Knowles, Chantal
Review of: Pasifika styles: artists inside the museum

Journal of Museum Ethnography
pp. 204-206, 24 (2011). 0954-7169

http://repository.nms.ac.uk/1159

Deposited on: 20 March 2014

This thought-provoking book comprises a catalogue of and reflections on the groundbreaking *Pasifika Styles* exhibition held at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge from 5 May 2006 to 23 February 2008. The exhibition brought together the work of thirty-six New Zealand based Pacific artists. Their work was interspersed amongst the ethnographic displays in the lower gallery of the museum and as an installation-
cum–exhibition in the Andrews gallery upstairs. The complexities involved in bringing together the works of so many artists, enabling them to access the museum’s historic Pacific collections, and of fund-raising for and facilitating such a show, are addressed here through a series of essays by artists, curators, project and museum staff, and others involved in the project. At the time of its run, the exhibition (reviewed in these pages by Elizabeth Cory-Pearce; see JME, no. 19 (2007), pp. 160–65) stimulated a good deal of discussion amongst museum curators, academics, and art practitioners. The accompanying book begins to document, address, and discuss the issues that the exhibition provoked.

The book comprises contributions from seven of the participating artists and an equal number of contributions from project and museum staff involved in the exhibition. The co-curators Amiria Salmond and Rosanna Raymond provide an introduction that explains the context and clarifies the themes, aims, and remit of the project before detailing the timeline from the genesis of the idea of the exhibition through to the practicalities of bringing it about. The remaining essays are book-ended by two reviews, the first an essay by Deirdre Brown that reviews the exhibition, reflecting on the works, the setting, and the relationship to the Te Aotearoa / New Zealand context. The final chapter also provides a review or overview, comprising as it does a visual essay of photographs taken and compiled by Kerry Brown over the course of the exhibition’s run. This draws the reader back to the starting point, the artworks, and provides a visual summary, documenting the impact of the art in the museum and providing a useful prelude to the catalogue section—listing the artists and their works—that follows.

The artists’ contributions are of two types: those that are personal reflections on their particular contributions to the exhibition, their inspirations, and intentions; and those that reflect on the production of the exhibition as a whole. The press release for the book proposes that it will become ‘a working reference for anyone involved in major exhibitions, particularly those aimed at linking museum collections with contemporary art and artists’. It delivers on this claim by giving access to the voices and reflections of many of the participants and by giving the reader a glimpse of the multifarious experiences of the participants that reflect their practices and points of view. We are taken through the practical work of creating the exhibition, the obstacles that arose and how they were overcome, and there is a refreshing honesty about the emotional highs and lows and how these affected the organizers and participants. There is a moment, however, at which the presentation of these personal reflections feels like a prelude to a further discussion of the methodological approach and how it may be applied in other museums. In particular, the use of museum objects in a performative context reported on here challenges conventional ideas and received practice with regard to the role of curators and conservators in ‘caring for objects’. Although a number of other
museums have provided this type of access, greater discussion of the practical problems involved, the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the approach, and the potential repercussions when others want similar levels of access would have been valuable.

The essays by Anita Herle, Mark Elliot, and Sarah-Jane Harkentt provide tantalizing glimpses of potential areas of conflict, but never quite move beyond personal reflections on the decision-making process. As a museum professional I keenly felt the absence of an essay by a conservator or one putting the curatorial work into a wider frame. Using or playing with the objects is described a number of times as ‘awakening’ them, and this clearly felt right for the participants—and it feels right to me. However, surely there were behind-the-scenes discussions about this approach, and if not why not? A summary of such discussions would have been revealing for both the reader, but also for the artists, many of whom have gone on to work with other museums. There is no doubt that the divide between the ‘untouchable’ museum object and the sort of contact that people—whether artists or visitors—can have with artefacts is changing. The complexities of the challenges we face as museum professionals mean we interpret and draw on wider options; thus a discussion of different opportunities with differing outcomes and emerging methodologies would have helped.

I also wanted to know more about how visitors experienced the exhibition. In their introduction Raymond and Salmond do cite two comments from visitor surveys, but further discussion or examination of the visitor surveys, what questions were asked, and the results would have been very helpful. For example, I was interested to know the project’s aims vis-à-vis its visitors and whether these were achieved.

*Pasifika Styles* provides a very positive way-marker in the wider debate about artists and museums. It would be interesting if the impact of the exhibition and the present publication—with its important reflections by many of the participants—were to be reviewed again in a few years’ time, perhaps in relation to the other Pacific exhibitions that took place in 2006, including *Pacific Encounters* at the Sainsbury Centre (similar reflections concerning which were recently published in this Journal; see *JME*, no. 21 (2009)). What has happened to the artists who contributed? What has happened in the museums/galleries as a result? Can we chart the influence of the curatorial practices or of the artists involved in subsequent years? I look forward to a moment in the not-too-distant future when these questions and the longer-term legacies of the exhibitions can be debated again.

CHANTAL KNOWLES

*National Museums Scotland*