

Oceania at the Met Animating collections activating relationships

by Maia Nuku Published on 28.11.2018



In New York, I look after a collection of over two thousand works of Pacific art. These ancestral treasures (taonga) come from Pacific islands spread across a vast expanse of ocean that takes up over a third of the globe. The outstanding mobility of Pacific peoples over the course of several thousand years was a catalyst for the flourishing of an almost kaleidoscopic range of cultures and art traditions - some 20,000 islands and close to 1,800 different cultures and language groups, all of whom share common ancestry. The inter-connectedness of the Pacific and its people - wrought from many centuries of dynamic engagement - is a strand that unites all the art of the region. Storytelling is the other great connector for, broadly speaking, all Pacific art is a vital means to access story.

Art has always been used as a vehicle to channel knowledge, ideas and ancestral connections. Acting as a mnemonic to memory, when activated with song and dance, it is a crucial conduit for current generations to pass important knowledge from the past into the future. One of the challenges of looking after a collection of art is the static nature of display. How do we convey to visitors the vital components of artworks? when so much of the sensual repertoire

of words and gesture originally conceived to accompany it - is now absent.

When I arrived in New York in October 2014 to take up the position of curator of Oceanic art at the Metropolitan, I was keen to work with Pacific artists as a way to animate the galleries, to populate the space with Pacific voices. I had wondered about the institutional memory of the museum with regard to Te Māori, the landmark exhibition that the Met hosted almost thirty-five years ago. At dawn on the morning of 10th September 1984, the traffic stopped on Fifth Avenue as a delegation of Māori leaders gathered on the front steps of the museum and prepared to enter. The call (karanga) of the women went out and a group of kaumatua (elders) climbed the front steps, flanked by two young men with taiaha. Chanting appropriate ritual incantations, they moved through the museum to the exhibition gallery clearing the pathway (whakawate a) for Māori and visitors to enter. The exhibition is frequently cited as a turning point in establishing an entirely new framework for cultural policy in Aoteraoa New Zealand, setting new precedents in consultation and shared decision-making.

Having opened to great acclaim in New York, it travelled for the next two years to three further venues in the US (San Francisco, St. Louis and Chicago). As it travelled, Māori organized formal protocols at each venue and led impromptu cultural performances in the galleries alongside the *taonga* on display. The constant presence of Māori and their insistence on overseeing appropriate *ti kanga* (protocols) ensured that museum staff and audiences alike were introduced to the unique relationship of Māori with their art that sculptures were not simply relics of a forgotten past but living spiritual ancestors who remained in close relation with their living descendants. It is this ancestral relationship that really drives the connection between people and art in the Pacific. Pacific art is acknowledged as having efficacy and agency; as such, it has a vital role to play in initiating an expansive cultural dialogue for the 21st century that extends far beyond the Pacific.



Rosanna as Back Hand Maiden in The Metropolitan Museum, New York, gliding up the staircase to European Paintings. Photo credit: Artefact. Greenstone TV Ltd.



Oceania gallery, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Rosanna Raymond, Chester Dale Fellow in Education and Public Practice engaging with visitors in Oceania gallery The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Filip Wolak, 2016.

Animating collections - activating relationships

But what of today? What relevance does a show like *Te Māori* have for those of us working with art in large institutions with what are referred to as encyclopaedic collections? In the intervening years since Te Māori in the 1980s, the discipline of Pacific art has been steadily shifting. Curators of Pacific art work on the boundaries of many disciplines: art history – ethnography, anthropology, archaeology and museology. In Europe and America, I have been involved in collaborative research projects that bring Pacific artists, scholars and cultural practitioners together to work alongside museum curators and conservators. Accessing collections of Pacific art together, it has been possible to pool our knowledge bases, bringing new perspectives to bear on the research that lessens the gap between 'knowledge' and 'practice'. Shifts in the academic landscape mean that written documents are no longer perceived as the only robust or valid primary sources. The discourse of materiality - an analysis of 'things' in and of themselves - has taken center stage to direct a discourse that acknowledges the active agency of objects, opening up pathways to

different kinds of knowledge and understandings. Crucially, scholars in the Academy have begun to take the new perspectives and viewpoints of Pacific collaborators more seriously. This has impacted my own curatorial practice in the sense that I have moved towards an understanding of the gallery itself as a place of encounter. Shifting the perception of the gallery as simply a place where we present art from a particular region, I prefer to approach it as a place to *host* in the manner that Pacific people are accustomed to do. In this way it becomes a very active, dynamic space:

- a place to dialogue
- a place to confront difficult, complex histories
- a place to honour and explore indigenous epistemologies, giving them the space and time outside the ordinary run of life where they might land and take root.

