

Rosanna Raymond's SaVAge K'lub at the eighth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art

Abstract: This visual essay is based on a conversation in June 2016 between artist Rosanna Raymond and academic Karen Jacobs on Raymond's art work, The SaVAge K'lub, with which she contributed to the eighth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. While this art work challenges a variety of stereotypical misrepresentations of Pacific people and their arts, it unexpectedly reinforced some perceptions too.

Keywords: Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art; The SaVAge K'lub; postcolonialism; (un)dressing the body

Her skin marked with ancestral patterns, she walked around the room silently, but agitatedly, acknowledging the people in the room from past and present, from close and far: the ancestors embodied in the museum objects in the vitrines, the living artists in their fabrications and creations, the audience anticipating and awaiting. Suzanne Tamaki and Charlotte Graham stood up to clothe her in a dress which suspiciously resembled a Victorian dress, but made of barkcloth and backless – this is when Rosanna Raymond started talking. She asked a question that she did not think she needed to ask when she was planning her artwork. She asked whether it was better with the dress on. With this question, she asked whether hiding her 'nudity' as the institution had asked her to do before 7.30pm was better. This question was also related to the sign that the institution hung outside the entrance to her art space: 'Please be advised this exhibition space includes some artworks with adult themes'. The audience did not think the dress enhanced her, but embraced her Pacific body, fully clothed with her *malu* (Samoan female tattoo) and other patterns, linking her to her ancestors (Figure 1).

The occasion was the opening of the eighth edition (21 November 2015-10 April 2016) of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT8) at the Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), a flagship exhibition focused on the work of Asia, the Pacific and Australia (APT 2016a). Born in Aotearoa-New Zealand of Samoan and *pakeha* (European) descent, Rosanna Raymond is an artist, poet, lecturer, curator, who crosses spatial and linear divides in all her work. She participated in APT8 with her work, *The Savage K'lub*, which she founded in 2010: 'The SaVAge K'lub presents 21st Century South Sea SaVAgery, influencing art and culture through the interfacing of time and space, deploying weavers of words, rare anecdotalists, myth makers, hip shakers, navigators, red faces, fabricators, activators, installators to institute the non cannibalistic cognitive consumption of the other' (Raymond 2011).

Emphasizing collaboration and activation, the underlying concepts of *The SaVAge K'lub* developed out of Raymond's earlier work, particularly her residencies in museums and exhibitions where she enlivened the objects on display and emphasized connections with the living descendants (Jacobs 2009), and in her curatorial work where she juxtaposed artists and their work in museums (*Pasifika Styles*, an exhibition at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge between 2006 and 2008).[1] She approaches museum objects as *taonga tuku iho*, highly prized possessions handed down from the ancestors to which specific stories and histories are attached (Mead 1984, 22, Tapsell 1997). These *taonga* embody the life blood of Pacific living culture – they are not merely a representation of ancestral efficacy, 'but are this efficacy in material form' (Henare 2007, 56). Similarly, the challenging of western representations of Pacific women is a salient feature of Raymond's work (Tamaira 2010). Yet, *The Savage K'lub* itself was developed during a residency at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. While conducting research on the museum's founding anthropological collections assembled by Frank Burnett, she uncovered how he talked about his adventures in the Pacific at the Canadian 'Savage Club'. [2] Named after the English poet Richard Savage (1697–1743), the Savage Club was founded in 1857 in London 'and remains one of the leading Bohemian Gentleman's Clubs' (Savage Club 2016, see also Watson 1907, Milne-Smith 2011). Over time, associate clubs were established throughout the Commonwealth as 'English gentlemen spread clubs as far as their travels took them' (Milne-Smith 2006: 800). Having entirely removed the gendered, elitist aspect of the club, Raymond's version of the Savage Club draws on the cultural stereotype and decor of such exclusive institutions, with a plethora of references to Indigenous peoples in their collections, marketing and entertainment. Since 2010, she has convened *the SaVAge K'lub* in locations throughout the UK, Europe, Canada, America and Australasia – each time providing a space for SaVAges – membership is fluid – to fabricate and create. 'Each time there is a SaVAge K'lub, the site will dictate what is in it', Raymond mentioned (interview 6/6/16). Having received a blank gallery space for APT8, Rosanna Raymond began to wonder:

