

## Land, sea, sky and the human element

Works in this gallery focus on the relationship between Pacific peoples and the environment in which they live. Spanning the 19th–21st century, these works suggest the multitudinous life forms and lush physicality of the islands that make up the Pacific. Contemporary works—alongside tapa, hiapo and masi from earlier times—evoke a fundamental closeness to nature: the tilling and harvesting of crops, human reliance upon the earth for food, shelter and clothing.

Many works also address the omnipresent elements of sea and sky. *Ina and the Shark* links together, in a rhythmical composition, human, fish, plant-forms and the ocean itself. Shane Cotton's *Whakapiri Atu te Whenua*, Robin White's *Suka Siti* and Teuane Tibbo's *Samoan Village* register the layering of colonial history upon the islands and their peoples. These works also bring together approaches to image-making from both Western art and the indigenous Pacific.

In the midst of these works, Robyn Kahukiwa's *He Toa Takitahi* and Shona Rapira Davies' *Nga Morehu* ('the survivors') introduce a human presence, reminding us that Oceania is a place defined by thought, political convictions and social concerns. The human element is also to the fore in John Pule's *Tino*—the Niuean word for 'body'—which equates the painted canvas with human skin. Pule reminds us that, historically, tapa and other pieces of barkcloth were often worn as garments. Masi and tapa are coded statements of individual and communal identities, of genealogy, as well as a means of recording patterns, currents and objects from the wider world.

The exploration of 'the human element' continues in late 20th century works from Melanesia, which are rich in stories and metaphors, offering a glimpse of a culture in a state of change, but in which traditions remain very much alive. Processes of self-assertion, resistance and adaptation are contained in these boisterous, remarkable works. Examples of historic Pacific carving are also included, reminding us that many of the forms and energies manifest in contemporary art have their point of origin in ancient practice.

## Between Oceania and the Western world

The three artists featured in this gallery offer very different responses to the legacy of colonialism in New Zealand and the broader Pacific. Fiona Pardington's photographs document a series of life-casts which were made of Pacific peoples by a scientist who accompanied Jules Dumont D'Urville on a mid 19th century voyage through the region. These casts were taken back to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, where they were the basis for ethnographic research. In Pardington's photographs, these images—and the ancestor-figures they contain—return to their point of origin. These contemporary works offer a counter-movement to the flow of artefacts and knowledge towards Europe which characterised previous centuries.

Another kind of cultural imperialism is alluded to in Michel Tuffery's *O le Povi Pusa Ma'ataua*. Since the 18th century, contact with European culture has significantly changed the lives of Pacific people—and this is highly apparent in their dietary habits. Constructed from tin cans which once contained corned beef, Tuffery's bucking bull is a purposefully intrusive presence in the gallery (with a usable barbeque contained within its body). It embodies the new reality—which includes cows, pigs and sheep—which colonialism foisted upon the inhabitants of Oceania.

The abstracted figures in Paratene Matchitt's *Taunga Waka* resemble palisades of a pā, or a line of warriors. Facing into the gallery space, Matchitt's figures confront the future while containing echoes of earlier Māori history. *Taunga Waka* is loaded with modernist-inspired forms gleaned from European culture. Like the work of Gordon Walters (upstairs in the South Gallery) this sculpture registers the productive flow of ideas and forms between Western and Pacific cultures.

## Black Phoenix

Ralph Hotere's masterpiece *Black Phoenix* is a statement of cultural rebirth and reawakening, as well as a meditation on cycles of nature and human life. Here we re-experience the European myth of the phoenix, the bird which catches fire and is then reborn from its own ashes. Hotere's sculpture is an echo chamber of a great many sources, from across time and space. With its central hull/body and outstretched wings, the work echoes the frigate bird designs—embodiments of ancestral spirits—on Pacific breast ornaments. The T-shape carved into the blackened wood echoes the Tau cross of Jewish and Christian tradition. The boat's prow invokes the waka of the great Polynesian voyages, as it does Homer's *Odyssey*.