At the Metropolitan, it has been really productive to work with colleagues in our Education and Digital departments, allies in this shared project, to complicate the institutional narrative of the museum through a series of artist-led projects.



Benjamin Work, $Tauhi\ V\bar{a}$ - Pacific mural inspired by iconography of Tongan club in The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection. East Harlem mural project, New York. Photo: Benjamin Work 2016.



Benjamin Work, $Tauhi\ V\bar{a}$ - Pacific mural inspired by iconography of Tongan club in The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection. East Harlem mural project, New York. Photo: Benjamin Work 2016.

Artist projects (2016-2017)

These have included the Tongan artist and philosopher Visesio Siasau who was in New York with his family for a six-month residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) after winning the New Zealand Wallace Prize in 2016. Visesio was involved in a series of events in the Met's Oceania galleries: we beamed him into the galleries digitally and he formally addressed his ancestral 'otua fefine (female deity figure) in his own dialect. During an evening event dedicated to the distinctions of the Tongan aesthetic, we discussed the sacred and cosmological landscapes inherent in the colors black and red. The discussion ranged from important Tongan figural sculpture created during the 18th and 19th centuries to his contemporary ngatu 'uli (a huge painted ceremonial barkcloth), underscoring the continued innovation of Pacific artists who deftly navigate between the past and the present, often through the conduit of the artworks themselves. The audience were challenged to think very carefully about questions of authorship and validity: what is customary? what is contemporary?

Later that summer in 2016, Māori fiber artist and fashion designer Shona Tawhiao visited to investigate Pacific collections in museums. One glorious summer evening, she staged an impromptu fashion show for Matariki (the Māori new year) up on the Met's rooftop, hosted by the Digital MediaLab as part of their Late Night Friday. We were joined by New York's Māori and Pacific Islander communities based in Manhattan who were keen to come together for an event to mark Matariki. Shona's energy and willingness to jump to the beat brought members of the Pacific community together, consolidating the Pacific network far from the shores of home.

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Artist Visesio Siasau presents his contemporary barkcloth painting (ngatu 'uli) at an evening event *Exploring indigenous epistemologies: Tongan art and aesthetics.*Oceania galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 5th Oct 2016.



Collections research hosted by Meghan Bill at the Brooklyn Museum with (l-r) Maia Nuku, Rachel Smith, Meghan Bill, Shona Tawhiao and Serene Tay. 2016 Photo: Carly Tawhiao.



Artist Benjamin Work and Pacific researcher Sergio Jarillo de la Torre discussing a Tongan ngatu (barkcloth) in the reserve collections, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Maia Nuku 2016.

I feel strongly that the Oceania collections of the museum ought not to be a static resource that waits to be drawn from for temporary exhibits. I enjoy encouraging dialogue around the collection itself. It is always rewarding to have the taonga stimulate conversations in the reserve section of the museum stories just rise up to the surface. Benjamin Work (a young artist with ancestral ties to Tonga and the Shetland Isles) was so inspired by the iconography of one of the 'akau tau (Tongan war clubs) he had seen in the Met's collection that he incorporated the design into a street mural in the last two days of his stay in New York. The results were fantastic! The bold, graphic Tongan designs leached out of the museum and literally exploded into the street. Benjamin was thrilled to democratise the museum experience by presenting Tongan iconography in an open-air venue where people can visit at any hour of the day or night without having to pay an entrance fee. Proud to have been able to throw up the first Pacific mural in the East Harlem mural project, Benjamin named the work Tauhi Va – a title that speaks to the importance of tending to and nurturing relationships. This dynamic mural takes pride of place amongst the basketballers shooting hoop in the schoolyard of my son Te Aonehe's elementary school. For he and I, the work is rather like a Pacific anchor (tau) announcing our presence in the city and binding us to a distant (though ever present) home.

