

COSMOPOLITANISM AND A NEW GENERATION OF ART IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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I often say I am a 'PNG contemporary artist' when I write a document. I always have an association with that. But I've already proven to myself and others that I'm very versatile and I can work in many different environments. I am no longer bound by my society, but I can step out of that and think creatively without having to define my identity so much. That's just the way that I'd like to be viewed, first and foremost, as a creative thinker rather than a mind that is constrained by one particular culture.

Jeffrey Feeger

The above quote, from an interview with Jeffrey Feeger in November 2011, is reflective of the limitless opportunities for aspiring contemporary artists in PNG.¹ Feeger sees himself unbound to his own society and is adopting a strategy of communication and creativity in a global sense and on a human level. Feeger's work is not necessarily tied to a particular PNG cultural worldview, but rather a constant re-combination of culturally specific and global modes of practice. Through an introduction of two painters based in Port Moresby – Jeffrey Feeger and Leonard Tebegetu – this article highlights emerging visual themes of a new generation of artists. These artists are responding to globalization in PNG via new access to digital information and the infiltration of web technology.

Historically urban PNG artists created contemporary art as a response to the influences brought about through modernization, evolving cultural traditions, and national independence. In the 1960s and 1970s, artists who pioneered the indigenous contemporary art movement in PNG urban settings, had to establish their identity and their place in a milieu that was dominated by expatriates and a colonial culture. Artists were encouraged to draw visual connections to traditional village life and customs.² Nearing PNG's political Independence in 1975, the PNG government saw the importance of developing a modern communication industry and supported the opening of the Creative Arts Centre in 1972 (later renamed the National Art School).³ Artists during this time were stimulated by sentiments of national consciousness.⁴ However, in 1986, the National Art School (NAS) was forced to deal with increasing budget cuts, including the elimination of art exhibitions and public programs. Eventually these actions eroded the national cultural agenda that was founded during the independence period, and affected the livelihood of NAS artists. In the 1980's and 1990's artists began to feel disillusioned towards new narratives of the nation. As corruption and economic and political instability infiltrated PNG, artists began painting as way to communicate their distrust for politicians and convey the hardships of new urban environments. In the 1990's and early 2000's when artists lost all support of government creative arts funding, artists looked towards international exhibitions and tourist markets for sales, and predominantly painted idealized imagery of PNG culture.

By 2008, economic indicators showed signs of increased investor confidence and expansion of service sectors such as the telecommunication and information communication technology (ICT).⁵ As social media technologies became increasingly accessible, a new generation began seeing themselves within a cosmopolitan framework, and beyond the limits of nationalism.

For artists Feeger and Tebegetu, cosmopolitanism is not only about being a "citizen of the world", but also approaching their subject matter in a way that opens their discussions to new audiences across the globe and

within their home communities. The concept of cosmopolitanism is broadly informed by the ideas of philosopher and cultural-theorist Anthony Kwame Appiah (2005) who suggests the possibility wherein individuals from various localities (including geographic, economic, and cultural) enter relationships of mutual respect despite their differing beliefs. Appiah critically questions separatist philosophies that result in dichotomies such as the “West and the Rest” and “Locals and Moderns”, and thus, attempts to make it harder to think about the world through binary structures.⁶ Likewise, a new generation of artists are attempting to utilize art as a point of engagement for important socio-political issues and blur distinctions of traditional/contemporary and local/global. Tebegetu and Feeger are examples of new artists who are teaching themselves about art via the internet and with this new access they show there are interlinking patterns of local, national, and global modes of practice.

Their paintings depict portrait of grass-root people and show everyday experiences such as market scenes, domestic life, and cultural identity. Primarily self-taught, Feeger and Tebegetu utilize vivid photographic qualities, color pallets emblematic of their urban environments, and graffiti-like elements but also use visual languages rooted in their own cultural traditions. (see fig .1)

The emergence of cosmopolitanism in PNG is dependent on access to information, education, professions, and social associations. Both Feeger and Tebegetu come from middle-class families and have had access to education and communications medium.

Port Moresby, the capital where they both reside, has been exposed to external influences for a century or more, and there has been rapid growth in urbanization and economic organization.⁷ Within the last two years, the increased and wider interconnections afforded through the use of cell phones, Internet, television, advertising, and mass-media have generated effective, real-time communication and a social media-literate niche in the PNG population. These new tools are helping develop a wider sense of identity by making the process of communication fluid and expansive, and the artwork of Feeger and Tebegetu is situated within these complex interactions. The following sections highlight some of their personal stories and societal perspectives, and argues that the roots of cosmopolitanism are written in their visual vocabularies.

