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Pacific artistic communities in Australia: Gaining visibility in the art world

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Abstract

This article shows that although Pacific arts began to be largely recognised in Australia in the 1990s, Pacific artists based in Australia remained mostly invisible in the contemporary art scene until the mid-2000s. I aim to demonstrate how Pacific artists and curators—who in some cases collaborated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and curators—have made visible myriad Pacific identities and social trajectories in Australian cities. Exhibitions reveal and highlight multiple experiences of Pacific people residing in Australia, for whom Pacific cultures are partly mediated by the experiences of their relatives, popularised by museum collections and coloured by the gaze of non-Pacific people. This article is built around two cultural events that have not previously received scholarly attention, a group show curated in Sydney by Māori artist and cultural worker Keren Ruki and a triennial in Brisbane imagined and organised by Bundjalung Yugambeh (Aboriginal Australian) artist and curator Jenny Fraser. It addresses how narratives in the 2000s were often connected to objectives of empowerment and the necessity to build a future for Pacific peoples in Australian society.

KEYWORDS

contemporary Pacific art, exhibition, identity, indigenous agency, urban spaces

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Urban anthropology, in its early development, showed how cities are intrinsically linked to the state and are a place where social and economic inequalities are reproduced. In France, the contribution of the Chicago school has been revisited (Hayot, 2002; Joseph & Graffmeyer, 1990), revealing the importance of looking at social practices, imaginaries and representations in cities. Cities are often perceived as anonymous places, characterised by mobility, where social relationships are subject to instability and fragmentation (Huhn & Morel, 2003). Looking at expressions of identity and their material markers, this article proposes an ethnography *in* the city and not an ethnology *of* the city (Hannerz, 1983). It shows that although Pacific arts began to be largely recognised in Australia in the 1990s, Pacific artists based in Australia remained mostly invisible in the contemporary art scene until the mid-2000s. Looking at the progressive ‘production of localities’ (Appadurai, 2018), I examine the strategies employed by Pacific people to appropriate urban spaces, create a place for themselves and invest them with meaning, in particular in and around museums. I aim to demonstrate how Pacific artists, who in some instances dialogued or collaborated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and curators, have highlighted in Australian cities myriad social trajectories and positive experiences, which stands in contrast to—and as a critique of—a prevalent and generalising perception of Pacific Islander identity either as fractured and dislocated (Enari & Haua, 2021; Fry, 2000) or simply happy.

In the next section I introduce the theoretical framework and explain the methodology. Then, a brief literature review shows the complexities of naming and categorising Pacific peoples in Australia and in Aotearoa New Zealand, a necessary contextualisation as local and regional representations inform and are intertwined in art exhibitions. Section 4 examines the progressive visibilisation of contemporary Pacific arts in Australia in the 1990s–2000s. The last two sections provide an ethnography of cultural events that have not previously received scholarly attention: a triennial in Brisbane imagined and organised in 2006 by Bundjalung Yugambeh (Aboriginal Australian) artist and curator Jenny Fraser, and a group show curated in Campbelltown, on the outskirts of Sydney, by Māori artist and curator Keren Ruki in 2013. Focusing on identity markers, this article contributes to debates on belonging and territorial anchoring in urban areas on Indigenous land.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the early 1990s several conferences and books initiated discussions on museum transformations, in particular on how curators were engaging in discussions with spectators and communities (Karp et al., 1992). While raising challenges for museums (Golding & Modest, 2013), such ‘contact zones’ (Clifford, 1999) are important for better cultural dialogue and co-decision processes. This article focuses on a specific time when Australian museums and contemporary art spaces were slowly but increasingly looking at Pacific artworks and artists. It builds from Agier’s (2015) idea that museums can be either ‘places for Others’—defined by anonymity and impersonality—or ‘anthropological places’—that is, places of relationship, memory and possibly identification—in order to analyse how Indigenous artists and curators from the Pacific region understood the role of museums and the opportunities (or lack thereof) they provided, and commented on the kinds of changes they imagined and fought for.

In the early 2000s, when I started my fieldwork on the Australian Indigenous art world, as an anthropologist trained in art history with museum experience, power relations in the mounting of



cultural events on Australian and Pacific arts appealed to me as a topic of interest. In artists' studios and in museums, during talks at universities or during festival openings and even during parties, I often witnessed conversations between Pacific artists and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists about non-Indigenous art actors' misconduct or misunderstandings. Even when a consultation process had taken place for the organisation of the exhibition, or even if a few people from the Pacific community had been involved in the organisation of the event, criticisms were raised about the power imbalance and the risk of tokenism. I quickly realised that these criticisms were not so much about ethnic identities as they were about indigenous agency, a notion to be understood here as a local and global force formed to challenge and restructure power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Glowczewski & Henry, 2011). Aboriginal artists were supportive of Pacific art exhibitions and their peers and, similarly, Pacific artists supported their Aboriginal peers. For example, at Griffith University in Brisbane, during the opening of QPACifika, a series of events dedicated to Pacific arts and cultures in 2005, scholar and artist Fiona Foley publicly criticised the organisers and stated that the organisation committee should not only have consulted the local Pacific communities, they should have involved them as co-organisers and not just participants. Pacific artists were also very supportive of criticisms formulated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artists against the art industry, such as the one summarised by Richard Bell's famous statement, 'Aboriginal art, it's a white thing' (Le Roux, 2013).

