hand in hand: sexy and dangerous

DANIEL BROWNING

and in hand was a multi-artform, cross-cultural exhibition held in conjunction with the 2008 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras over two spaces, Boomalli in the inner western suburb of Leichhardt and Performance Space at Carriageworks in the former rail workshops at Eveleigh. The exhibiting artists were Jeffrey Samuels, Tracey Moffatt, Arone Raymond Meeks, r e a, Clinton Nain, Gary Lee, Jenny Fraser (curator), Dianne Jones, Adrian Wills, Sionelagi Falemaka, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, Moana Nepia, Claudine Sartain, Darrell Sibosado, Niwhai Tupaea, Salote Tawale and Shigeyuki Kihara (curator). The artists are all indigenous to the Pacific.

Progressively over the past few years, I have watched Indigenous art and culture slip incrementally from the agenda of the Mardi Gras cultural festival. In the festival program, we and our artists are a mere blip. Over the past few years Boomalli has done the work of Mardi Gras, agreeing to fund and host an exhibition of Indigenous gay and lesbian artists.

At the outset, I’d like to make the point that to be gay, lesbian or transgender is to challenge the dominant society. We live under threat. It’s delusion to think otherwise. In the crucible of the schoolyard, kids don’t want to be gay. For many of us, homophobic abuse or the debilitating fear of it is unfortunately a part of life. Poofter-bashing is as common as it ever was. (In itself, homophobic violence is sometimes homosocial; committed in groups, it is a perverse way to bond with other men). In December 2007, two men were brutally attacked near Sydney’s Oxford Street by a gang of four homophobic thugs who stole their credit cards and mobile phones. Several of the attackers were described as being Aboriginal, or at least, as being ‘of Aboriginal appearance’. Like it really matters. Needless to say it provoked a rather unhealthy debate in the gay media and was the unfortunate background to this exhibition.

It’s a mistake to think because we are indigenous, we enjoy some kind of commonality. Australia, the mythic great South Land of the European imagination, was mapped and colonised by the British at the same time as many of the Pacific islands. But to think that because of this we share a common history is simply not true – we negotiate our historical and contemporary experience of colonialism in radically different ways. The Aboriginal experience here was different from that of other indigenous people in the Pacific. Cook’s landing at Kurnell in 1770 and the tall ships that followed him in 1788 brought a slow and agonising wave of
cultural death – what the French ethnographer Pierre Clastres termed ethnocide. Unlike genocide which attempts to obliterate the other, ethnocide ‘admits the relativity of evil in difference: others are evil, but we can improve them by making them transform themselves until they are identical, preferably, to the model we propose and impose.\footnote{1}

Exhibitions such as hand in hand explode a great cultural silence. Some from within our own indigenous communities might hope that gay, lesbian and transgender artists keep quiet and noiselessly produce art that is cold and straight-acting. The gay saint-philosopher Michel Foucault once talked about how we are ‘dominated by the deep truth of the reality of our sex life’.\footnote{2} According to this way of thinking, sexuality and gender identity are at the core of the self, fixed points around which everything else constellates. But it’s just not so for many indigenous people across the Pacific. Often we live a communal way of life, where extended family groups live in the same community and sometimes in the same house. In this environment, the needs of the individual are secondary. And to stand on sexual difference as a marker of individuality is generally frowned upon; we are all family, and family is family. But sexuality and gender ought not to be confused. In some Pacific cultures, a third, intersex gender fills the liminal space between male and female. For example, the fa’afafine in Samoa and the laelae in the Cook Islands.

That said, whatever the identity politics, the work has to stand and be judged on its aesthetic merits. Fraser and Kihara, the curatorium, attempted something that would have flipped the wigs of many other curators. The exhibition could have been a bewildering melange: to be brutally honest, the first phase of the exhibition that I saw at Boomalli didn’t entirely gel. I sensed a discontinuity, an interrupted and spasmodic flow between the works. If you’d never been to Boomalli you might have missed the video work, which was screened in a recently converted, darkened room off the main exhibition space. That’s a shame for the artists whose work was installed there but more a practical issue for the venue (which does a fine job with little or no money) than a criticism of the curatorium. As a spectator I felt that there was no beginning; that if the works represented a narrative – a story that’s only now being told, of the way indigenous gay, lesbian, bisexual, same-sex attracted and transgender artists across the Pacific region see and express their own representation – then the spectator might leave without any notion of what that might actually be. What I did leave with was a sense of the differences between us, rather than the commonalities – not a bad thing at all.

The exhibition was supposed to challenge dominant ideas about sexuality but I recall thinking that some of the work was either in denial or too esoteric. In retrospect that was unfair. Jenny Fraser’s conversation with co-curator Shigeyuki Kihara published in the slickly produced exhibition catalogue is enlightening. Kihara asks why it is that many of the artists included in the exhibition don’t

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make a direct statement about their queer status, and Fraser contends with, ‘that’s usually the way we roll here’ [Australia]. Fraser also articulates the key difference in the way the artists produce work around their indigeneity in this exhibition – the question of sovereignty. Many of the islands in the Pacific were sovereign, politically independent states ‘before Cook’. Generally, power was centralised in the hands of a few high-ranking chiefs and to a degree mirrored the political and social structures of Georgian England. In contradistinction, Australia was populated by many sovereign nations with their own languages and ways of life. As such there could be no unified and singular response to the British invasion which in itself was drawn out over more than a hundred years. And precisely because of the great land mass of the continent, there was no singular moment or point of contact. No year zero. This shared but radically different history of colonisation is apparent in the work in hand in hand.

