

VIEWPOINT:
“PASIFIKA COOL” (REVISITED)¹

Graham Fletcher



Figure 1. Cath Cocker, *Sweet Dreams in the Missionary Position*, 2012. (detail) Paper & glue, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.

In 1999 I took part in a group exhibition at Sarjeant Gallery, Whanganui entitled *Pacific Cool*. This was the first group show I participated in after leaving art school that was dedicated to showcasing the works of contemporary Pacific artists. Since then I have been included in several Pacific focused shows, and more recently, I exhibited work in *Home AKL* (Auckland Art Gallery, 2012) which is the first major group exhibition of contemporary Pacific art at Auckland Art Gallery since Jim Vivieaere's touring exhibition *Bottled Oceans* (1994). Eighteen years is a long time between landmark Pacific shows at the Auckland Art Gallery, not forgetting that Auckland has the largest number of Pacific Islanders living in any one place in the world.

What this situation does bring to light is just how little exposure there is of Pacific visual arts within key public museums and dealer galleries throughout the country. But despite this sense of under-representation, what *Pasifika Cool* signals to me is that Pacific art is strong and healthy and that this exhibition is the start of something new and exciting for the Dunedin School of Art (DSA) and for the city of Dunedin.



Figure 2. Bridget Inder; *Running in the Rain* (Displayed in Room P152), 2004. Woodblock over Monoprint, 760 x 565 mm. Collection of the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 3. David Teata, *Viti*, 2005. Woodblock, 705 x 500 mm. On Loan to the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 4. Michel Tuffery, *Matai 'Fa Samoa'*, 1987. Woodblock on handmade paper 836 x 615 mm. Collection of the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 5. Bronwyn Nau Robson, *Multicultural Leis*, 2009. (detail) Wool, tapa cloth (ngata), dimensions variable. Collection of the artist and the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 6. Teina Ellia, *Death to Disco*, 2012. Oil paint, acrylic paint, graphite pencil on canvas, 755 x 760 mm. Collection of the Artist.



Figure 7. *Paranesia* (installation view of opening night) – photo by Amy Moffitt.



Figure 8. Tere Moeroa, *Faces*, 2009. Mixed Media Print, 675 x 510 mm. On Loan to the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 9. Donald Harman, *Scale design for Tapa Window*, 2009. Digital Print, 1680 x 725 mm. Collection of the Artist .

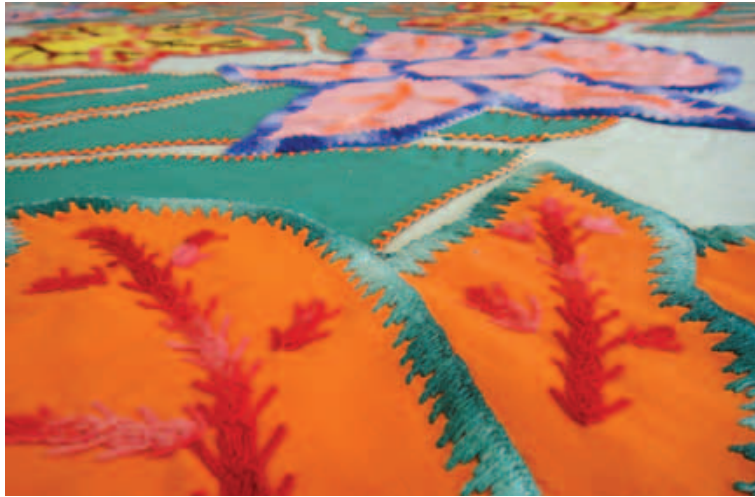


Figure 10. Tivaevae made by Māra Moeroa, Tere Moeroa's Mother and generously lent for the exhibition *Pasifika Cool*.

This exhibition is dominated by works from former Pacific students of the DSA, some of whom have gone on to have successful careers in the art world. Many of these works examine ideas that are familiar to my own practice, such as culture, identity, hybridity and place, and despite the term "Pacific Islander" inferring some kind of collective consciousness and a shared pool of common themes and ideas, it is clear to me that each work has its own distinctive cultural flavour peculiar to that artist's heritage and experiences.

Donald Harman (DipFA, 1985) and Michael Tuffery's (DipFA, 1988) striking graphic works use Pacific symbols and iconography that recalls the traditional art form of tapa making and how this is translated to modern techniques in printmaking. David Te Ata's (BFA, 2006) work is informed through his Manganian heritage in which he draws upon its rich material culture for inspiration. Tere Moeroa's (BFA, 2007) self-portrait combines traditional Cook Island motifs and urban forms that speak of his interests in contemporary music and its connection to his heritage. Teina Ellia's (BFA, 2009) emotionally charged works highlight her harrowing experience of the Christchurch earthquakes in 2011. Bronwyn Robson's (BFA, 2009) lei works challenge traditional readings of this art form while adding to the discussion of hybridisation through the blending of cultures. Bridget Inder's (MFA, 2010) work *Running in the Rain* (2004) explores issues of belonging, otherness and identity as a person of mixed Samoan/Pakeha heritage. Catherine Cocker's (BFA, 2010; PGDip, 2011) work *Sweet Dreams in the Missionary Position* (2010) uses the metaphor of the wasp nest (made from pages of bibles) to comment on the history of New Zealand colonisation and the effects of Western religions on indigenous cultures and practices.

This exhibition, I believe, bodes well for Pacific art in the future. When I look at the works in the show I'm reminded of the question posed by artist (and former DSA student) Colin McCahon at the end of the catalogue essay he wrote for his 1972 Survey exhibition: 'Do you believe in the sunrise?'