JEFFRY FEEGER



Figure 2. Jeffrey Feeger, *Jewel in the Rough*, 2007, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 1. Jeffrey Feeger, *Transition*, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.

Jeffrey Feeger's life experiences have given him an unusual confidence and a prominent role in his PNG community as an artist. He states his artistic objective, "[The intention of] my work, [is to] transcend race and class, and first world and third world. I want to bridge the gaps between people who have everything and [those who have nothing]."⁸ Growing up, Feeger lived in numerous regions around PNG, primarily in the island of New Britain and also in Port Moresby, where his father worked as a school teacher. Feeger has had access to education within the International School system and was able to travel across Asia and the Pacific region with his family starting at a young age. He comes from a multi-cultural background: his father is German (but raised in Australia), and his mother comes from a village called Tapala in the Gulf Province. Although early in his professional art career, he has already participated in exhibitions throughout PNG, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as residency programs offered by with the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust in Aotearoa New Zealand (2009), the World Expo in Shanghai (2010), and Intersections at University of Hawai'i Mānoa (2011)

Early in his art career the Internet also became a strategic tool for Feeger to develop an expansive repertoire, through which he gained a deeper understanding of contemporary art politics and global conversations. After attending the Visual Arts program at the University of Papua New Guinea for one year in 2002, he was dissatisfied with the program and decided to develop a self-taught practice. He did Internet searches about contemporary art in various places and began to master techniques of photorealism and compositional design. Usually working from his own photographs, he creates paintings by replicating photographic qualities, but he continues to mediate the subject matter by enhancing the colors, contours, and emotional qualities of the image. In the painting *Transition* (2008), fig 2. Feeger harnesses the visual language of multiple times/places via assembling images on top of each other and intensifying the hues. *Transition* paradoxically juxtaposes brightly colored hibiscus petals signifying notions of paradise, with the discerned face of a young girl revealing a sense of concern and confusion. This powerful image enforces a mosaic of possible meanings that could be read as magical, real, spiritual, and contemporary. These ideas are the foundation of Feeger's work that he calls 'magic realism,' a term borrowed from a literature movement (also called 'magic realism'). The importance of this is the way in which his work mediates a multidimensional aspect of society. He states his intentions,

I do realism and portraiture. [This] world that exists is magical. The ordinary world is seen through a magical lens. I view Papua New Guinea, generally floating in that realm...sometimes we don't realize but we overlay these two worlds, in everything we do.⁹



Figure 3. Jeffrey Feeger, *Yu Laikim Buai?* [Do you like Betelnut?](*The New Buka Series*), 2008-2009, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Jeffrey Feeger, *Lapun Meri* [Old Woman](*The New Buka Series*), 2008-2010, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5 Jeffrey Feeger, *Meri Simbu (The Port Moresby Market Collection)*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6 Jeffrey Feeger, *Pikinini Kikori (The Port Moresby Market Collection)*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.

The concepts of magic realism add to the power of his paintings because he localizes aesthetic elements of realism to become more meaningful and specific to traditions belonging to Papua New Guinea.

In 2008, Feeger started creating a new kind of portraiture that communicates a sense of responsibility for the communities he belongs to in Papua New Guinea. In the series called the *New Buka Series* (2009-2010), he uses magic realism as a way of translating political and social issues in the region of Bougainville. From 2005-2008, years following the end of the Civil War in Bougainville, Feeger moved to the region with his partner and began sketching and painting portraits of people in their daily activities reflecting the realities in a post-war society

The painting entitled *Yu Laikim Buai? (Do You Want betelnut)* is particularly evocative and presents the conditions of contemporary life in Buka (The capital of Bougainville). The painting shows a young woman selling buai (beetle nut or arcega nut) at a local market. Her face asserts strength, as she firmly grasps the umbrella that seems to act as a source stability and grounding in an urban society with lost infrastructure. The use of incandescent hues of blues, reds, and yellows in stark contrast with dark and murky colors of city structures, are emblematic of the Buka scenes. Feeger chooses to drip red paint on the canvas that represents buai spit, and in real life splatters to paint the exterior of buildings and streets throughout Buka. These textured effects reveal an experiential and palpable aspects of everyday Papua New Guinea culture.