These projects build momentum in all sorts of interesting ways. The mural in particular continues to play out its magic, inspiring an emerging visual anthropologist Anna Weinrech to produce a documentary film Walking Backwards into the Future as part of NYU's Graduate Program in Culture and Media. The film was shown at the Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York in October 2018 and has been selected for presentation back home in the Nuku'alofa Film Festival (November 2018). The return to Tonga feels significant. Words spoken out loud in the stores of the museum now have tangibility in brick and paint, and in sequenced frames of digital film. With the relevance of cultural heritage under fire in some quarters in the Pacific - where it's validity and role can be questioned and challenged, indeed threatened, by sectors including fundamentalist Christian groups - the role of art as a global ambassador in establishing the coordinates for the Pacific cultural compass has never seemed so vital.



Celebrating Matariki on the Met roof! with New York's Polynesian community who gathered at sunset to celebrate with an impromptu fashion show of Shona's fiber designs, July 2016. Photo: Maia Nuku.



The artist Shona Tawhiao and Che Guevara mural, East Harlem, July 2016. Photo: Maia Nuku.



Montage of fiber fashion by Shona Tawhiao.

It remains important for me to not limit engagement with the collections to the visual arts and I always have an eye out for the performers who will integrate the movement and gesture, song and dance that is such a vital ingredient in activating our Pacific arts. Our orators and spoken word artists, our dancers and performers these make up the rich landscape of creativity in the contemporary Pacific. Visiting scholar and artist from the Center for Pacific Islands Studies of the University of Hawaii Manoa, Dr. Moana Nepia also developed a fascinating inter-disciplinary project over the summer of 2017. Early on during his visit, Moana requested

access to the galleries before opening hours. He was planning to create new videographic and choreographic works inspired by the gallery displays. As a trained dancer, Moana's scholarly practice extends theoretical investigation with creative research that is infused with indigenous Māori concepts. The multi-media project which he titled Archiving Intimacy - wove together fascinating threads of enquiry and culminated in a live presentation: a thoughtful and moving consideration of the absences and gaps in museum collections which the artist urged can, and ought to be, salient sites of enquiry. This powerful, contemplative series of vignettes produced a poignant narrative pertaining to art, knowledge and display. Exposure to this kind of interdisciplinary practice is precisely the kind of extension of boundaries that I am dedicated to promoting at the Met. The work, in its fusion of scholarly and artistic pursuits, draws in new and diverse audiences and opens up a dynamic space in the institution for important discussions about indigeneity and its interface with the museum.

In 2017, the artist, poet and fashion activist, Rosanna Raymond arrived from Auckland to take up a six-month residency at the Metropolitan Museum as the Chester Dale Fellow in Education and Public Practice. From the outset she established that as well as using her time to incubate ideas for various ongoing projects, her interest was to respond in her own way to the institution of the museum itself.



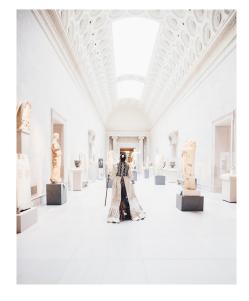
Rosanna Raymond as Back Hand Maiden in the Greek and Roman galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Richard Wade.



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Rosanna Raymond as Back Hand Maiden in the Greek and Roman galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Richard Wade.

'She got big bones and big hair, when she breathes her breasts rise and fall like the swell of the shallow sea,
Loves wearing mother of pearl and pounamu all at the same time, so she chimes when she walks,
Always busy so can seem a bit distracted, nevertheless, a no fuss, no bother, can-do, sort of a girl.
Pretty in a strange sort of a way, you can't help stare at her eyes,

They are vast and can light up the night sky,

You see she has no pupils, they are vessels containing old gods ...