The emergence and multiplication of artist-initiated projects often result from a lack of national arts infrastructure, a necessity to 'fill the gaps', or from a desire to develop alternative visions or modes of co-creation (Clark, 2005). This article proposes an examination of two ground-breaking events that took place in Australia in the 2000s and of the gaps they filled.

The ethnography on which the article is based was carried out from 2005 to 2010 on the east coast of Australia, mainly in Brisbane and Sydney, and has since been augmented by regular trips to other Australian and Pacific areas, including to the Festival of Pacific arts and the Festival of Melanesian art, as well as to major contemporary Pacific art exhibitions in Europe. My engagement as a freelance curator, who organised several exhibitions and artists' residency with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Pacific artists in France and Belgium (Castro-Koshy & Le Roux, 2022), has also informed my understanding of the art industry and the role that identity markers may play.

This article focuses mostly on artists with Polynesian heritage, as Polynesians were one of Australia's fastest growing immigrant groups at the time of my fieldwork (ABS, 2016). To write this article I also kept in mind many discussions I have had with artists whose families hailed from different places, including Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, French Polynesia and Tonga. With 23 Pacific ancestries identified in Australia, this article does not claim to be exhaustive and only gives a small view of what the Pacific art scene in Australia may offer to the study of social interactions amongst the Pacific diaspora living and working in cities.

3 | 'BUT WHERE ARE YOU FROM, FOR REAL?' STATISTICS, POLITICS AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN URBAN AUSTRALIA

Owing to the open border policy between Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, many Pacific people migrate to Australia from or through Aotearoa New Zealand and are thus identified in the Australian census as New Zealanders.¹ The Queensland Health Department's Pacific informants point out that many people tick the category 'other' instead of indicating their country of birth or ancestry on administrative forms (Teaiwa, 2016). For The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in State Care and in the Care of Faith-based Institutions (2021), Seini Taufa, an Aotearoa New

Zealand-born Tongan, detailed the inadequacies in ethnicity recording in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, Pacific migrants ticking the box 'multiple ethnic group' can be 'counted as Māori' (Taufa in Tulou, 2021, p. 168). In the face of this administrative reality, she advocates for a better understanding of history and its linguistic legacy. Her work contributes to the body of scholarship on Pacific Studies, including the work of Samoan scholar Albert Wendt who famously said, in essence, that there is no such thing as a Pacific Islander until one arrives at a New Zealand airport. For Seini Taufu, 'Pacific Islander' can be an insensitive term, a label inherited from a colonial vision that minimises the cultural diversity of the region, erases indigenous names and facilitates racial discrimination. While the term 'Australian South Sea Islanders' specifically defines the descendents of Pacific labourers brought into Australia in the 19th century, who identify as Australian South Sea Islanders, and who are accepted as such by the communities in which they live, I note that some people unfamiliar with Pacific history use 'South Sea Islanders' as a synonym for 'Pacific Islanders'.

Drawing from a comparative observation of diasporic Pacific communities in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, Kirsten McGavin shows how 'panethnic labels of identity are important to diasporic communities in Australia' (McGavin, 2017, p. 125). The author also demonstrates how Pacific collectivism embraces and acknowledges ethnic-specific identifications. It is also important to keep in mind that identity terms can change according to time and location, and may be used or understood differently from one generation to the next. According to Papoutsaki and Strickland (2009), who researched the development of Pacific diasporic media, the pan-ethnicity model is more pronounced amongst second- and third-generation Pacific people.

Self-identification processes are often situational and therefore they must be discussed in regard to context, place and time. As consultation between the Australian Government and the Pacific communities has not yet taken place on the appropriate terms which should be used to refer to Pacific peoples, I reproduce in this article the nouns the artists use to self-identify. When this is not possible I use the expression 'Pacific people' to refer to Pacific persons and the plural, 'Pacific peoples', to highlight the diversity of countries, cultures and social trajectories falling under this umbrella. In other words, 'Pacific people' in this article refers to migrants from the Pacific region who settled in Australia, as well as their descendents, and purposefully excludes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Australian South Sea Islanders. It includes Māori because they share with the rest of Pacific peoples a *whakapapa*² and a common journey in the Pacific Ocean, a position defended by Enari and Haa (2021).

In light of imprecise or inaccurate statistics, detailed ethnographies contribute to a better understanding of Pacific people's trajectories and their sense of attachment to one or several 'homes'. Artworks, exhibition catalogues, artist talks and websites are useful resources to see how people share their identity publicly and the discussions it generates. In Australia I have noticed how the term 'Pasifika' has quickly gained popularity in the art world. Pasifika, as Stevenson (2008) notes, emerged in Auckland in the nineties and was used by young New Zealand-born Pacific people to express a different identity from that of their parents, a mix of island heritage and urban lifestyle. The modification of the spelling and the emphasis on the final vowel are a reappropriation of colonial and derogatory labels, a gesture marking their intention to take back control of their representations. Over the years the term has often been used as a name or a hashtag for many Pacific cultural events,³ even if it is predominantly Polynesian-centric (Mackay, 2018, p. 16). In the contemporary art world, in Australia, in Aotearoa New Zealand and in Europe, the term has circulated largely under the influence of Pacific Sisters, a group of artists engaged in the field of contemporary art, photography, film, theatre, performance and fashion. For example, one of the founding members of the group, Rosanna Raymond, who