Hotere often salvages materials to incorporate into his art—including old sheets of iron, tarpaulins and sash-windows. In this, his most ambitious act of salvage-art, he uses the wreckage of a fishing boat, the *Poitrel*, which caught fire in Otago Harbour, not far from his home, one night in 1984. The artist enacts a kind of alchemy, transforming that which has been jettisoned or ruined—ravaged by fire and water—into a monumental work of ongoing significance.

During the early 1980s Hotere had been actively involved in protests against the aluminium smelter which was proposed for the settlement of Aramoana, at the mouth of Otago Harbour. Moving beyond Hotere's immediate environs, however, to address issues that affect the wider Pacific, *Black Phoenix* states the artist's opposition to the over-exploitation of natural resources and to the environmental damage done by industrialism, over-fishing, waste-dumping and nuclear testing.

A proverb or whakatauki on the floor-based planks states: 'Ka hinga atu he tētē kura, ara mai he tētē kura' — 'When one frond dies, another takes its place.' *Black Phoenix* is a statement of regeneration and progress. It proposes a viable, earthly spirituality in a world preoccupied with material realities. While the work has blackness in its title, as well as burnt surfaces within it, its primary purpose is to offer a way forward, out of darkness.

## Imagining Pacific people

Not only can art be a mirror of who we are, it can offer a sense of where we have come from and where we are going. Questions of individual and cultural identity permeate the works in these two gallery spaces. At the heart of this section are three major paintings by Tony Fomison, including his epic reflection on Pacific identity, *The Ponsonby Madonna*. Fomison's works are a retelling of very old stories; in *The Fugitive* he revisits the myth of Maui who was swallowed up by Hine Nui Te Po, the maiden of death. These works are also statements of where Pacific peoples are in the present, with their uncertainties and struggles. Shirley Grace's double photograph of Fomison explores where the artist sits—between two cultures, inhabiting two worlds simultaneously. Another portrait of an artist, Marti Friedlander's photograph of Sofia Tekala-Smith, asserts the confidence and power of a new generation of Pacific artists.

Like Fomison, Michael Illingworth retells a biblical story—in his case that of Adam and Eve. Illingworth's stylised figures echo not only the Easter Island dance paddle on display in this gallery, but also the carvings in the downstairs West Gallery. Similarly, Len Lye's *Polynesian Connection*—made, remarkably, in the 1920s—brings about an imaginative synthesis of different source materials, reconciling Pacific sources with European modernism.

Jewellery by contemporary artists including Tekala-Smith, Alan Preston and Chris Charteris suggests another way the Pacific imagination reflects and inhabits the lives of the region's people. Beyond their refined surfaces, these pieces are also shaped by historical and imagined narratives. A particularly strident instance of bodily adornment, the three headdress pieces by Torres Strait Island artist Ken Thaiday are made from modern materials but designed with traditional ceremonies and rituals in mind.

The notion of the Pacific as a place of sensual as well as spiritual fulfillment is suggested in Megan Jenkinson's *Oceania*—a work which also reminds us of inescapable political and environmental issues. Suites of photographs by Lisa Reihana, Shigeyuki Kihara (with Duncan Cole) and Edith Amituanai assert the new and often surprising ways that Māori and Pacific artists are renegotiating their relationships not only with Pākehā culture but with their own heritage.

## Modern world, ancient forms

Emblematic of modern day experiences of migration, exile and homecoming, Peter Robinson's *Painting* and *My Marae, my Methven* both feature aeroplane motifs, reminding us that, as the artist himself has said, the aeroplane is the waka of the late 20th century. The rough, encrusted surface of *Painting* is deliberately archaic, almost primordial in feeling; the work is imbued with a sense of the ancient past while at the same time referencing contemporary life. Similarly, Theo Schoon's *Basic Arawa pattern with Bird Motif* contains echoes of prehistory. It incorporates a bird figure based on a Māori rock art depiction of a bird discovered near Mangakino. Schoon's paintings often incorporate the koru, a motif which links human and non-human worlds. In Māori culture the unfurling koru contains a notion of perpetual movement and progress, while the inner coil suggests a return to a point of origin.