Just don't trip over and fall in them ... you won't come back alive. [01]

I remember laughing out loud when I first heard poet and artist Rosanna Raymond recite a couple of her One-a-Day Maiden Rave On series. I loved the sass of these vignettes, these 'maidens', as Raymond conceived them, who were bold and mischievous, saucy with just the right amount of cleverness. I knew the girls she was channeling and recognised her Pacific 'Dusky's' - modern-day Dusky Maidens reinvented with a generous pinch of London swagger. One day when I visited a new studio space she was taking over in Willesden Junction, I found she had tacked inspiration for the girls on the large expanse of wall. Fashion photos torn from magazines, photocopies of iconic works in museum collections and archives overwritten with her notes, ideas and quotes. These sketched fragments built a profile of each of these strong and vulnerable women - each, in some sense, an aspect of her own self. The room was brimming with outfits, props and all manner of tusks, raffia and bone in preparation for a major photoshoot she was planning at the studio the following week. Rosanna was pulling the girls out again, reviving them, reacquainting herself with their energy before she would inhabit them once again for a set of fulllength portraits she had conceived for an upcoming exhibit^[02]. Her take on the heroines of Pacific story was fresh and vigorous: myth and tale recalibrated for a new generation and very much in the spirit of what she had begun doing as a core member of the Pacific Sisters in Auckland during the 1990s^[03]. This was her in Tusitala mode: tracing the diasporic journeys of these Pacific maidens, affirming their life blood.

Amongst a plethora of projects that included convening an open workshop 'Museology and the Mused' (July 22-23, 2017) to explore the interface of indigeneity at the museum, the producers for a new series 'Artefact' for Māori TV were in touch. The series, presented by our esteemed colleague and friend Dame Anne Salmond, was looking to explore stories pertaining to Pacific history, art and culture as they inhere in and around 'things' – objects, artefacts,

people. Certain aspects of this series of case studies fell naturally within the framework of museums in terms of their complex histories and the relationships that might be drawn into play within their walls. They expressed their interest to film at the museum and interview both of us briefly for the series. Rosanna had packed her spectacular barkcloth frock to bring with her to New York - a spectacular tapa dress that she had worn when she created the portrait of 'Back Hand Maiden' in London almost a decade before in 2009 for exhibition. Fascinated with the architecture of the museum interior, we talked about the difference between the wood, plants and fiber of Pacific art in the Oceania galleries and the cool, smooth stone statuary of the classic world on display in the Greek and Roman galleries immediately adjacent to the Pacific galleries. The sense of permanence in the idealised portraits that once braced the architecture of political power in the Roman Empire seemed completely at odds with the transience and ephemerality of much Pacific art. In many instances, art in the Pacific is conceived to exist only for a short period of time - designed as a conduit, materials are assembled into a dynamic visual display that will bring the community together for a time before being disassembled and returned to the environment. Fiber and barcloth; stone and bone; male beauty and dusky female power... ideas were beginning to take root in the artist.

The moment 'Back Hand Maiden' appeared in the galleries in her full barkcloth bustle was a powerful one. Rosanna had described her as haughty and austere, a mistress of the manor. A towering turtle shell comb sat atop her scooped up hair. Wielding her tokotok o defiantly, she walked through the galleries like she owned the place. Stopping to courtsey gently, she paid her respects to the youthful beauty of a series of male nudes, their taut buttocks laid bare in an avenue of smooth plinths and stone. The back of her own dress split open to reveal her own behind clothed in the dark green ink of the tatau that marks her Pacific skin. Neither naked, nor nude but marked with the stories and genealogies of the Pacific. The statement was subtle and was an effective way to infuse the beautiful austerity of the stone galleries with the warmth and vigour of a Pacific body –a female body moreover, that highly contested site so central to the earliest European encounters with

the Pacific. Wrapped in natural fibers, this strong Pacific body disrupted time to unfold its own storied past into the present, introducing its own ancestors to those of ancient Rome.