is of mixed Samoan, Tuvaluan and Pākehā (person of European descent) descent, used it to explain her work and to name one of her exhibitions, *Pasifika Styles: Artists Inside the Museum*, which she co-curated at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of Cambridge University in 2006. A few other terms have been coined by artists, such as ‘Kamoan’, an expression invented by painter Leleisi Ûao to refer specifically to Pacific Islanders, in particular Samoans, born in Aotearoa New Zealand and to address the challenges and conflicts they face within their own group and with other communities (Higgins, & Leleisi'ua'o, A., 2009). Specific identity terms in the art world also allow artists to position their family and social trajectory in the public sphere and to identify with or distinguish themselves from their peers.

Māori scholar Te Punga Somerville (2012) points out that general terms, such as Oceania, Moana Pasifika or Pacific peoples, are problematic as they do not allow a problematisation of the relationships between indigenous and migrant communities. She is referring to the distinction in Aotearoa New Zealand between Māori as the Indigenous people and Pacific/Pasifika people who have made the country their home. Australia as a settler country shares a similar issue. A recently published article by two scholars of respectively Samoan and Māori descent who were raised in Australia summarises the debates surrounding the use of the term ‘Pasifika’ in Aotearoa New Zealand and in Australia (Enari & Haua, 2021). The authors identify two understandings of Pasifika: one that includes both Māori and Pacific peoples; the other that excludes Māori people because of their status of *tangata whenua* (people of the land). To them, this second interpretation of the term derives from colonial views.

Facing regular questions about their so-called places of origin—‘But where are you from, for real?’—Pacific peoples who have made Australia their home, independently of their birthplace, develop multiple strategies. Some take on a teacherly role to educate the general public, using bilingual terms to help spectators understand concepts that shape their position and relations towards the land(s) and the people(s). On her website, Kirsten Lyttle provides the following information: ‘I am Māori (my tribe or Iwi is Waikato, tribal affiliation is Ngaati Taghina, Tainui A Whiro), and Pākehā, raised in Melbourne’.⁴ The same page also features a statement acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which she lives. Such statements have increasingly been included on artists' websites since the mid-2010s. Kirsten Lyttle thus identifies as an Indigenous person of Aotearoa New Zealand who has migrated and settled on Aboriginal land.

On Pacific artists' websites and in exhibition catalogue essays, references to birthplace are not systematic. Many Pacific artists often highlight their personal experiences and comment on how Pākehā locate them and how they react to this. In the 2000s many artists attempted to deconstruct negative perceptions, to denounce racial discrimination and to provide positive examples for the youth in their communities. For example, during *The Other APT*, an exhibition that took place in Brisbane in reaction to the Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT), Ioanne Efeso Sidney (Fez) Fa'anana did not emphasise that he is a New Zealand-born Samoan raised in Ipswich, a trajectory similar to that of his cousin Lisa Fa'alafi, and also Chantal Fraser. The three mostly commented on the persistence of reductive stereotypes that confine Pacific peoples as a sub-group in Australia. As Chantal Fraser remarked during the private artists' talk: ‘Back at school, I looked like a Palangi and I didn't speak Samoan and people rejected me ... Going back now to school and bringing something, [I am] proud of myself, showing them dignity ... They can look at me as a mentor’.⁵ Whether or not artists mention their birthplace, they often note the way Pākehā look at them and the strategies they have developed to define themselves on their own terms. To better understand why artists felt the need to develop narratives on objectives of empowerment, the following section focuses on how Australian museums have progressively integrated contemporary Pacific arts and visions.

4 | PACIFIC ARTS AND VISIONS IN AUSTRALIAN MUSEUMS

At the end of the 20th century, the number of Pacific art exhibitions increased in Australian museums, art spaces and festivals.⁶ But the art production of Pacific artists living in Australia was largely invisible. While in the 1990s Pacific art was largely understood in terms of tradition (Gardner & Green, 2014) and mostly expressed through the presence of ethnographic objects, the establishment of the APT in 1993 profoundly changed the cultural landscape in Australia, and the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA, now QAGOMA) in Brisbane now hosts one of the world's most significant collections of contemporary Asian and Pacific art. The APT was established to showcase new relationships with the Asia-Pacific region (Turner, 1993). However, the persistence of western frameworks for assessing the artworks generated bias and excluded many cultural forms (Thomas, 1996a). APT1 and APT2 had a selection process and scenography that mostly reflected national identities (Storer, 2014). Responding to these blindspots, the third edition in 1999 dedicated a section to diasporic artists or artists who were engaged in cross-cultural collaborations. In his analysis of the event, Storer (2014, p. 41) explains that the GOMA presented 'people [as] increasingly mobile, interconnected, and living between multiple locations and cultures'. But the relationship that GOMA established with curators in Aotearoa New Zealand led to a larger representation of Polynesian arts and visions at the detriment of other Pacific groups (Hoffie, 2005). The APT was deeply anchored in regional politics and still influenced by Australian representations of the Pacific region.

