

## Conversations Across Time

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Reed, Michael; Karen Stevenson. *Conversations Across Time/Whakawhiti Korero*. Christchurch: Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, 2009.



### Maureen Lander's installation

The exhibition *Conversations Across Time/Whakawhiti Korero* at the Canterbury Museum in New Zealand is part of a larger trend in the museum world. Many ethnographic museums have started hosting exhibitions in which indigenous artists are given access to the museum's collections. After exploring the collections, the artists then create works that respond to their experiences of working with artifacts from their own cultures. The artists and the museums then collaborate to create an exhibition of these works in conjunction with their "referent" artifacts. These exhibitions allow the indigenous artists an opportunity to express an artistic, intellectual, personal and spiritual claiming of the artifacts in the collection. Participating in these exhibitions also allows the indigenous artists an opportunity to insert their voices into the museum narrative.



### Michel Tuffery's installation

Although I did not have an opportunity to visit Conversations Across Time/Whakawhiti Korero, after reading the exhibition catalogue, I believe that this exhibition is an excellent example of this trend. The instigators of this exhibition, Michael Reed and Karen Stevenson, invited 12 artists of various cultural backgrounds (all with some relationship to the Pacific), to work with the Canterbury Museum's collection. These 12 artists then created "interventions" that responded to the collection, placing their contemporary works next to their "referent" artifacts. These artistic interventions took the form of four installations of varying length that took place over the course of a

year (September 2007-September 2008). Each installation incorporated the “interventions” of several artists, creating temporary exhibitions that insert these modern works into the display of the ethnographic collection.

All of the artists share a common goal of creating new narratives for the artifacts in the collection. How they go about creating these new narratives varies from artist to artist. Some artists create works that share a physical similarity with artifacts from the collection, although they are functionally very different. Tim Brown’s works *White Zigzag*, 2007; *White Patu*, 2007; and *White Club*, 2007; adapt the physical forms of their referent objects to new, decorative objects. Others, such as Hana Rankera, created interventions that directly incorporated objects from the collections. In *Untitled*, 2008, Rankera placed tiki from the collection into clay bowls in an effort to address the spiritual concerns that she felt regarding the display of sacred objects.

The artists used the opportunity to “delve behind the scenes, and to re-consider, re-construct, or create new relationships for these works as well as for the artists themselves.” As Stevenson points out in the catalogue, these artists are not using the opportunity to criticize the museum, the display or the artifacts themselves. Rather they are “examining these roles and providing the opportunity for others to seek information, to visit the past, to reinscribe meaning to recreate histories, to enable artworks to tell stories.”

Other museums are also involved in similar collaborative projects. Many museums are inviting indigenous artists into the museum to create works in reference to the collection, such as in the exhibitions *Pasifika Styles* at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and *Raven’s Reprise* at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. Other museums are doing similar exhibitions, displaying contemporary indigenous art next to their referent artifacts, in an effort to include indigenous voices in the museum’s narrative.

Jennifer Kramer discusses this trend in the context of the debate over repatriation. She describes this phenomenon as: “the idea that First Nations artists can regain control of their material cultural objects by locating political artworks in western spaces as metaphorical acts of self-definition. In this way, contemporary First Nations artists make possessive claims for native cultural objects existing in museum collections by embracing them within newly created contemporary artworks”. She dubs this trend “Figurative Repatriation” and the artists are “artist-warriors”, fighting to reclaim their cultural object from museums. As Kramer points out, these exhibitions allow indigenous artists to reclaim their cultural artifacts from museums and insert their personal histories into the museum narrative. Hopefully this exhibition trend will continue, opening up a productive dialogue between the museum, the indigenous communities, the artists and the visitors.

### Reference:

Kramer, Jennifer 2004. Figurative Repatriation: First Nations ‘Artist-Warriors’ Recover, Reclaim, and Return Cultural Property Through Self Definition. *Journal of Material Culture*. 9 (2): 161-182.