

Islands Apart - Worlds Away

Review of *The Others / Les autres*

Exhibition:

Center Culturel Tjibaou, Noumea, New Caledonia, October 28, 2008-February 8, 2009

Catalogue:

Les autres/The Others, the touring exhibition of the other APT, edited by Jenny Fraser with contributions from Djon Mundine, and Gary Lee. 2008

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“Geographers say there are two types of islands. This is valuable information for the imagination because it confirms what the imagination already knew. Nor is it the only case where science makes mythology more concrete, and mythology makes science more vivid...

These two kinds of islands, continental and originary, reveal a profound opposition between ocean and land. Continental islands serve as a reminder that the sea is on top of the earth, taking advantage of the slightest sagging in the highest structures: oceanic islands, that the earth is still there, under the sea, gathering its strength to push through the surface” Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953 – 1974*, 2003

The nations grouped as Oceanic encompass over 25,000 islands, ranging from tiny coral outcrops to the massive continent of Australia. This fascinating and diverse region is home to many cultures and much history. The representations of these cultures gives rise to the enormous task of staging regional surveys, such as the Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) and the recent numerous Biennales of the Asia Pacific region. *The Others* began as an Indigenous-initiated critical response to the curatorial project of the Asia Pacific Triennials that have been held in Brisbane since 1993.

To complement and counteract the APT’s nationalistic and sometimes conservative anchoring of identity and geography, and also issue a challenge to curators of the APT, artists have taken matters into their own hands and creatively organised an online exhibition that acts as a forceful counterpoint to the limiting focus of the APT. *The Others* was curated specifically as the touring exhibition of *The Other APT* and as an online artistic meeting place that concentrated on new ways of exhibiting and exploring cultural identity among Indigenous people internationally.

The driving force behind this new exhibition was curator Jenny Fraser, whose own practice is inclusive of digital technologies and explores their possibilities for interrogating the dominant history of post-colonial Australia. *Native All Stars* was presented as an installation featuring the medium of collectable cards featuring portrait photographs of people from the International Aboriginal art world wearing the namesake t-shirt. In a commercial sense such cards are often associated with macho sports identities and a voyeur-like fascination with the statistical “facts” about celebrities’ lives that permeate mainstream media. Popularly they are linked with American baseball cards or geeky tween-age marketing phenomena like Pokemon.

Fraser has subverted these associations by creating her own series of “all stars” from the Indigenous art world and presenting



Detail from *Native All-Stars* installation
Jenny Fraser, photographer

them as real people rather than the mystical/spiritual figures that are sometimes associated with being an Aboriginal artist. This work also wryly acknowledges the “collectability” of Indigenous art and brings to our attention the real people whose work bridges the divide between respectfully referencing their traditional Aboriginal cultural traditions and participating in the modern industry of the contemporary art market.

Artist Paul Bong’s artworks incorporate the cultural heritage of far north Queensland. His practice refers to the Yidinji young warrior’s tradition of being given a blank shield as a part of their initiation ceremonies. After initiation they painted their totems on the surface of the shield. This design would have the significance of a modern day signature. Raw earth tones and solid blocks of color arranged in asymmetrical grid like patterns presented a visual totemic representation of an individual’s personal design that acted as a type of family affiliation or insignia, much the same way as European heraldry is displayed on shields.

Bong’s use of materials can also be read in an ecological context as well as a cultural one. The employment of bark, found wood, and ochres in the production of these artworks would have to be one of the most carbon neutral artistic practices existing in the world today. It is literally using nature to represent culture and the fact that the artworks are created for use as a part of everyday life highlights their importance as an ongoing cultural tradition.

International audiences are often unaware of the subtle differences between French post-colonialism in the Pacific and British post-colonialism in Australia and how this can be explored in relation to the art of the Indigenous people of these regions. *Tableaux vivant* - French for “living picture” - is an apt description for the installation created by Chantal Fraser and Polytoxic. The artists explore Pacific Islander identity through the relationship of actor/object, giving us an understanding of the constraints, contradictions and embedded memory of identity that is a part of the cultural interactions between the Pacific Island nations and Australia. This living picture presented a domestic space in the front window of the gallery that throughout the exhibition was inhabited by the artists as well as invited participants. The location of the artwork in the street front window of the gallery space adds to the notion of identity being performed as part of cultural practice, putting your “self” on show - for the tourists perhaps?

Ann Fuata uses performance to deconstruct the very notion of a Pacific identity by holding it against the prism of the fairy tales that serve as *de facto* mythology for Western cultures. With

hair type being one of the tools used by ethnologists to differentiate between the diversity of Indigenous cultures across the world, Fuata transposes the associations of hairpins into signifiers of her own meanings.

It is through these experiences of a man-made medium that motivated me to reflect on the edifices of post-colonialism, how it has shaped our ideologies and the people that we have become. These experiences we create can be seen as the ephemeral trail of the aftermath of change and inadvertently the beginnings of restoration. (2008, 18)

Documentary and portraiture become interchangeable terms when exploring the context of identity throughout this exhibition. The power of portraiture is the basis for a continuing photographic project undertaken by Gary Lee since 1993. His aim is to explore the idea of masculinity among different cultures. Gary has almost 500 portraits of men in locations from India, Southeast Asia and Australia. The separated continents as we know them today were once all part of Gondwanaland and the genetic connections that exist between Southeast Asia, Australia and the Pacific are indicators of the migrations and populations of thousands of different cultures that have largely been undocumented outside of academic circles. “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people look like so many other nationalities, yet this diversity is not yet widely understood let alone celebrated. I hope to do just that in the ‘Nimgololo’ series.” (2008, 28).

Lee creates his portraits in collaboration with his subjects. While some are portraits of personal friends and acquaintances, the majority involve a negotiation and a dialogue with his subjects, engaging them in the purpose of the project. This becomes an example of Indigenous consultation in practice and as an artistic project.

A regular concern among many Indigenous peoples across the globe is the process of the passing on of culture to the next generations. Also found troubling is the lack of respect by some young people regarding the importance of cultural protocol in community leadership participation. This concern becomes relevant to the visual arts where an artist or curator might be presumed to be speaking on behalf of their community, yet in a way in which that that community would not agree.

In *The Others*, Haro the Crazy Prins presents a traditional Maori wood carving technique in a contemporary context by creating three-dimensional artworks that resemble the stylistic

methods of aerosol art often seen in urban centres. The designs are more prevalent in tattoo designs, graffiti and jewellery that are distinctly Maori in style and marketed to international audiences through the promotion of New Zealand as a cultural destination. Younger generations of Indigenous people in the 21st century are defining the look of what it is to be Indigenous through their translation of cultural practices into modern forms. As shown in the work of Haro the Crazy Prins, knowledge of this inter-generational divide is a part of understanding the artwork.

I know I'm taking it out of context when I apply that to my art. I think that Maori people would understand that more than non-Maori. I am carving a language, a language understood by the youth but alien to older people unless they are the parents of graffiti artists.
(*Haro the Crazy Prins* 2008, 14)

It is a quandary for many Indigenous artists. How does one show respect for the protocols of cultural relationships while challenging dogma and bureaucratic practices that prevent honest, critical reaction to the representation of Indigenous people in mainstream art exhibitions? It is only through dialogue and

speaking up about injustice that consensus can be reached between diametrically opposed forces. All of the artists participating in *The Others* take on this challenge through their awareness of history and local knowledge. Thus, they express their identity in ways that are respectful yet powerful in their questioning of the status quo.



Chantal Fraser and her installation, *The Assembly*
Jenny Fraser, photographer