

Pacific women: Challenging the boundaries of tradition: Synopsis from 2011

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In the past decade much of contemporary Pacific arts is, in essence the same; but much has changed. At the turn of the millennium, contemporary Pacific arts were still embroiled in the academic debates referencing such notions as ‘identity’, ‘authenticity’, ‘tourist art’, ‘craft’ and ‘tradition’. In my article, I suggested that Pacific women were utilising their arts practice to negotiate between their contemporary lives and the traditional objects upon which their artistic practice was based. I wrote: ‘What we see in contemporary art practice is the attempt to negotiate tradition, which is at the heart and soul of Polynesian society’¹. Today, tradition is, perhaps defined more as cultural values – it is more than the object that is referenced, it is the cultural knowledge and protocols that are imbued in it. As such, artists are creating their own language and placing their work in categories of their own choosing: heritage, taonga, koloa, and even, art.

Many of the artists I spoke about in my 2001 article are still practicing. They have not only created quite a legacy for themselves, but their interests in re-contextualising traditional art objects have continued to inspire, not only other artists, but academic writing. *Pacific art niu sila*, edited by Sean Mallon and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira, provides discussion on women’s art forms highlighting tradition, but also asserting the presence of innovation seen in New Zealand (both in contemporary and heritage arts). We find here that the desire to participate in ‘traditional protocols’ (especially in association with gifting) inspires and/or necessitates innovation. Drawing upon a cooperative work ethic, collectives (both young and established) have utilised, reinterpreted, and highlighted the importance of traditional textiles.

The frangipani is dead, contemporary Pacific art in New Zealand, contextualised the contemporary Pacific art movement, focusing on its development from 1985-2000 (including 18 women artists). Since this point, numerous honours, Masters, and PhD theses have directed their attention to the work of a ‘new’ breed of Pacific artist – young, straight out of art school, and ‘informed by global media’². This art often speaks ‘of a new generation...equipped with iPods, bebo pages and txt2000’³. It addresses the urban realities of a Pacific New Zealand and a new generation, focused on ‘documenting’ their identity, as opposed to asserting it. The changes are subtle, and perhaps semantic.

The efflorescence of Pasifika has also been reflected in numerous exhibitions as well as the presence of Pacific women curators and gallery personnel. Ema Tavola has energised the South Auckland art scene as the director of the Fresh Gallery. She has provided both artists and the community a space in which to create, interact, and exhibit. Fresh Gallery has also provided many curatorial opportunities to both artists and academics. Across New Zealand, Maria Ifopo, Stephanie Oberg, Leafa Wilson, Naomi Singer, Nina Tonga and Charmaine ‘Ilaiu have also recognised the contribution of Pacific women artists.

In 2001 I noted that Pacific women’s art was ‘integrally linked to place – identity – traditions’. This has not changed, but the place has moved from the island to the urban – to Auck-

land and/or the family home. It is now the everyday realities of living in New Zealand that plays a central role in this art production - it is the negotiation between the past and the present, not as it was enacted a decade ago, but creating new traditions by challenging how one interacts with and interprets those traditions. The battle, in essence, has been won – a Pacific presence is clear. Challenge has given way to negotiation as Pacific women artists embrace and innovate their traditional heritage.

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Notes

- 1 Stevenson, K. (2001). Pacific women: Challenging the boundaries of tradition. *Women's Studies Journal*, 17(1), 15-16.
- 2 Tautai website, <http://www.tautai.org/janet-lilo/>, sourced 19 July 2011.
- 3 Tautai Website, <http://www.tautai.org/cerisse-palalagi/>, sourced 19 July 2011.