Darrell Sibosado’s expansive, geometric wall painting and incised mother-of-pearl objects drew me in. They were truly enigmatic. The monochrome forms are inspired by the traditional motifs of the Bard people of north-western Western Australia but have a life of their own; enlarged, they swirl and pulse. The pearlshell works might have been produced in the Pacific. An exciting but underrated photo-media artist, Dianne Jones has produced work that superimposes an Aboriginal subjectivity, a missing presence, on the masterpieces of Australian settler-colonial art such as Tom Roberts’s iconic Shearing of the Rams (1888-90). When Roberts imagined the Australian landscape he didn’t see the Aboriginal presence. In this exhibition, Jones’s work zooms in on herself as subject; photographed in skirt and heels she becomes a stereotype upon which popular ideas about Aboriginality and female sexuality might be inscribed. In her new series, Blaklash, Jones again inverts racist stereotypes by re-presenting them, throwing them back in the face of the dominant white Australian culture. Jones has said that ‘everything I am caricaturing is everything but what I am’.

Dan Talaupapa McMullin’s paintings suggest to me the work of the portraitist Julie Dowling. I’m thinking here of O le Lo e matua ma pua a, in which a revered grandmother floats in colonial dress against a modern backdrop; a jetliner in the distance and a bristly wild pig in the foreground, perhaps standing in for the economic forces which drive globalisation and the Samoan diaspora. McMullin lives in the United States, which in the Samoan context is one of the colonial powers. Both his parents were born in American Samoa but his paternal grandfather – from whom he inherits the surname – was Jewish and from Dublin. There is a deep nostalgia in these images, just like in Dowling’s. McMullin also produced a short video, Sinalela (2002), about the imaginary life of a fa’afafine in Samoa, which won the best short film category at the Honolulu Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in the same year. He says rather beautifully: ‘These are my seabird tales from a wandering Samoan. If I paint my images with a feather, with the wing of a moth and the

printmaker and latterly children’s book illustrator, his work
artists cooperative in the late 1980s. Born in 1957, his clan
along with (in this exhibition) Jeffrey Samuels and Tracey
Along with... (2004). This black-and-white series
convincingly mimics the staged, ethnographic photography
of the latter half of the 19th century which supplied mass-
produced postcards for Western consumption. In it, Kihara
retrofits herself as a Samoan maiden. Born in Samoa to a
Japanese father and Samoan mother, Kihara was early in life
identified as fa'afafine, biologically male but assuming a
female identity. Kihara herself defines fa'afafine as those who
are ‘gifted in the “mana” or spiritual energy of both man and
woman’. But even in Samoa the term is now more or less
used interchangeably with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender
and intersexed – to describe anyone who is not heterosexual.
I don’t know why but I was glad to see Gary Lee’s
overly sexual photographs, Chotto (diptych 1) (2007)
alongside the less literal work in this exhibition. The images
of a prostrate Hindu man masturbating in a squalid and
uncontrived hotel room are completely without pretence.
You can sense that Lee identifies strongly with the men he
photographs; an Aboriginal man with Filipino, Chinese and
Japanese heritage, photographing Indian men. I have heard
Lee speak about the feeling of disappearing in India and
Nepal, of his cultural identity being so porous that it doesn’t
really matter. I feel no unease with Lee’s male nudes but I
know that some people do. Overt male sexuality – a taboo in
modern Western iconography precisely because so much of
it was produced by heterosexual men – is bared in these
photographs. In Western discourse, the black man’s
sexuality is to be feared, envied or desired. But Lee’s images
ask us to observe male sexuality in a neutral or detached
way – and that’s their power. Ultimately, I am touched by
the humanity of Lee’s subjects.
As far I can determine, sexuality does not form the
singular basis for the work of any of the artists in this
exhibition. It’s an aspect of the self that ought not to be denied
but nor should it be overstated. It’s there, but it’s not the be
all and end all. To imagine that gay artists should only
produce art that is identifiably, obviously gay is unfair. It
presumes that sexuality predominates. On the contrary, I
wouldn’t be surprised if many of the artists in this exhibition
consider their indigeneity to be the key to understanding their

KLAUS RINKE recent drawings
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Photo: Klaus Rinke by Anne-Marie Sansody
aesthetic practice, rather than their sexual ‘difference’. Our cultural background, our indigeneity, truly makes us what we are, at our core, in ways that our ‘sex life’ simply cannot.

Notes
3. Ice is the street name for methamphetamine, which is often used as a sexual stimulant.
4. The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction on the Sale of Opium Act, 1897.

hand in hand was curated by Jenny Fraser and Shigeyuki Kihara, and featured artists from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Maori, Samoan, Niuene and Fijian nations. The exhibition was shown at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-Op, Sydney, 8 February to 4 March, and at Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney, 16 February to 16 March.

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