K'lubs so far never had a physical space. This made me think: What would a club room look like if I did have one? In my imagination, it would show what we collect, because we [SaVAges] are all definitely hoarders. There is definitely a lot of comparables with gentlemen's clubs in terms of showing off. When I visited the gentlemen's club in Melbourne, I was amazed that there was not an inch of space left on the wall. As a club room it is a living thing, to which each time another memento is added. I wanted to get that scale of memories and stories all assembled in one room. It was also important that the SaVAge K'lub had a comfy home feeling; that is why we had a sofa. I wanted to have a pool table too, and a bar, but they wouldn't let me. (Raymond interview 16/6/16)

Since the gallery space conformed to museum display regulations and requirements, Raymond was able to borrow from the Pacific ethnographic collections at the Queensland Museum allowing her to further push the boundaries as to how Pacific collections are exhibited. SaVAges chose *taonga* that were personally important to them, usually through genealogical connections.[3] Reina Sutton chose a shell currency ornament from her island of Malaita to be displayed and Precious Clark was interested in a *kahu kiwi* (Maori kiwi feather

cloak). An outrigger canoe was hung from the ceiling. By displaying historical artworks and images alongside the SaVAges' assemblages and newly created works (over 200 works were assembled), she defied display hierarchies and questioned the authority of ownership as much as the label of museum object: 'Our treasures are with their treasures. Why are some collections considered to be more important so that you cannot touch them, while some of us have exactly the same things at home? It is all important to Pasifika people', Raymond mentioned (interview 6/6/16). The result is an iconic display of dynamic collaboration. The bilaterally symmetrical arrangement of clubs above the entrance (Figure 2) and the wooden display cabinets were in keeping with Victorian sensibilities, yet were filled with various kinds of treasures, such as body ornaments made by Ani O'Neill (Figure 3), Star Wars figures ('if it's a treasure to you, show it'), *Raninikura*, a cloak woven by Bethany Matai Edmunds (Figure 4), *taonga puro* (Maori musical instruments) and a photograph by Suzanne Tamaki cutting up the British Flag. A mat is spread on the floor, layers of barkcloth adorn the four corners of the room. Numa MacKenzie created the skin by adding graffiti to the walls, adjacent to wallpaper inspired on Wahgi shield patterns designed by Eric Bridgeman. Portraits of SaVage K'lub members taken by Salvador Brown and Eric Bridgeman are clustered around a late nineteenth century oil painting, *The Savage Chief* (1897) depicting a European masquerading as Maori, by Girolamo Nerli, himself a Savage Club member (Figure 5).

Most importantly, *The SaVage K'lub* is enlivened by Pacific artists and local communities who have created new artworks, spoken word and performance artworks, as such fitting the eighth edition of APT's theme of performance: 'This eighth edition emphasises the role of performance in recent art, with live actions, video, kinetic art, figurative painting and sculpture exploring the use of the human form to express cultural, social and political ideas, and the central role of artists in articulating experiences specific to their localities' (APT 2016b). Yet, SaVAges do not perform, but acti.VA.te. The VA in actiVAte, as in SaVAge, refers to the Samoan understanding of a dynamic space that relates and connects all things by traversing boundaries of time and space. As Samoan Albert Wendt writes: 'Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things' (Wendt 1996). [4] In this negotiable and all-inclusive space, SaVAges offer and embrace distinct perspectives, affecting the audience through shared experience and interaction, thus mediating group formation. 'There is no audience in these actiVAtions, everyone is a participant' (Raymond interview 6/6/16).