The remit to invite and encourage participation from a range of contemporary Pacific artists is of course vital in conveying to audiences that we are a culture *not* confined to the past. In the spirit of Pacific reciprocity and exchange, Rosanna Raymond's projects extended to several collaborations with fellow Samoan artist and writer, Dan Taulapapa McMullin and the two actively produced and presented new works in dialogue with the Oceanic collections that fused costume with spoken word and performance. One memorable collaboration took place one evening on a Late Friday at the Met. Beginning in the European Painting galleries they stood for a time in front of two iconic canvases by Gauguin. The pair then processed through the museum, each fully enveloped in bodysuits^[04] of foliage, fern and flowers - populating the paneled walls of the galleries with the flourishing island landscape of Polynesia. Moving steadily, their solemn procession through the museum was slow and purposeful, punctuated with cynicism and humor, and forced a dialogue with the unnatural and artificial environment of the museum.



If we believe in the active agency of things, the collections become more than a static resource from which to draw periodically for the staging of displays and temporary exhibits. Bringing people (physically and digitally) into the galleries helps connect the living dynamic with the collections to activate and enliven relationships. When I reflect on this series of ad hoc engagements with visiting artists that have taken root during my first three years of tenure as curator at the Metropolitan Museum, I see that they have stemmed from my own network of *relationships*, and as much from a desire and need to energise my own personal Pacific compass, to recharge my Pacific batteries as it were. There is nothing as powerful as watching our artists at ease in the museum's galleries: simply 'being' in the space, sharing generously in the culture from the heart, breaking into song, responding instinctively to the taong a in the space. The public see this cultural dynamic in flow; they witness it, they understand it in a nuanced and embodied way that no explanatory text can communicate.

In this sense, these projects are a way to build on the original notion of the role of a curator [curare in terms of 'taking care of, and attending to' the art] and move closer towards a role of kaitiaki tanga (or guardianship) that sees us looking to nurture relationships, to reinforce and establish alliances that may have become eclipsed over time. In this way, we can pull the knowledge backup and safeguard it going forward. For art not only offers us a window onto the past, it propels us forward into a consideration of what the future also looks like. This practice is cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. It can bridge the past with the present. These projects push at the boundaries of the institution, forcing it to reassess itself, to become self-reflexive.

Stepping back then to consider art's ability to disrupt and question in the context of 21st century globalized life: when someone walks into the museum, we do have an opportunity to help them stop and reflect and perhaps reconfigure the accepted narrative. Can we jolt them out of their own reality into someone else's? Can we break down the overarching institutional voice to present more complex, multivocal and inclusive histories? Can artists & practitioners help us do this? A resounding yes. To cite the well-known Māori wh akatauki (proverb):

He aha te mea nui o te ao? (What is the most valued and important thing in the world?)

...He tangata he tangata he tangata! (It is people, it is people, it is people!)

The power in art then is in joining up history with its people.

Footnotes

01. 'Fully Laiden Maiden' by Rosanna Raymond from the series One-a-Day 7 Maiden Rave On' or 'The Dusky ain't Dead she Just Diversified'.

02. Several of that suite of photographs were exhibited in the show 'EthKnowcentrix: Museums inside the Artist' at October Gallery in London [10 Sept – 10 Oct 2009] a collaboration with Lisa Reihana, Shigeyuki Kihara and George Nuku which explored their ongoing relationships with museums as a site of research and reflection.

03. The Pacific Sisters collective of Pacific and Māori fashion designers, artists, performers, and musicians electrified 1990s Auckland and was recently the focus of a major exhibition 'Pacific Sisters: Fashion Activists He Toa Tāera' at Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand (17 March - 15 July 2018).

04. The bodysuits were originally created by Dan Taulapapa McMullin for an installation entitled *Aue-Away* at the American Museum of Natural History, New York during the Margaret Mead Film Festival (Oct 2016).

Biographies



Dan Taulapapa McMullin is an American Samoan artist, known for his poetry, visual art and film work that are centered around his indigenous Samoan heritage and his fa'afafine gender identity. McMullin has been creating literary and artistic works in a variety of styles for over 35 years and has received numerous awards, fellowships, and grants, including having his 2013 book *Coconut Milk* named one of the American Library Association's Over The Rainbow Top-Ten Books for 2013. In 2010 he was the recipient of the Arts & Humanities Award from the University of California at Irvine; in 2010, he won Best Short Film Award at The Honolulu Rainbow Film Festival, for his work *Sinalela*; and in 1997 was awarded the Poets & Writers Award from The Writer's Loft. Taulapapa McMullin now lives in Laguna, California and in Hudson, New York.