Feeger's intention is to present the "rough and raw" portraits in elite and selective venues. It is not surprising then when he exhibits outside of PNG, he creates somewhat paradoxical situations. *The New Buka Series* was exhibited in a solo exhibition at White Space Gallery in Auckland in 2009. His urban portraitures became a way of merging conflicting systems of time and space: the exclusive space of a gallery and the post-colonial discussions

of PNG communities. Similarly, in November 2011, he was invited to exhibit at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa. Feeger's residency coincided with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Honolulu during the same time. Feeger presented his *The Port Moresby Market Collection* as a way of drawing attention to the 80% of PNG's population who participate in marketplaces and informal economies, but lurk in the shadow of political and economic development.

In PNG and for his Papua New Guinea viewers, his portraits are meant to revitalize a new connection to everyday stories of urban people and centers. "Live paintings" performances have also become a signature genre of Feeger's, where he paints portraits of community members and public figures as a way of highlighting important social issues such as environmental preservation and human rights. Since 2010, Feeger has been developing these live performances, infusing theatricality and spirituality and uses the streets of Port Moresby to attract crowds. He then publicizes the events through Facebook and social networking. The dissemination of Feeger's work in PNG through the Internet has made a significant impact in the way he communicates to other Papua New Guineans. He states, "Now all of a sudden my works are accessible to young people who are part of this social revolution..."¹⁰

Feeger is an example of someone who has access to global tools, grew up in an urban setting, and attended an international school, but importantly is using these new devices and contemporary art to reinvent a Papua New Guinea spiritual and cultural connection.

LEONARD TEBEGETU

Tebegetu was born in the Lelet area on the island of New Ireland in 1980. He grew up in the Highlands township of Goroka where his father worked as an officer for an oil company and his mother worked as a laboratory assistant. He spent most of his youth in Goroka town, the provincial capital of the Eastern Highlands Province. In 2000, he



Figure 7 Leonard Tebegetu, *Identity II*, 2009, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8 Leonard Tebegetu, *Tatanua I*, 2007, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 9. Leonard Tebegetu, *Bishopotonamous*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. Leonard Tebegetu, *The Botanist*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.



moved to Port Moresby to undertake studies at the law school at the University of Papua New Guinea. For several years, from 2000-2006, Tebegetu struggled with the course work, and moved to the streets. Since 2006, he made three attempts to re-enter law school, but failed to complete his course work and returned to the streets numerous times until he moved in with his sister in Port Moresby.

Surviving financially through informal means, Tebegetu began casually experimenting with graffiti until he was asked to design a poster for one of his friends, which opened up a new avenue for art-making. Like Feeger, Tebegetu started searching the Internet and reading books to teach himself basic techniques and art theories. He started researching topics on abstraction and expressionism. He also began learning about new graffiti trends around the world. These early inquiries about modern painterly aesthetics and graffiti styles are evident in his compositions and visual language that he has developed over the years. Tebegetu engages with two primary themes: New Ireland cultural identity and experiences of living in the urban environment of Port Moresby.

During the first few years of his career, Tebegetu abandoned immediate connections with graffiti because he states, “[in PNG] it is not looked at as art.”¹¹ Instead he focused on developing a series of images depicting New Ireland culture which he began selling at the Ela Beach Craft Market in Port Moresby. In Port Moresby, where there is a growing demand in the tourist market for affordable paintings expressing idealized depictions of PNG culture, Tebegetu found that his paintings depicting New Ireland culture sold much easier than the politically oriented images. In his New Ireland painting series he stages an assemblage of material culture, but experiments with new ways of incorporating graffiti elements into the design.

The image entitled *Tatanua I* is an example of his New Ireland imagery. It is directly referencing a type of Malagan mask from the northern region of New Ireland.¹² Most recognizable are the crescent shaped eyes of Tatanua masks

and the heads and beaks of birds, which are often depicted in Northern New Ireland malagan figures. There is a direct relation to graffiti aesthetics where visual elements are unstructured and interlocked, and colors blend and fade. He uses a loose grid-like structure, layering recurring symbols and motifs of tatanua while melding blues, blacks, reds, yellows, and whites, colors often used in malagan figures. Many of these paintings are located at the New Ireland resort, Nusa Island Retreat, where the owner has collected over eighty of Tebegetu's paintings.