During the *whakawatea te ara* (Maori, clearing the way) SaVAges and members of the audience alike followed Mark Yettica-Paulson in the room (Figure 6), who represented the indigenous Australian land owners (Kamilaroy, Birra, Wakka Wakka and Bunjalung groups), clearing the space, paying respect to ancestors and emphasising the connection of Indigenous people to the land. In the kava ceremony, everyone participated.[5] During the opening night, all activations involved the public. To name but a few: Rosanna Raymond questioned the (un)clothed body, the audience helped to create Reina Sutton's body adornment, and Lisa Fa'alafi and Maryann Talia Pau activated the legend of Taema and Tilafaiga, the Samoan co-

joined twins who brought *tatau* (tattoo) to Samoa (Figure 7). The rest of the opening weekend, SaVAges challenged preconceived conceptions, re-awakened *taonga puro* (Maori musical instruments) held in museums (Figure 8) and they rendered *The SaVAge K'lub haka*, which was written by Precious Clark. However, SaVAges also felt they (unexpectedly) had to continue conversations about dress, undress and modesty.

By focusing on people, there is a focus on the body, the Pacific body, which has long been misrepresented and sexualised in the works of artists such as William Hodges, John Webber, and later Paul Gauguin (Jolly 1997, Taouma 2004). Rather than acknowledging the agency of Pacific women in cosmology and ceremonies, 'Western artists literally and figuratively painted over the agency and power of Polynesian women by representing them not as the genealogical descendants of powerful goddesses, but as exotic, vulnerable maidens' (Tamaira 2010, 6, see also Taouma 2005, Stevenson 2008). During the official opening, Raymond got dressed in her signature backless gown representing herself as *Back Hand Maiden*. Emphasising that 'The Dusky Ain't Dead She's Just Diversified', Raymond reclaims the Dusky Maiden, not by rejecting her, but by empowering her. Following the principle of *Va*, the Dusky Maiden and the Back Hand Maiden are relational rather than oppositional. Still, this was not fully understood. By asking her to cover up, APT organisers reconfirmed the sexualisation of the Pacific body and warned visitors of the 'adult themes' they were about to encounter. When asked about it, Raymond responded:

When I saw that sign of adult themes, I just laughed. I actually thought that it was a joke, but it wasn't. Then I had to go through that whole thing of negotiating – it is about money and visitors and the fear of what might happen. Somebody might become outraged or disgusted, while the whole point is that you judge the body not through a sexual lens. The Pacific body is a genealogical body. The body is the vessel of our ancestors, fully dressed in its decorations. It was a shock because I thought that in the 21st century we had come a lot further. In all my work I have wanted to decolonise the position of the body, yet they made me feel ashamed. Here we were, invited to ArtAsiaPacific and it's about performance and the body and gender and yet we were highly censored the whole way or controlled. I was put in a position where I was made to feel bad about some of the content of what we do, while it is about empowering, and that was just because there were a few 'nude' bits around. I totally misunderstood Australia's political and cultural landscape. That was a big lesson. Anyway, on the day of the opening we were told that there would be no nudity outside the K'lub room before 7.30pm. That is why Suzanne Tamaki covered up the nude sculpture outside the gallery building (Figure 9). That was our reaction. You can have a nude sculpture on view 24/7 yet our bodies are the ones that need to be covered. APT had not been heavily performance-based before so they had to take on board some very new ways of thinking. Yet the *whakawatea* and the closing were so beautiful and people were moved by it. That level of ritual and ceremony is something that they are not used to, I guess. They kept asking us when we were going to perform but actually we just brought everyone together in a circle and did like a classic *whakawatea* where everybody spoke. (Raymond interview 6/6/16).