My response is an emphatic yes!

PASIFIKA COOL (FROM CATALOGUE TEXT BY VICTORIA BELL)

An exhibition of early artworks by Pacific Island graduates of the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic – Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, shown in conjunction with traditional Pacific Island works of art sourced from local communities.

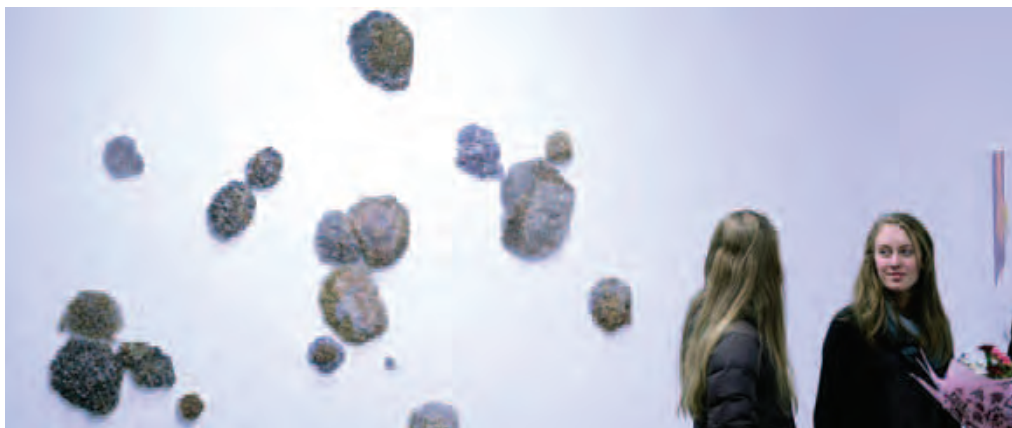


Figure 11. Opening night: Cath Cocker (installation view) - photo by Madeline Sherwood King.



Figure 12. Opening night: Bronwynn Robson (view through installation) - photo by Madeline Sherwood King.



Figure 13. Opening night guests look at a work by Teina Ellia photo by Madeline Sherwood King.

"Pasifika Cool" offers a survey of mostly early works, by invited Pacific Island graduates of the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. The exhibition recognises the rich complexities and empowering strength of heritage and tradition as well as the importance of family and community to the processes of art making. In viewing the artworks in this exhibition it can be seen that during the experience of tertiary education each artist's cultural identity manifested itself in their art work, in some way. Sometimes this became a central premise of their practice, as in the work of Inder and Teata; other times it was a more subtle element, as in the work of Ellia and Harman. The show presents these artists's work supported by and in conversation with, customary works of art and the voices of contemporary Pasifika artists as presented in the film *Paranesia*, acknowledging the cultural, social, familial and historical narratives which move back and forward in time, and are integral to their practices.

In 2006, at the fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial held at Queensland Art Gallery and the Gallery of Modern Art, in Brisbane, Australia, an important collection of woven fabrics and textiles from the Pacific were exhibited for the first time in a major art exhibition. The presentation of these works, humble in nature, but embedded with social and cultural importance, challenged the consistent craft/art, traditional/contemporary, art/artefact categorisations which circulate through Western histories of collection and exhibition. Acknowledged as contemporary artworks, these Pacific textiles presented communal narratives and expressed lived experiences from the past as well as the present.

Nicholas Thomas noted in the accompanying APT5 catalogue, that Pacific textiles "became maps of time and history, which is why Queen Salote, the famous mid-century Tongan ruler, declared that 'Our history is written in our mats'!" It is in the spirit of this sentiment that three contemporary Pacific Island textile based artworks are included in "Pasifika Cool".

The ie toga was originally gifted to the College of Education by Pacific staff and students at the opening of the Owheo building, in Union Street. At the farewell gathering held at the Owheo building, when the College of Education became part of the University of Otago, Eti Laufiso attended and shared stories about Owheo and the 'Village' (Polytechnic and College of Education buildings on the site before Owheo was built) which had housed Māori, Pacific and Multicultural Studies, as had the Owheo, and these were the places Pacific students and staff congregated for many years. Thanks to the College of Education for a loan of this ie toga.

Also shown is a contemporary tivaevae made by Māra Moeroa, Tere Moeroa's Mother. This vibrant quilt speaks to the important language of textiles in Pacific Island art which can be seen picked up in the work of Bronwyn Robson. Lastly, we are pleased to exhibit a large Tongan Funeral Tapa/Ngatu on loan from Catherine Cocker. This ngatu was given to Cath on the occasion of her father's funeral.

Victoria Bell is a graduate of the Master of Fine Arts programme at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic – Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, where she also lectures. Her practice engages with white studies and Western constructions of 'Other'. In 2005 she received the Olivia Spencer Bower Award.

Graham Fletcher is Studio Coordinator: painting at the Dunedin School of Art. He holds a Doctorate of Fine Arts from the University of Auckland. His research has explored the critical legacy of the widespread European tradition of housing collections of Oceanic and African tribal art in domestic settings. Of particular relevance for him as an artist of mixed Samoan and European heritage is the question of how this legacy might be appropriated and subverted within a contemporary Pacific and New Zealand context.

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1 Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (6th : 2009 : Brisbane, Qld.), The 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, p.41. See Nicholas Thomas, 'Our history is written in our mats', in The 5th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2006, pp.24–31.