 41. Queensland Art Gallery, APT2: Wendi Choulai, Egu Rami Artist Performance, 27 September 1996, QAGOMA APT Archive (video -performance), <http://tv.qagoma.qld.gov.au/2012/11/08/apt2-wendi-choulai-egu-rami-artist/>.
 42. QAGOMA Asia Pacific Triennial Exhibition Archive online. https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/research/library/about_the_qag_library/apt_archive.
 43. Lisa Chandler, "The Asia-Pacific Effect:" Geo-Cultural Grouping at the AsiaPacific Triennials, *Limina*, 13:2007, 41. In the 1990s, international biennales spread to non-Western centres, such as Beijing, Seoul, Havana, Johannesburg, and Noumea, each with a widening field of local artists.
 44. Michael Wesley, "Transcentury," *APT7: The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane: QAGOMA, 2012) 65.
 45. Rex Butler, *ABC Arts Blog*, Friday 23 November 2012.
 46. Bernard Narokobi, "Transformations in Art and Society," in *Luk Luk Gen! Look Again!*, ed. Susan Cochrane Simons and Hugh Stevenson (Townsville: Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, 1990) 21.