As the APT was developing, the Australian Museum initiated a highly symbolic re-examination of the national history, in particular the 'transnational realities' (Stanfield, 2018, p. 1) that linked Australia to the Pacific. At that time, museums were often perceived by Pacific people as western places where they did not belong, a place made for Others. With 60,000 objects, making it one of the largest Pacific collections in the world, the Australian Museum decided to establish new relations with the source communities settled in Australia. In 1998, the Djamu Gallery was opened and John Kirkman, who was appointed to the role of director of the gallery, was instrumental in developing collaborations with artists and local communities. However, despite the recruitment of several Pacific employees, a feeling emerged that local Pacific communities had not been offered the possibility to interact in a meaningful way with the institution and its collections. Stronger collaborations with Pacific communities based in Australia were later developed when Lisa Havilah became Director of Campbelltown Arts Centre (2005–2011). In this new space located on the periphery of Sydney, where many Pacific and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live, Havilah appointed two Pacific people to work closely with her, organising several workshops and openings for the local community. Over the years, Pacific communities began to recognise the gallery as a place to meet and gather, during exhibitions and openings, or even a place where they could organise private events. Gradually, on the margins of Sydney, a Pacific presence was becoming visible. Later Kirkman and Havilah took the direction of two other art spaces, the Penrith Regional Gallery and Carriageworks, which were also instrumental in the recognition of contemporary Pacific art.

But despite this progressive recognition, it was still difficult for Pacific artists living in Australia in the 2000s to access funding for art production and to participate in exhibitions. In 2005, a team of scholars from Griffith University, the Queensland College of Art and the University of Queensland curated the exhibition *QPACifika: On the Importance of Being Present*. Their intention was to make the historical and contemporary contributions of Pacific peoples to Australia more visible and to show that 'a deeper understanding of the impact of contemporary Pacific life on our everyday life here in Queensland gradually develops' (Hoffie, 2005, p. 2). Despite these few institution-based initiatives, Pacific artists felt that Australia was late behind Aotearoa New Zealand in acknowledging their local Pacific communities and supporting the diversity and quality of contemporary Pacific arts.⁷ A few



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and curators shared their view. Pacific artists based in Australia also shared their frustration at seeing Pacific arts coming from Aotearoa New Zealand while there were not many opportunities for them to create and exhibit. The two following case studies reveal how a few local artists and curators became actors of significant and long-lasting change in this context.

5 | JENNY FRASER'S 'ALTER-NATIVE EVENT' AND ARTIST INITIATIVES: THE DECONSTRUCTION OF INSTITUTIONALISED BARRIERS AND REINFORCEMENT OF LOCAL BONDS

Established in 1993 by the Queensland Art Gallery, the APT met with a largely positive reception from the public and various artists. The initiative to create such an event dedicated to this vast region was largely acknowledged by artists who mostly appreciated the idea that the museum was working with selected committees from the countries represented. The fifth edition in 2006–2007 took a different turn. At the opening of the new GOMA, its management decided to halve the number of artists and to choose artists with whom it had already worked and from whom it had acquired works. Considering the triennial to be an event produced by a white elite denigrating the work of local artists and denying the authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Jenny Fraser responded by developing her own exhibition (Figure 2).

Jenny Fraser is a well-known Bundjalung Yugambah curator and artist who has been active on the east coast of Australia since the 1990s, mostly promoting Indigenous new media art. The founder of the online gallery cyberTribe (1999), founding member of the Brisbane-based collective proppaNOW (2003) and a freelance curator, she has actively promoted the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as well as Native American and Pacific artists and filmmakers. She was the first Aboriginal curator to organise an Indigenous triennial exhibition in Australia.⁸

The first edition of *The Other APT: An Exhibition of Other Perspectives* was held from 28 November 2006 to 23 January 2007 in Brisbane at RawSpace Gallery. It comprised approximately 30 works—painting, photography, new media, sculpture and performance—made by 23 Australian artists, from Samoan, Māori, Aboriginal, Filipino and Torres Strait Islander origins (Fraser, 2006). The works were exhibited in an art space which includes three window showcases that physically located the works in an urban area.

'I wanted visitors to feel that the Asia-Pacific region is alive right here in Australia, full of colour, engagement, contrast and genius. The Asia-Pacific Triennial seems to be based on the curatorial premise of bringing artists and artwork from around the region to Brisbane whereas *The Other APT* has attempted to say "hey, we already have people here represented and we also have relationships with each other", we have art practices and dialogues already explored and yet to explore also'.⁹

The intention of the curator was to highlight the different Pacific communities living in Australia while emphasising the relationships they have established with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Jenny Fraser first introduced her project to several traditional Aboriginal owners from Brisbane and then approached the elders of the other communities represented. The artist Chantal Fraser, Brisbane-based, but born in Aotearoa New Zealand into a Samoan family, welcomed this cultural protocol: 'We respect this project because it is not only the art circle, she actually went to the community ... It incorporated us.'¹⁰ The curator also organised a pre-opening reserved for the members of the

communities. This project was a response to the constant pressure of the institutions to make biennials economically viable events, encouraging high entry prices, which then exclude locals. Imagining another way of doing cultural events, Fraser organised the opening on the same evening as the APT, offering a place to everyone who could not afford a ticket or who had not been invited to the 'big' event. She made her exhibition less a space of representation of the cultural differences than a place of sociability in the city of Brisbane. The exhibition encouraged the constitution of new networks and reinforced bonds between local communities.

