

hand in hand: sexy and dangerous

DANIEL BROWNING



Shigeyuki Kihara performs *Taulaluga: the last dance* at the Boomalli opening of *hand in hand*, with Darrell Sibosado's mural, *Untitled*, 2008 in the background. Image courtesy Jenny Fraser.

hand 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, re 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. Poofster-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.’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’.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

TOP LEFT: Clinton Nain, *Big City Time*, 2001, bleach on paper. © Clinton Nain, image courtesy Nellie Castan Gallery. CENTRE: Darrell Sibosado, *Untitled*, 2008, ochre on pearlshell. Courtesy the artist. LEFT: Moana Nepia, *Ka mau te wehi*, 2007, still image from documentary DVD projections, double screen, installation view Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney. Courtesy the artist and Mary Newton Gallery, Wellington.



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

TOP LEFT: Top: *Niwhai Tupaea, Papatuanuku; mother earth*, 2006, coconut, metal, waxed strings, photography and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist. LEFT: Sionelagi Falemaka, *Mataninifale; eyes of the house* (detail from series), 2007, woven textiles, feathers, beads, buttons and mixed media. Courtesy the artist. Photograph by Emily Valentine Bullock.

breath of a story, the shadows and reflections in my work will weave a garland made of the stories of us.'

Even though he now lives in north Queensland, Arone Raymond Meeks continues to exhibit at Boomalli. Along with (in this exhibition) Jeffrey Samuels and Tracey Moffatt, Meeks is one of those who set up the Aboriginal artists cooperative in the late 1980s. Born in 1957, his clan is Kukumidiji from far north Queensland. A trained printmaker and latterly children's book illustrator, his work is populated by elongated, mythic beings (quinkans) who sometimes assume a stylised human form, as with *black narcissus* (2007). Narcissus has of course always been something of a gay icon, a bit like St Sebastian. A Niuean counterpart to the Narcissus myth might be found in the work of Sionelagi Falemaka who produced some of the most nuanced work in the exhibition. The works included are not jewellery in the Western sense but adornment, like that historically worn by persons of high rank in Niue and other parts of the Pacific. The adornments honour a sacred deity known as Mataninifale, whose story tells of her contact with an anthropomorphic whale sent by the supreme god Atua to warn her and her people of impending danger. Incredulous, the young maiden began teasing the whale and as a consequence it swallowed her. In a photographic diptych, New Zealand artist Niwhai Tupaea transforms herself into the sacred female Maori deities who stand for life and death in the Maori belief system. Papatuanuku (mother earth) and Hinenuitepo (goddess of death) are also universal aspects of the self, the benign and the malevolent.

Clinton Nain has often used bleach in his work as a literal and visual metaphor for what is benignly termed the colonisation process but which produces the same effect as ethnocide, a whitening. Interestingly, Fraser says that in Nain's work the spectator is left to decide whether whitening actually cleanses or stains. In *Big City Time* (2001), Nain drips the lurid white bleach onto black paper, producing if nothing else some startling visual effects. If you fix your gaze, the bleach morphs into seminal fluid – or am I seeing things?

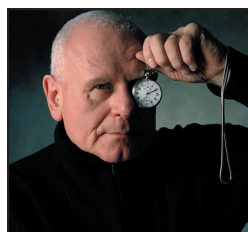
The expatriate Tracey Moffatt might at first glance seem rather a bad fit for this group of artists; her widely published images seem almost too slick and urbane. *Laudanum* (1998) is almost part of another aesthetic paradigm. Like storyboards from an unmade film, Moffatt's photogravure prints are keyholes into a parallel universe. Their backdrop is a decaying colonial mansion that might be set on the edge of a balmy tropical frontier at the turn of the 19th century, a time when opium was either drunk as a tincture in the liquid form of laudanum or smoked illicitly in 'dens'. As a departure from the norms that controlled social and sexual behaviour, we might presume that the consumption of opium inspired aberrant sex with the homosexual other. In such a libertine haze, anything is possible. Opium was the 'ice'²³ of its day. When Queensland's

colonial government introduced legislation to control its Aboriginal population in 1897, confining them for life to missions and reserves, it also enforced restrictions on the sale of opium.⁴

Unintentionally, Moffatt's erotic *tableaux* spoke to Shigeyuki Kihara's performance, *Tauuluga: the last dance*, during which Kihara wore a black silk Victorian mourning gown like those introduced to Samoa in the 19th century. A bit of postcolonial drag perhaps. Kihara performed the work in July 2007 at the Musee du Quai Branly in Paris. The *tauuluga* is often performed by unmarried chiefly women in Samoa. Kihara, who defines herself as transgender, has also produced a photographic body of work, *Fa'afafine – in the manner of a woman* (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 overtly sexual photographs, *Chottu (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 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



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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

1. Pierre Clastres, *The Archaeology of Violence* (1980), translated by Jeanine Heriman, Semiotext(e), New York, 1994, p. 45
2. Michel Foucault, 'An Ethics of Pleasure', in *Foucault Live* (Interviews 1964-84), Semiotext(e), New York, 1989, pp. 371-81.
3. Ice is the street name for methylamphetamine, 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, Niuean 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.

Daniel Browning is an Aboriginal journalist and radio broadcaster. He produces and presents *Awaye!*, the Indigenous art and culture program on ABC Radio National.



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Gloria Fletcher Thanakupi, *Fishermen* 2007



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Bryony Anderson, *Sick People* in Hamburg, 2004, ink and pencil.

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