In 2009-2010, Tebegetu began creating images with a stronger interest in realistic urban scenery and discussions.¹³ Through Internet research, Tebegetu became interested in a New York-based artist named Justin Bua, who melds "urban rhythms, graffiti, and classical art training" to something he calls "distorted realism."¹⁴ Tebegetu adapted this style to convey his feelings of the raw urban realities in Port Moresby, that he feels are also deranged and often corrupt. He states, "To [alter] these characters, goes to show, that realistically it's our perspective of development; is a bit distorted in a way." Tebegetu is referring to the recent economic boom in PNG fueled by mineral, crude oil, gas discoveries, and the subsequent development of mines.¹⁵ Although the macro economy is strengthening more than ever, the government failed to improve social development at a staggering low rate, including: ensuring law and order; strengthening health and education systems, and ensuring suitable fiscal and regulatory systems.¹⁶ The complexities of these circumstances have been at the forefront of Tebegetu's imagery.

Tebegetu adapts Bua's schemes by inserting his own figures and subject matter into them. He recreates recognizable architectural elements that are true to New York but rarely seen in Port Moresby. For example, Tebegetu's painting called *The Botanist* and Bua's painting *The DJ* present an interesting juxtaposition. Compositionally the images are similar; replicating the brick walls, large bookshelf, and lighting effects. He makes subtle alterations, where a painting of an orchid hangs in Bua's image, Tebegetu replaces it with a traditional Awan mask. He mimics bodily gestures making the woman's head tilt left towards the brick wall. The woman's hand is scaled proportionately larger than the rest of her body, similar to the way Bua elongates the DJ's hand.¹⁷



Figure 11 Leonard Tebegetu, *Susap Solo*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, image courtesy of the artist.

The appropriation of Bua's work is important to emphasize; he is not only appropriating the imagery, but also the persona and lifestyles of the USA into his paintings. It is as if the disparate histories of each place become an amalgam of contradictory traditions combining urban schemes of U.S.A with elements of PNG culture. Conversing with issues of urbanization Tebegetu conveys Port Moresby as a city of such complex and jarring dichotomies. With the influx of business opportunities coming through the city of Port Moresby, and the rapid emergence of new buildings and businesses, he questions "who and what does 'development' serve?"

Tebegetu uses multiple tools to inform his stories and presents a space where people can engage with his stories from various angles. He merges visual dichotomies of tradition/modernization, high art/low art, and original/reproduction. As a painter in PNG, he also plays different roles as a documenter, political commentator, and discusses issues that are dismissed in the media. In his words,

People on the streets are branded as a nuisance... [But] the media forgets to look beyond the struggles and what causes them to do this and that. So I've realized that I could take on the task. [My paintings are] a way of generating social commentary and reporting on life in Port Moresby from a critical viewpoint.

CONCLUSION

For the new generation of Papua New Guineans exposed to diversifying economies and interactive communication networks, aesthetic and representational agendas have transformed according to these new environments. As cosmopolitan artists, there is no ambivalence towards appropriation and hybridity, and their art has become more urban and varied.

New access to the internet has been transformative, and in many ways it has enabled young artists to voice their concerns and re-think boundaries of representation. Feeger's use of "magic realism" and Tebegetu's adaptation of "distorted realism", are examples of how these artists are using the internet to learn new approaches and global modes of visualization, but then transform it into something that expresses a local Papua New Guinean character. The Internet has also allowed artists to immediately and rapidly engage with other Papua New Guineans, expatriate, and international communities. Both artists actively use the social networking website Facebook to publicize their work and update their current information. In January 2012, Feeger created a Facebook group called *PNG Contemporary Arts* which is meant to act as a platform for discussion and share information about contemporary art ideas in Papua New Guinea.

Ultimately, their ambitions as PNG artists is not superseded by forces of globalism, but rather they use globalized tools to cross boundaries and open their discussions to new audiences. They see themselves as artists within a cosmopolitan structure in which they are able to equally engage local and global communities and ideas, but they are dealing with socio-cultural topics specific to Papua New Guinea.

The emerging roles of cosmopolitans in PNG is reflective of their position as middle-class urban artists. At the moment, 2% of PNG's population has access to the Internet and it is only afforded by people who can pay the high fees of the services.¹⁸ Although the Internet has spurred recognition and connections for the artists outside of PNG, the dissemination and collective appreciation of their work amongst a national and rural audience is still limited. New cosmopolitan dispositions may also become separate from provincial experiences where most people associate themselves within various traditional knowledge/practices, languages, sorcery, social groups, economic and educational units.¹⁹ The increasingly growing tensions between traditional and contemporary systems are at the core of why within PNG there is a consistent struggle to try and create imagery that speaks to the nation as whole.²⁰

As the work of Feeger and Tebegetu enters an increasingly cosmopolitan dialogue, new tendencies also create further divides. There are many more inquiries and complexities to pursue in the study of cosmopolitanism and a new generation of artists in PNG still, and the significance of the Internet and new situations in PNG art cannot be underestimated.