The works she selected gave a good overview of the social realities experienced by Australian Pacific communities. Many of the selected artists such as Charles Street and Prins highlighted a rich family history, with diverse family origins from the Asia-Pacific region. Others, such as Ann Fuata, explored the exoticisation, sexualisation or social pressure for a normalisation of Pacific bodies. Other artists commented on objects stored in museums or used in their daily environment.

Interested in the circulation of everyday objects, Chantal Fraser creates minimal installations, sometimes exploring the meanings of abandoned objects. Her work explores personal memories, in particular the way she grew up in her family home, where there were *ie toga*, finely woven Samoan mats, as well as plastic flower wreaths laid next to photographs of Samoan relatives. *The Assembly* is a reinterpretation of mats (*fala*) based on her memory of how her mum used to keep and layer these mats under her daughter's bed. As a child, Fraser would find fragments of the mat. By playing with fibre remnants, she started another relationship with the *ie toga*, no longer through the object per se or the gift giver, but through its process of disintegration. With a birthplace in Aotearoa New Zealand, an Australian childhood and strong importance given to the *Fa'a samoa* (Samoan worldview) at home, these insignificant, forgotten scraps of material became for Fraser the expression of the distance that separates her from her parents' country of origin and yet also embodies the possibility of (re)connecting with it. With the ambition to re-establish relations with Samoan iconic objects, she invited a group of performers to play with her artworks. Symbolically, the performance took place in one of the large windows of the gallery (Figure 3). Cities are produced on a daily basis by those who live, work, travel and perform in them.

Trained in theatre, dance, costume design and visual arts, Lisa Fa'alafi and Efeso Fa'anana (Fez) are founding members of Polytoxic, a troupe that have developed performances combining Samoan dance movements and burlesque theatre scenes. The term 'poly' in the company's moniker refers to the polyvalent voices they echo and is also a play on the word Polynesian. By performing in the showcase of *The Other APT* and playing with Chantal Fraser's displayed objects, they highlighted the multiple experiences of young Pacific people residing in Australia, for whom Pacific cultures are partly mediated by the experiences of their relatives, popularised by museum collections and coloured by the gaze of non-Pacific peoples. In a later work titled 'Hot Brown Honey', Lisa Fa'alafi once more explored the idea of the layers of costumes frequently cast off in ways that suggest the performers' disavowal of imposed identities. As Chloe Colchester (2003, p. 5) demonstrates, 'ways of using cloth, or ideas about native dress, can serve to thwart direct social engagement by establishing distance between people, or between people and a given object of worship.' With *The Other APT*, Jenny Fraser encouraged a visual inscription of Pacific and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the city, through a process of reappropriation of objects and the inscription of bodies in the streets.

During the *The Other APT*, the curator organised a discussion between the artists. Chantal Fraser revisited her personal experience in Australia and noted the fact that, often, Pacific cultures are reduced to a few images. '[T]here is this general conception of Island culture where all are happy and where everything is colourful and kitsch'.¹¹ She recalled 'a wide range of problems', such as poverty, unemployment, women's abuse and violence. Well-received, *The Other APT I*, like the four subse-



quent ones, was defined as a 'safe place'. As I heard a few artists say, *The Other APT* was not just an opportunity to 'pin exotic images on the wall', but rather a place where discussions could take place and inform strategies towards the empowerment of Indigenous people from the Asia-Pacific region.

In the years following *The Other APT I*, several Pacific artists organised similar events to continue discussing such issues. Some included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, others focused on Pacific communities and others opened them up to all 'creative communities of colour'.¹² This expression was formulated by Fijian-Australian Torika Bolatagici to define her project, the *Community Reading Room*. Like the theatre show *Hot Brown Honey* developed by the South-African born musical director Kim 'Busty Beatz' Bowers and the Australian Samoan Lisa Fa'alafi with the participation of six performers of 'global First Nations heritage', such projects were based on intersectionality. They were presented as inclusive, for those who 'do not fit the boxes or adhere to the tropes that are so limited across the stage, page and screen' and aimed 'to counter and dismantle structural oppression' (Beatz, 2018). In the 2000s to early 2010s, a growing number of Pacific artists in Australia were active in deconstructing negative representations (Bolatagici, 2014). By interrogating and displaying the memory of their forebears in Australian cities, they formulated their own urban identities and made them visible in urban spaces. Pauline Vetuna and Léuli Eshraghi, who described themselves as 'young urban citizens' of Australia with 'native lineages tracing to Samoa, Iran and Papua New Guinea respectively' curated for the 2011 Melbourne Fringe festival an exhibition, *So Fuckin Native* (Vetuna & Eshraghi, 2012), in which the complexity and richness¹³ of personal identity were at the core of the selected works. Not only did the artists establish spaces where members of their community could feel welcome and safe, they also tried to educate people about the persistence of certain beliefs and ways of being. There was an expectation that in performing identity and family history a new constructive relationship would form within Australian cities.