Dr. Moana Nepia (b. 1957, Auckland, NZ) is a visual and performing artist, Assistant Professor in the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i, and Arts Editor for *The Contemporary Pacific – A Journal of Island Affairs*.

Following a residency at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and exhibitions in New York and Honolulu in 2017, he has a painting selected to complement a display of historical Oceanic material being curated for the Met's Rockefeller Wing late 2018, and upcoming publications on indigenous curation, collaboration, and creative practice-led research based upon his PhD from AUT University titled *Te Kore: Exploring the Māori concept of Void.*



Sistar S'pacific aka Rosanna Raymond is notable producer of, and commentator on contemporary Pacific culture in Aotearoa and internationally. She is a long-standing member of the art collective the Pacific Sisters and a founding member of the SaVAge K'lub. Raymond specialises in working within museums and tertiary institutions, and has achieved international renown for her writing, poetry, performances, installations, body adornment, and spoken word. Raymond was awarded the CNZ Pacific Senior Artist for 2018 acknowledging her contribution to the arts, a former Chester Dale Fellow at the Met in NYC and holds a Master of Philosophy from Auckland University of Technology.



Shona Tawhiao is a Maori Fibre Artist and Designer based in Avondale Auckland. In 1994 and 1995, Tawhaio attended United where she was tutored by Kahutoi Te Kanawa, learning the skills of traditional Maori Weaving. In 1996, she started Takirua Weavers with Joy Wikitera, stocking various retail outlets with woven art and kete and has worked in the wardrobe and art departments for Film, Television and also Music Videos including as the main designer for sets on Maori Television. In 1998 Tawhiao was part of Urupatu set on the confiscation line in Taneatua Tuhoe, where she installed three 3.5-1.5 metre woven panels made from builder's paper in a cow paddock and from 2003-2005 Tawhaio and Judy Hohaia were employed to weave the front and back walls of the United Marae under the guidance of Lionel Grant. Her work has showed in Paris, London and Melbourne and her garments have been on the runway during New Zealand, Melbourne and London Fashion Weeks.



Visesio Poasi Siasau is a carver, painter, and fiber artist from the Pacific island Kingdom of Tonga and is one of the most significant contemporary practitioners of Tongan Art. Siasau comes from a hereditary guild of Tongan "Tufunga" (or ritual practioners/artists) and is a highly accomplished carver in the traditional Tongan style, producing works for numerous royal families across the Pacific. As a contemporary artist, he has worked in glass, bronze and installation, extending the parameters of what is considered "traditional" Tongan art. More recently, he has extended his practice into the creation of large paintings on tapa cloth and canvas.

He is the first Tongan artist to be awarded the Wallace Art Prize, and in 2016 spent six months as resident artist at the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York. During this time, he was invited to lecture and present his work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.On Feb. 2, 2018, Siasau presented at *Oceans of Exchange: Art, Indigeneity, & the 21st Century Museum,* a symposium hosted by the Mellon Indigenous Arts Initiative, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, The Fralin Museum of Art, UVA McIntire Department of Art, and the Institute of the Humanities & Global Cultures.



Dr. Maia Nuku is Evelyn A. J. Hall and John A. Friede Associate Curator for Oceanic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Born in London of English and Maori (Ngai Tai) descent, Maia completed two post-doctoral fellowships at Cambridge University as part of an international research team exploring Oceanic collections in major European institutions in France, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Germany and Russia.

In 2014 she moved to New York to become Associate Curator for Oceanic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her curatorial approach is driven by an ambition to distill core ideas pertinent to indigenous art, drawing out themes and cosmological connections that can assist visitors in fully appreciating this unique and spectacular art. Her latest exhibition Atea: Nature and Divinity in Polynesia is currently showing at the Metropolitan Museum, New York (Nov 19, 2018 - Oct 27, 2019).