The title of Walter's *Genealogy III* hints at the koru's linking of past, present and future generations. As Ian Wedde has written, Walters' 'koru paintings' alert us to 'deep structures, points of intersection between culture and personal psychology, history and individual imagination'. The art of Reuben Paterson and Michael Parekowhai bring the koru motif into an unmistakably contemporary context. They use such unlikely materials as glitter paint, fluorescent lighting and vinyl paneling to rephrase ancient forms and meanings.

## Seeing and imagining the Pacific

If you include its largest landmass, Australia, Oceania covers one third of the earth's surface and contains some 25,000 islands, 1,500 of which are inhabited. Immensity and diversity are words synonymous with this region. Existing beyond the bounds of the rational mind, Oceania is a region well-suited to the human imagination. As well as inspiring the great works of historic Oceanic art—which stands as one of the great art traditions of the world—the Pacific Ocean continues to challenge and energise contemporary artists.

In Bill Hammond's *Traffic Cop Bay*, we find ourselves, as viewers, standing on the indistinct boundary between dry land and ocean. Aotearoa New Zealand is country with a lot of coastline; not only have our poets and painters spent much time staring out to at the Pacific, so have most New Zealanders. Standing in for all of us, Hammond's bird figures are ambiguously sited between different elements—they are birds of the sky, as they are inhabitants of the land and divers into the ocean.

Elsewhere in this gallery, we leave dry land behind and inhabit vast expanses of sea and sky. In Ani O'Neill's *Rainbow Country*, the eye moves between orbs of colour which form a constellation—of stars or islands—on the white wall. John Pule's *Shark, Angel, Bird, Ladder* and Brett Graham's large spherical relief-sculpture introduce us to opened-out, irrational vistas, where our familiar bearings are left far behind. Gretchen Albrecht's *Ocean Flower* offers a glorious splash of blueness, acknowledging the lyrical, at times luxuriant, qualities of an ocean famous for its coral reefs and warm waters.

## Visible mysteries, oceanic navigation

Voyaging and navigation are at the heart of Oceanic mythology, history and life in the present. The Marshall Islands stick chart, at the entrance to this gallery, hints at many possible sea voyages. The chart is a coded summary of water currents, swells and wave-patterns—it maps energy and flow. Over many centuries, such charts have provided voyagers with a reliable means of crossing huge distances.

In recent decades, artists have also offered a set of co-ordinates by which the citizens of Oceania can negotiate the reality in which they live. Painted in an abstract idiom, the works of Pat Hanly and John Drawbridge suggest subjects drawn from the real world—an horizon, a standing stone, a splash of water—but they pointedly leave us in the realm of the irrational. These works travel deeply in time and space, hinting at some originating notion of Oceania. They offer a sense of the Pacific as a realm of deep cultural memory and a limitless future.

Three paintings by Colin McCahon spell out his growing awareness of Pacific realities during the 1960s and 70s. *Visible Mysteries No.8* underlines the sustaining presence of land, sea and sky. The artist introduces a symbolic heart shape in the sky as a navigational guide, with a Māori koru suggesting movement forwards. Evoking patterns of stars and bird-flight, McCahon's other two paintings incorporate a motif resembling a string of Polynesian beads or flowers. Niki Hastings-McFall uses that same necklace—or *lei*—as a means of exploring Pacific beliefs, politics and environmental issues.

In the works of Bill Culbert and Richard Killeen, the viewer's eye finds its way between many-coloured forms. We voyage towards understanding, while exploring the myriad forms and patterns of the Oceanic life-force. Killeen has written: 'Each shape is like a word—it's like poetry or music.' The visual rhythm in Killeen's work is echoed in the video work *Pacific 3, 2, 1, Zero* (playing in the Reading Room and Adam Auditorium), by From Scratch, which presents richly evolving patterns of sound.