6 | KEREN RUKI'S ARTISTIC AND CURATORIAL TRAJECTORY: GIVING VOICE AND SPACE TO PACIFIC PEOPLES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ART WORLD

My second ethnographic case study focuses on Keren Ruki's trajectory as an artist and museum professional, given her long-term and diverse experiences in the Australian art world. Ruki, who is of Tainui descent (tribal confederation of the Central North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand), arrived in Sydney from Christchurch at the age of nine. Now living and working in Sydney, she has explored her visions of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand through a personal reinterpretation of Māori *taonga* (ancestral treasures) and more modest family objects. The first major exhibition Keren Ruki curated, *Towards the Morning Sun* (2013), was held in Campbelltown. Nine artists interrogated Pacific cultures as mediated through the lens of western perception.¹⁴ Keren Ruki's goals bore witness to the crucial role that exhibitions have in the public space:

It was really about giving voice to our issues and concerns from our perspective in Australia because we have a really big population here and really we do not have a lot of opportunities to have our issues raised and our voices heard; so that's really what the exhibition, for me, was mainly about (Metcalf et al., 2013).

Born in Aotearoa New Zealand to Māori and Pākehā parents and raised in Australia, Keren Ruki started to re-engage with her Indigenous identity and heritage when she started university (Figure 4).

The art world's expectations about creativity, individuality, exoticism and authenticity led her to explore Aboriginal culture as a way to connect with Indigenous Australian cultures. She explained to me in 2007:

When I started studying art, I was in Western Australia and while there I said I was actually sucking on the nipple of Aboriginality for my cultural sustenance. I identified with them so strongly, I was living on their land, but then I recognised they are not me.

Facing her discomfort, Ruki decided to turn to her own culture, firstly by researching and recreating the representations of Māori culture in Australia. For example, she did a modern interpretation of cloaks and *piupiu*, a skirt-like garment made of flax strands, similar to the ones her parents used to keep at home for their own performance shows in Sydney. She replaced the natural fibres with a dowel rod and linen strips on which she ironed images, such as her younger self wearing a traditional Māori skirt at home. Other photographs show her and her son posing in their garden, with the traditional fence so typical of suburban Australian houses (Figure 1). As the flax is not available in cities, Keren Ruki consciously used another accessible material to establish a strong bond with her daily environment. As she started reinterpreting objects kept in her family house, she felt the need to return to her homeland. She first went to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1995 to visit museum collections, attend weaving workshops with internationally recognised Māori weavers, and learn from the elders of her *iwi* (tribe). This was her first 'homecoming', a 'trip to the homeland specifically undertaken by the person, and usually accompanied by a senior family member, to learn more about their heritage and family history' (McGavin, 2017, p. 125). After several trips, Ruki realised she did not want only to reproduce traditional objects and techniques; she wanted to articulate her new skills around her own Australian life experience. The 'homecoming' experience and her own artistic trajectory led her to strongly affirm a sense of belonging amongst not only the Pacific diaspora but Australian society. In



FIGURE 1 Keren Ruki and her son posing in their garden with, respectively, *Maori girl*, 1999 (iron-on transfer, fabric and cane) and *Tumohe's cloak*, 1997 (iron-on transfer, fabric and cane) © K. Ruki. Photo by the author (2006).



FIGURE 2 Flyer designed by Jenny Fraser for the first edition of *the other APT* © J. Fraser.



FIGURE 3 Polytoxic performance, 2006 © J. Fraser.

the context of a stronger presence of Pacific artists and the growing work of Pacific curators, which were both foregrounded at the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival that took place in Melbourne in mid-May 2013, Keren Ruki inaugurated her own show in 2013, a project she had dreamt about for years.

Towards the Morning Sun was organised at the Campbelltown Art Centre. In the 2016 census, there were 12,566 people in Campbelltown, 3.2% of whom declared Aotearoa New Zealand as their country of birth, a percentage that is much higher than in the rest of New South Wales (1.6%). Ruki's



FIGURE 4 Keren Ruki with her *Kahu Kuri*, 2006 (muka/flax fibre and dingo skins), 120×100 cm © K. Ruki. Photo by the author (2006).

project was informed by this regional context and by her broad experience in Australian institutions, her role as technical officer and later as Creative Producer of the Pacific Collections at the Australian Museum. She has always tried to make objects accessible to Pacific people—those from overseas as well as those living in Australia. Her project also built from a previous exhibition that had taken place in the same art space, but was organised by Aaron Seeto, who self-identifies as a Sydney-born curator of Papua New Guinea–Chinese background. His exhibition, *News from Islands* (2007), honoured the Pacific communities of Campbelltown, which include Samoan, Māori, Tongan, Fijian and Niuean people, and Cook Islanders, as they ‘form one of the most significant and diverse diaspora communities of Pacific peoples in Australia’ (Stannard, 2007, p. 6). This exhibition of contemporary art was welcomed by many local Pacific artists. However, some found that it did not take sufficiently into account the local communities’ aspirations and needs. Therefore, *Towards the Morning Sun* brought together artists of Pacific heritage around three major themes: community engagement, Pacific culture and identity, and the environment. Many activities were organised, including Pacific and Indigenous women’s gatherings, printing workshops and T-shirt making, to bring the communities together in and around the museum.

