

Parallel Journeys

Exhibition. Lauraine Diggins Fine Art. 2002.

RE-FRAMING PATRIARCHY, PANDANUS and the POSTCOLONIAL

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Washed-up on Mike Green's pristine, intentionally clichéd, tropical island shores are reminiscences that relate to both sides of the Colonial/Postcolonial debate. Images are threaded by recondite, part-remembered, part-imagined strands that connect both to an Anglo heroic and to an indigenous Pacific past. These are known firstly genetically, passed-down from Green's great-grandfather who was appointed the first British Vice-Consul of Tonga in 1862, and his grandmother, the Tongan wife of the Vice-Consul's son.

In genealogical study Green discovered heroic tales of struggle at sea on the part of his great-uncles. These journeys involved extraordinary bravery, when all was set at risk in the interests of the doing, of the conquering, of surviving every possible hardship, of the being there. Green argues that though this is an attitude now regarded absurd it is to some degree worthy of greater respect than the meagre dreams and realities that characterise comfortable Anglo middle-class.

Green thus challenges the style of the discourse, which he suggests, does not serve understanding as well as it promises. With its universality, inflexibility and easy good/bad intonations, he suggests it too is flawed, just as the outdated cultural platitudes that signify the Pacific are: the footprints in the sand, the tranquil tropical-island waters, the civilising missionary zeal, the simple-minded native - all long consigned to the humorous waste-paper basket of Empire. Green's

'Boy's Own' illustrations are represented ironically by finely painted figurative watercolours, fifty of which are hung together in a monumental assemblage, while other more detailed works are shown individually.

Green's painted genealogical journey was

experienced for the most part imaginatively as he read old family letters transcribed into type by antecedents. These fragmentary incidents and fleeting emotions, that can only be grasped at, are denoted visually by selected phrases that are pasted randomly onto an armature surrounding the watercolour assemblage. Significant events from generations are evocatively highlighted by the use of such phrases as, [in Tongan] 'fakamo' omi no fonua ni oku ai fakataha moe tohi ni'; and [in translation] 'for himself, his heirs, and his successors, all that parcel of land - (lease) comprised in and demised...'

Along with the 19th century adventurer go sexual transgressions that the successor must accommodate with his own sense of self. In order to explain these behaviours he places them in their own time when such mores were considered 'natural' and in keeping with the explorer persona. Shredded paper is stained and interlaced like chromosomal chains that agglomerate and wash through the bloodstream. Green found himself weaving and plaiting, only later recognising this activity as a contemporary version of indigenous pandanus work.

Contemporary interpolations and materials are used to refer to the dark skeletons that are plaited into his psyche and into his art in such a way as to mimic the sombre tones of spiralling tapa decorations, traditionally made on the inner bark of the mulberry bush'. Similarly, elements of the past are textured into his narrative, as in traditional Tongan ceremonial pandanus mats.

Green uses a skeletal hand as a symbolic refrain on the genetic DNA that relates him to his ancestors. At the same time it reaches back into history signifying

claims upon land. Here, situated on the explorer's isolated beach, it also reaches out for explanation. Surrounding this reconstructed history, the aged armature, sometimes consisting of frames within frames, bears the marks of experience and time, and serves to re-frame the family narrative.

Photographic images are revived by being sculpted in balsa wood, the material chosen because it is the stuff of boats which are so crucial to indigenous Pacific people, and to the artist's story of discovery. These models are then wrapped in tissue after the

Tongan custom of swathing corpses in tapa². Green then coats these figures with paint. Some of his models are contracted back to the two-dimensional form after being given a fleeting three-dimensional existence but still appear as models in his paintings. In these incarnations they are scarcely recognisable as family members, appearing only vaguely human in order to emphasise the alien nature of the interaction between the two cultures.

Which bits are me? Green inevitably asks, as flecks of white and fragments of brown rise to the present. These parts of cells that cannot be isolated or defined in racial terms, inchoate memories that are neither pure nor complete, are expressed in a part abstract, part figurative fashion. Through this methodology Green attempts to blur the standard presentation of the colonial/post-colonial and black/white discourses in precise oppositional ways.³ A binary approach is particularly unhelpful in the Tongan case given the existence of many white groups in its genealogy. The Dutch explorers Jacob Le Maire and Abel Tasman arrived there in 1616 and 1643 respectively, Captain Cook arrived in 1774, it became a British protectorate in 1900 and yet it retained its own monarchy. Each white group had its own motivation: 'The traders were seeking profit, the settlers were seeking land, the missionaries were seeking converts'³. Confounding a black stereotype was civil war in the Friendly Islands⁶.

In a postcolonial era in which regret and sorrow for old crimes is at the forefront of consideration, Green suggests understanding might be granted the perpetrators. His position is not to excuse past injustice but to encapsulate historical perspectives. As he puts it, 'My aim is to lift the discussion beyond blame so as to halt the tendency towards hegemony in any form'⁷.

In 2001 Green 'discovered' Tonga for himself and located the grave of his great-grand father. To the dreamlike and imaginative qualities already extant in his work were added interpretations of direct observation. He found his attempts to comprehend his past were themselves romantically coloured. He found a place even further removed from the tourist-styled image than he had imagined. His brown/white plaiting was reworked to include the brightly coloured gaudy and plastic decoration preferred by today's Tongan artists. There were other surprises. He noticed the silk flowers often used by Tongans for decoration

were originally made in Asia; he saw that for many Tongans an important cultural icon is that of the Mormon Church.

Green marked a space for himself in the ocean, placing flags around the spot that he would claim as his own, knowing that this place could never actually be contained, just as the past can never be perfectly retrieved.

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ENDNOTES

' My thanks to Dr. Helen Morton, lecturer, La Trobe University for information on Tongan craft.

2 Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, p.136

3 Homi Bhabha in 'The Babelian performance' attempts to move beyond binary opposites in his analyses of colonial relations. 'Whereas Said concentrates almost entirely on the colonizer, and later Fanon almost entirely on the colonized, Bhabha seeks to emphasize the mutualities and negotiations across the colonial divide.' *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, Verso, London,?. 115 & 116

4 Edwin Serdon, *Early Tonga as the Explorers saw it*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1987 p. 13

' Mark Dalby, *The Cocker Connection*, Regency Press, London, 1989, p. 51

6 *Ibid*, The Friendly Island was the name given to one of the Tongan island by Captain Cook, after which the name came to be applied to the whole group of islands.

7 Mike Green Interview 21 July 2002