

Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the museum

Date : February 22, 2009

Amiria Salmond, Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Pasifika Styles. 2008. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, in association with Otago University Press. ISBN 978-1-877372-60-5

Francis Upritchard, Sports Heads (2005). Photo: Kerry Brown

This book explores the making of the Pasifika Styles exhibition (Cambridge, UK, 2006-2008) from the perspectives of artists, art historians and academics.

Pasifika Styles was the first major exhibition of contemporary Maori and Pacific Island art in Great Britain. The show featured the work of contemporary artists from New Zealand whose work responded to Maori and Pacific Island cultural issues and influences. Located in a museum, in and amongst historical ethnographic artefacts, it aimed to challenge assumptions about art and about culture in the Pacific, emphasizing continuities and connections as well as contemporary innovations.

Material World

A Global Hub for Thinking About Things
George Nuku, Outer Space Maori (2006). Photo: Kerry Brown

<http://www.materialworldblog.com>

~~The show (like the book) was a labour of love on the part of everyone involved, and generated lots of publicity in New Zealand (the opening featured on prime time news and it was the subject of two separate documentaries commissioned by Maori Television). Strangely, however, critical attention has been hard to come by - the Museums Journal tried unsuccessfully to get it reviewed, and the fine arts press in the UK and New Zealand were virtually silent on the topic.~~

Rosanna Raymond, Eye land Part II: Welcome 2 da K'lub (2006)

Why? As one of its curators, and co-editor of this volume (with Rosanna Raymond) I think the show wasn't able (despite our intentions) to break out of the 'ethnic art' box to which it was assigned (perhaps inevitably, because of its location in an ethnography museum). For us it was a platform on which a group of artists (not all of whom were of Polynesian descent) could present their work and commentate on contemporary issues (including conventions of ethnographic representation), but for others it was clearly another case of a museum trying to update itself by inviting 'indigenous' artists to add their 'cultural' art to the collections. ('Real' contemporary art being, of course, culturally unmarked, or rather marked by ethnic signifiers that are sufficiently abstracted, used ironically, or have been critically sanctioned - think 'the New Chinese Art' etc.)

Can Pacific Art ever avoid this problem?

These issues and others are discussed in the various contributions to our book. All feedback gratefully received!