It presented works by emerging and established artists, including the breathtaking performance of Australian-born Tongan artist Latai Taumoepeau on climate change (*i-Land X-isle*, 2012–2013). The artist also performed with one of Keren Ruki’s pieces, a ‘cultural safety vest’ (Figure 5), which pays tribute to the numerous Pacific peoples who are often an invisible labour force; the two artists wanted to make Pacific bodies visible in the city. This performance—which was imagined as gift to the Pacific community offered by both Taumoepeau and Ruki (Figure 6)—complemented Ruki’s installation, *Tūrangawaewae*, which was composed of three contemporary interpretations of pākē and kahu kūrī, different types of Māori cloaks (Figure 7).



FIGURE 5 Keren Ruki, *cultural safety vest*, 2007, plastic tubing, nylon, reflexive tape, 80×60 cm © K. Ruki.



FIGURE 6 Performance by Latai Taumoepeau, Campbelltown, 2013 © K. Ruki. Photo by K. Ruki.

For the *pākē*, a traditional Māori rain cape, Keren Ruki replaced the flax strips (*hukahuka*) with fluorescent plastic tubes to create a fusion between the traditional cloak and reflective safety vests usually worn by road workers. *Tūrangawaewa* (an important and well-known Māori concept) was translated as *A Place to Stand*. Literally it means standing place (*tūranga*) and feet (*waewae*); it is often translated as ‘a place to stand’, or ‘standing strong’.¹⁵ *Tūrangawaewae* are places where Māori feel empowered and connected. ‘They are our foundation, our place in the world, our home’.¹⁶ Keren Ruki mobilised the concept of *tūrangawaewae* to reflect how Pacific peoples in Australia can feel, or receive, an inner sense of security and foundation. In designing a Māori cloak as a safety vest, she honoured where Australian-based Pacific people come from and encouraged them to see them-



FIGURE 7 Keren Ruki, *Tūrangawaewae* installation, 2013. Photo by K. Ruki.

selves as playing an important role within Australian society, a message for all workers and future generations.

In the installation, Ruki exhibited another cloak, a creative interpretation of a *kahu kurī* (dog skin cloak). Creation of *kahu kurī* stopped around the 1870s when the Polynesian dog (*kurī*) introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand became extinct. *Kahu kurī* were amongst the most prestigious cloaks; they possessed great *mana* and often had a personal name. Their history was passed on carefully. Today, the reinterpretation of Māori cloaks is still a practice of great importance in Aotearoa New Zealand and for the Māori diaspora (Smith, 2011). By replacing the New Zealand dog hair with that of an Australian dingo, Keren Ruki reveals the impact of colonisation and its ongoing effects on indigenous peoples, making a connection between her cultural history and that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The cloak was made from elements from the two countries to which she feels a connection. On her family's *marae*, located in rural Aotearoa New Zealand, she collected and prepared *muka*, the inner fibres of Aotearoa New Zealand flax that she planted at the back of their *tupuna whare*, the family meeting house. The choice of this plant has another, very personal meaning for Keren Ruki, who buried her son's afterbirth in that same area. 'Part of my own body actually fed the plants that grew the fibre that I used' (Ruki, in Diamond, 2007, p. 54). She also went to see an Aboriginal elder, Uncle Alan Madden, to introduce her project and ask for his approval (Diamond, 2007). Artists do not only collect objects, they pick up materials to activate the multiple roots and routes that constitute them and their extended family. Like Keren Ruki, many Pacific artists not only explore techniques, patterns and cultural practices, they interpret them within the context of their own contemporary urban lifestyle.

An assistant curator at the National Gallery of Victoria, Sana Balai, who has Papua heritage, recalls how Pacific people often considered museums and galleries in the 1980s and 1990s as a 'place where our cultural material is stored away' (Metcalfe et al., 2013). Such a perception is the result of structural inequalities (colonial legacy) and the fact that most Pacific people live in the margins of the city, quite far away from the historical buildings that host the collections. This is one of the many reasons why Pacific people are invisible to so many Australians. However, with an increasing



population of Pacific students and an evolution of mentalities in cultural institutions, a sense of (re) connection is taking place between institutions, artists and local communities.¹⁷ Moreover, due to the increasing number of museums, art spaces and libraries willing to facilitate physical engagement with objects and access to valuable historical archives, criticisms about museums tend to soften and artists emphasise how some collections play a major role in strengthening cultural experience. By extension, these bonds forming between Pacific people and museums contribute to a stronger Pacific presence in urban Australia. Over the years, I have seen more Pacific people travelling from peripheral neighbourhoods to the hearts of the cities of Sydney and Brisbane; portraits of Pacific people have appeared on public billboards and Pacific peoples have become increasingly involved as curators, festival contributors and tour guides to introduce their culture(s) to visitors. Nevertheless, such a presence and its contribution to Australian society may not be seen by all. With wide press coverage, *Towards the Morning Sun* was on the one hand presented as a great contemporary art show not to be missed and on the other hand as 'a fantastic chance to learn something about the various cultures that surround Australia'. The reviewer who wrote this last comment failed to see that five of the nine featured Pacific artists were Australian-based people—not 'neighbours', 'foreigners', but citizens of Australia (Taborda, 2013).

Until the 1990s, the literature dedicated to the Pacific diaspora in Australia mostly focused on crime and people's anti-social behaviour (Ravulo, 2009). To counter this tendency, many artists have been vocal about how they have successfully overcome prejudice in the hope of inspiring the young generation and members of their community who may not have developed a sense of belonging in Australia. Appreciating 'how much these kids grew when they could identify with their roots through a bit of culture' (Ruki in Diamond, 2007, p. 54), the artists explain, through artworks, performance and public talks, their own trajectory, in the hope of strengthening their communities and making them feel at home.

