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in a room, in a house, on an island, in an ocean



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RADICAL INCLUSION: ON *PACIFIC ARTS AOTEAROA*

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ABSTRACT: *Pacific Arts Aotearoa* (Penguin), edited by author, curator and academic Lana Lopesi (University of Oregon), was published in November 2023. The book is crammed with profiles of many Pacific artists, collectives and movements across the contemporary arts scene in Aotearoa New Zealand and gives voice to the artists themselves, with more than 95 artists documenting their own experience. This piece is a long-distance talanoa (conversation) between Lopesi and Andrea Low, a curator at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. They discuss the genesis of the book and why it is important not only to record the breadth and depth of Pacific contributions to the cultural landscape of Aotearoa but also to contextualise those contributions in unexpected ways.

Keywords: Indigenous arts, Pacific artists, Pacific arts, talanoa, contemporary Pacific art

Pacific Arts Aotearoa (Penguin, 2023), edited by Lana Lopesi, is an anthology of contemporary Pacific art and artists that contextualises the diversity and range of Pacific artistic engagement in Aotearoa New Zealand. While significant in number, Pacific artists have not been equitably represented in the New Zealand art historical canon, a reflection of the marginalisation of Pacific peoples across many dimensions of life in Aotearoa New Zealand (Salesa 2017) and of their absence from the creative industries' permanent teaching staff (Naepi 2019) and underrepresentation in institutional exhibitions and collections. This book is pivotal and recalls an earlier publication that mapped the influence of Pacific artists: *Speaking in Colour: Conversations with Artists of Pacific Island Heritage* (Te Papa Press, 1997), in which ten artists spoke to Sean Mallon and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira about their lives and work. All ten artists represented in the earlier book are present in *Pacific Arts Aotearoa*, some posthumously. Lending urgency to the concern expressed by Lopesi and Ioana Gordon Smith in 2019, and quoted in *Pacific Arts Aotearoa*, that "our stories, our histories, might disappear before we have even assessed their

significance” (p. 13), Mallon and Pereira followed their first effort with *Pacific Art Niu Sila* (Te Papa Press, 2002), a book that made a deep impression on Lana Lopesi as a high school art student and which she credits as a personal driver in the conceptualisation and realisation of *Pacific Arts Aotearoa*.

Leone Samu Tui’s graphic chart “9 Reasons Why Pacific Research Is Important” (Leenen-Young and Uperesa 2023: 11) is as relevant in an art context as it is in an academic one. Intentions to reclaim space, reaffirm worldviews, recognise roots/routes and, perhaps most importantly, replenish capacity are foundational structures for artists looking to see their creative practice reflected in society. *Pacific Arts Aotearoa* reveals the work, experience and range of Pacific creative endeavours, allowing for emerging artists, curators, writers and dancers to build on the groundbreaking work of not only those that went before but those that are still here.

I (Andrea Low) had contributed a chapter to *Pacific Arts Aotearoa* on adornments by Pacific jewellers and artists held in the Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum collection but had mostly dealt with Lana’s assistant editor, Faith Wilson. I had not spoken directly with Lana about the book prior to the talanoa (conversation) presented below. We have worked more closely together in my role as a member of the advisory board of *Marinade*, an arts journal started by Lana and curator Ioana Gordon-Smith, and I was familiar with writing by Lana, in particular her impressive thesis, “Moana Cosmopolitan Imaginaries” (Lopesi 2021b), and two important books, *False Divides* (2018) and *Bloody Woman* (2021a). Her curatorial work on the exhibition *The Commute*¹ with four other curators at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2018 is still creating waves and changing the conversation on the mobility and locatedness of Indigeneity today. The talanoa took place over a number of weeks as we fitted our responses in around our day jobs, Lana as a writer and academic in the Race and Ethnic Studies department at the University of Oregon and mine as Associate Curator Contemporary World at Tāmaki Paenga Hira.

Andrea Low:

First, congratulations on the production of *Pacific Arts Aotearoa*! How did the idea for this book come about, and was it always imagined as something so big and comprehensive?