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- 1 The interviews in this article were conducted in 2011 during research in Papua New Guinea for a Master's Thesis entitled "Cosmopolitanism: The New Generation of Artists in Papua New Guinea." This particular interview with Jeffrey Feeger was conducted at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa during his residency in October- November 2011.
- 2 Prior to Independence in 1975, there were three influential expatriate art educators who worked with PNG artists; Ulli and Georgina Beier (husband and wife) and Tom Craig.
- 3 Pamela C Rosi, "Bung Wantaim: The Role of the National Arts School in Creating National Culture and Identity in Papua New Guinea. PhD Thesis (Bryn Mawr College, 1994), 356. Pub. Ann Harbor: Bell & Howell, 1994
- 4 Pamela C. Rosi, "The Disputed Value of Contemporary Papua New Guinea Artists and Their Work," in *Exploring World Art*, ed. Eric Venbrux, Pamela Sheffield Rosi, and Robert L. Welsch (Long Grove: Waveland, 2006), 245-7. Anthropologist Pamela Rosi (1991, 1994, 2006) has primarily contributed to ideas to the topic of contemporary art and nation-making in PNG.
- 5 This is mentioned in the publication by Thomas Webster and Linda Duncan, ed. *The Papua New Guinea Development Performance Report 1975-2008*, Monograph No. 41. (Port Moresby: National Research Institute, 2010), 1.
- 6 Anthony Appiah Kwame, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* 23:3 (1997), 617-639. The connection between cosmopolitanism and contemporary art is also drawn from the recent publications written by Nikos Papastergiadis (2012) *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity) and Marsha Meskimmon (2011) *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*, (London: Routledge).
- 7 Michael Goddard, *The Unseen City: Anthropological Perspectives on Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea*. (Canberra, ACT: Pandanus, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2005).
- 8 Interview July 6, 2011.
- 9 Interview July 6, 2011.
- 10 Interview July 6, 2011. Feeger particularly uses his Facebook page (www.facebook.com/jeffryfeegerart) to promote his new artworks, projects, exhibitions, festivals, and other PNG contemporary artists. In January 2012, Feeger created a new Facebook group called PNG Contemporary Arts (www.facebook.com/groups/238085869601099/). With hundreds of members, this forum continues to grow. This PNG arts forum is becoming a valuable new medium for rapid dispersal of information and is a much needed platform for upcoming artists in PNG.
- 11 Interview September 30, 2011.
- 12 Michael Gunn, and Philippe Peltier, *New Ireland: Art of the South Pacific* (Paris: Musée Du Quai Branly, 2006), 260.
- 13 The painting entitled *Bishopotonamous* is an example of how his compositions began to change. He merges bright colors and applies paint with a "spray paint" mannerism.
- 14 Justin Bua, *The Beat of Urban Art: The Art of Justin Bua* (New York: HC, 2007).
- 15 Thomas Webster and Linda Duncan, ed. *The Papua New Guinea Development Performance Report 1975-2008*, Monograph No. 41. (Port Moresby: National Research Institute, 2010), 1.
- 16 Ibid. Paul Barker speaks about these issues in his articles "What are the MP's, Parliament and Government therefor?", *Masali Blog*, <http://masalai.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/what-are-mps-parliament-and-government-there-for/>
- 17 Justin Bua, *The DJ*, 2009, Acrylic on Canvas, in Justin Bua, *The Beat of Urban Art: The Art of Justin Bua* (New York: HC, 2007), p123).
- 18 Information found on "Oceania Internet Usage Stats and Population Statistics." <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats6.htm> [accessed 16 Jul 2012].
- 19 Stephen Winduo, "Preface." Charles Yala, David Kavanamur, and Quinton Clements. *Building a Nation in Papua New Guinea: Views of the Post-Independence Generation*. (Canberra: Pandanus, 2003), xii.
- 20 Pamela Rosi discusses converging notions and authenticities of globalize and traditional artforms in her essay "The Disputed Value of Contemporary PNG Artists" (*Exploring World Art*, 2006). Rosi (263) states that old artists and elite viewers preferred the imagery of village artists because they admired the "traditional designs" and the "strong spirit" of village life. Whereas, younger artists gave higher value to stylistic range and modern techniques. Furthermore, Rosi further comments, "contemporary art is often denied authentic PNG identity because it is seen as a product of imposed Western practices, a kind of soft neocolonialism." (264)