This article demonstrates that Australia-based Pacific artists, curators and initiatives in the 2000s to early 2010s played a crucial role in promoting Pacific people's artworks, which, from then on, started to feature increasingly in museums and art spaces. The artists of the 2000s recommended the following changes to build a future for Pacific people in Australian society: encouraging museums to recruit Pacific collaborators; organising cultural events from which the communities could benefit, either through payment for their contribution or by providing free access to events; and making sure public funding and exhibitions opportunities are available to local artists.

My ethnographic case studies also show that many Pacific artists, who interpret objects and materials through the lens of Pacific concepts, define themselves in relation to both their country of origin and their country of settlement. By interrogating and displaying the memory of their forebears in Australian cities, by elaborating techniques and using materials that relate to both their rural and urban family places, artists create their own urban identities and make them visible in urban spaces.

This article also addresses two interconnected topics that deserve further study: the invisibilisation of Australia-based and Australian-born Pacific artists and curators in the Australian context and the power of hosting exhibitions on Indigenous land. In the 2000s Pacific artists were often willing to pay homage to and ask for prior authorisation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people before exhibiting or performing on their land. During the years of my fieldwork, some of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and curators with whom I worked commented on how good it was to see the emergence of local representations of Pacific arts, cultures and agency, but they also raised a new issue in relation to power relations: with the multiplication of Pacific exhibitions emerged the idea that Pacific curators should follow cultural protocols better—that they should not only acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and consult the communities, but also include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and curators. Their reasons were, firstly, they were on Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander people's land and, secondly, as some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people consider themselves to be part of the Pacific region, they should not be excluded from Pacific arts exhibitions. Producing an exhibition with exclusively Pacific artists was seen by a few people as a perpetuation of a colonial view of the Pacific region, a perspective similar to that of Jenny Fraser when she objected to the recruitment of a Māori woman for the position of Indigenous Art Coordinator of the Commonwealth Games held on Yugambah land in Queensland (Fraser, 2018). In being committed to the organisation of cultural events, the artists and cultural workers mentioned in this article, and many others, have not only deconstructed negative representations of Pacific peoples, they have reshaped social interactions and power dynamics within the cities and their margins. With this ethnography this article offers an insight into a specific time in the history of Pacific art exhibitions in Australia.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to Prykes's analysis of the Australian census of 2011 (2014), there were 279,248 Pacific people living in Australia, which is less than 1% of the population. In 2016, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) counted 142,107 Māori and 214,635 Pacific Islanders, which could be estimated as 1.5% of Australia's population.
- ² *Whakapapa* is a fundamental notion of Māori culture. The recitation of genealogy (*whakapapa*) asserts one person's association, belonging and spiritual connection to a common ancestor and an ancestral land, sea and/or river.
- ³ To name a few: *QPACifika* in Brisbane in 2005; the *Pasifika Festival* at the Powerhouse in Brisbane, which was one of South-East Queensland's biggest multicultural festivals in the 2000s; and *Pasifika Vibes Festival*, which was founded in Queensland in 2011 to keep celebrating Māori and Pacific cultures.
- ⁴ <http://kirstenlyttle.com.au/artworks/identity-crisis/>
- ⁵ As part of *The Other APT* the curator organised an artists' talk, a special gathering not opened to the public. I was invited to attend and document it (1 November 2006, Brisbane).
- ⁶ See, for example, the performances and symposia that took place in Townsville during the fifth *Festival of Pacific Arts* in 1988 and the exhibition of contemporary art from Papua New Guinea, *Luk Luk Gen! Look Again!* in 1993 (Craig et al., 1999).
- ⁷ For example, the first major exhibition of Polynesian migrant art in Aotearoa New Zealand, *The Dream of Joseph: Practices of Identity in Pacific Art*, was held in 1996 (see Thomas, 1996b). This was almost a decade before Queensland announced a series of events to acknowledge its Pacific communities (*QPACifika*, 2005).
- ⁸ She was subsequently awarded a PhD in the Art of Aboriginal Healing and Decolonisation at the Batchelor Institute and was appointed Adjunct Research Fellow at The Cairns Institute in 2015.



- ⁹ Email conversation with Jenny Fraser, 2008.
- ¹⁰ Artists' talk, *The Other APT*, 1 November 2006, Brisbane.
- ¹¹ Artists' talk, *The Other APT*, 1 November 2006, Brisbane.
- ¹² <http://www.bolatagici.com/biography/>
- ¹³ They describe their rich family heritage as a 'muse of abundance' (Vetuna, 2013, p. 21).
- ¹⁴ *Towards the Morning Sun*, 7 September–21 October 2013, Campbelltown Arts Centre, <https://towardsthemorningsun.wordpress.com/>
- ¹⁵ *E Tū Ake: Standing strong* was the title of a touring exhibition organised by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Smith, 2011), which toured internationally, including at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris (2011–2012).
- ¹⁶ <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land/page-5>
- ¹⁷ See, for example, the symposium of the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival in Melbourne and the proceedings edited by Bolatagici (2013–2014).

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