Misrepresentations of the Pacific (female) body are a result of differing views on modesty. Unable to understand that seemingly naked bodies could be fully dressed, the apparent nudity

indicated savage innocence that needed to be covered up. But as Wendt points out: ‘The malu [Samoan female tattoo] was essential wear for women before they married. Clothed not to cover your nakedness but to show that you are ready for life, for adulthood and service to your community’ (Wendt 1999). Raymond showed her body fully dressed in its ancestral patterns and then covered it further with a dress. Yet as *Back Hand Maiden* (Figure 10) she did not cover herself in the fabric of institutional rule, but indicated the power of the clothed and the unclothed body, deliberately employing the power of performance (yet not wanting to be diminished to mere performers) to destabilise institutional regulations and perceptions.

Notes:

1. For information on *Pasifika Styles*, see Raymond and Salmond (2008) and Herle (2008).
2. Frank Burnett, a Scotsman who emigrated to Canada in 1870, travelled over several years to Fiji, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tahiti and the Cook Islands, He wrote four books about his travels to the Pacific (1910, 1911, 1923, 1926) and collected over a 1,000 objects, which became the founding collection of the Museum of Anthropology (Mayer 2002, 2006).
3. *SaVAge K’lub* at APT8 participants included: Margaret Aull, Jess Holly Bates, Eric Bridgeman, Salvador Brown, Emine Burke, Precious Clark, Croc Coulter, Lisa Fa‘alafi, Charlotte Graham, Mark James Hamilton, Katrina Igglesden, Jimmy Kouratoras, Numangatini MacKenzie, Ani O’Neill, Maryann Talia Pau, Tahiarrii Pariente, Aroha Rawson, Rosanna Raymond, Reina and Molana Sutton, David Siliga Setoga, Grace Taylor, Niwhai Tupaea, Suzanne and Rameka Tamaki, Mark and Tavina Yettica-Paulson, Jaimie Waititi and Jo Walsh.
4. There is a growing literature on the (Tongan) notion of *Va* (space) and the related concept of *Ta* (time). The *Ta-Va* Theory, particularly advocated by scholars Māhina (2010) and Ka’ili (2005), states that time and space intersect in reality (rather than time being lineally structured) enabling people to consider the past being in front of them to be used as a guidance for the present and future, which is behind people.
5. For a video showing clips of the *whakawatea* and opening, shot by Salvador Brown, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIoZh0-7xY&feature=youtu.be>

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Figures:

Figure 1. Rosanna Raymond during the official opening of APT8 being dressed by Suzanne Tamaki and Charlotte Graham (Photo and ©: Natasha Harth, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 2. The entrance to *The SaVAge K'lub* during the *whakawatea* at APT8 with Samoan weapons of the Queensland Museum, University of Queensland and personal collections (Photo and ©: Natasha Harth, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 3. Ani O'Neill activating her body adornments during the opening (Photo and ©: Joe Ruckli, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 4. Jaimie Waititi wearing *Raninikura* by Bethany Matai Edmunds during the closing of APT8 (Photo and ©: Ruth McDougall, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 5. Aroha Rawson during the opening weekend; note Eric Bridgeman's wallpaper, portraits by Salvador Brown and the painting, *The Savage Chief* (1897), by Girolamo Nerli (Photo and ©: Joe Ruckli, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 6. *Whakawatea*, Mark Yettica-Paulson, representing the indigenous land owners (Kamilaroy, Birra, Wakka Wakka and Bunjalung) clearing the space. His voice was the first

to be heard in the K'lub Room. His daughter, Tavina Yettica-Paulson, closed the K'lub Room and ensured that hers was the last to be heard (Photo and ©: Natasha Harth, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 7. Reina Sutton involving the public to help her create her body adornment (Photo and ©: Joe Ruckli, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 8. Horomona Horo after playing *taonga puoro* (Photo and ©: Joe Ruckli, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 9. Suzanne Tamaki's lava-ed/clothed the nude sculpture outside the Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art (Photo and ©: Mark Sherwood, courtesy of QAGOMA).

Figure 10. Back Hand Maiden, Rosanna Raymond during the opening night of APT8 (Photo and ©: Mark Sherwood, courtesy of QAGOMA).