Lana Lopesi:

The project started as a digital project called the Pacific Arts Legacy Project, which was the brainchild of Makerita Urale from Creative New Zealand.² In the first Covid-19 lockdown, concerned with artists being out of work and conscious of the Pacific art community’s calls for more written art history,

she saw the opportunity to commission artists to write their stories and pay them to do that. So, it started as a project of 10 commissions, which grew to 20, then to 40 with the help of Lagi-Maama,³ who commissioned stories by our elder mama and papa artists, and it was published online with *The Pantograph Punch*.⁴

I think we always had visions of it being a book, or at least we'd sort of joke "this could be a book", but it wasn't the initial intent, as we were focused on the digital version in the context of a pandemic. But as soon as the online project launched, Claire Murdoch from Penguin Random House reached out and saw the potential of the project, and that's how those conversations began. Claire as a publisher has been behind important Pacific books like *Tangata o le Moana* (Māhina-Tuai *et al.* 2012) during her time at Te Papa Press. So really the vision and heart of Makerita and then Claire is a huge part of the project coming into the world, and both of them seeing the value in the stories of Pacific artists.

It did feel really important to show breadth and depth, which to me was about the dynamism of Pacific arts. Also, I think honestly, the book could be bigger, which feels ridiculous when we're talking about a book of 544 pages, 120-plus contributors and 300-ish images. But once you start thinking about artists and the breadth of our stories, really we're just getting started.

Andrea:

There are many voices represented in the book and, uniquely, there are a lot of artists talking about their own work as well as the perspectives of researchers and writers.

Lana:

The artists' voices are the core of the book, just as they were the core of the online project. Very rarely are artists asked to write their own stories—it's usually people like me and you doing that—so it was really important to flip that emphasis and give it back to the artists and their voices. Something really unique happens when you give that space over to artists to tell their story. In addition to that, having researchers and writers—many of whom are also incredibly important voices in the Pacific arts, whether they be writers, curators, historians or producers—was also vital to provide the opportunity to focus on an art form or an exhibition or a moment. Artists weren't asked to write the history of Pacific arts but just to write their own story in whatever way made sense to them, and then in the collective of all the voices and all the perspectives, that's where we get some kind of sense of the bigger story.

Andrea:

The Pacific arts bench is deep! There are still so many artists not included, and not everyone from the digital project is in the book.

Lana:

I think it's really important to remember that this book is just the tip of the iceberg, and one book can't and shouldn't stand in for six decades of Pacific artists not being written about. We did ask a number of people who weren't interested or weren't able to submit in the end, as well as some people who were in the digital project and decided not to do the book. And the other thing, too, is that many people in here are long overdue for their own monograph. There's a lot of work to be done to actually fill the void of Pacific art histories.

Andrea:

As you said before, artists weren't asked to write the history of Pacific arts. That, in a sense, fell to you with collating most of the 40 original commissions for the digital project and then commissioning 50-plus more for the book. Unlike a typical art historical approach, the stories are categorised not by practice but by themes. In "Y2K" (chapter 7) alone, the multiplicity of approaches is amazing. Leafa Wilson/Olga Krause, who writes her own story in the chapter, is a self-described "art anakema (misfit, anathema)", but that could be applied to so many in this volume. How hard was it to develop the ways you have united each chapter and devised the themes?

Lana:

It was both hard and easy, I suppose. Many of the artists fit either chronologically or thematically within a particular theme or time, and many of the artists are written about within the chapters—either as belonging to a time frame or through a theme like enduring practices or doing it yourself—so having them there is useful for readers who might want to read more in depth about a particular person and also hear that artist's voice. Where it gets tricky is that many artists are uncategorisable, or maybe defy easy categorisation, and could feature in many places in the book. And when putting a book together, at some point a decision needs to be made; hopefully we made some good decisions, and I also hope that some of those decisions of placement are exciting and unexpected.

Andrea:

Your own life has been immersed in a broad spectrum of arts from the outset—in the book you mention your father in the hip hop music world, a

world that's been dominated in Aotearoa by Māori and Pacific musicians; the influence of artists like Fatu Feu'u at high school; attending Polyfest with your Samoan language nest class; and, significantly for this book, the influence of Pandora Fulimalo Pereira and Sean Mallon's book *Pacific Art Niu Sila*, which came out in 2002. It's easy to underestimate the impact of these experiences.

Lana:

I guess so. I mean, they all individually seem insignificant, but I suppose when thinking about it, it's thinking about all the creativity I was exposed to at a young age. Both of my nanas—my English and Samoan ones—were creative in their own ways, whether in sewing, quilting, weaving, braiding, gardening or drawing, and so these were things I was exposed to. I used to sew with my nana at a young age. I remember when I went to intermediate and we made cushions in our soft materials class, I was showing my classmates how to thread the sewing machine. I never thought the creativity around which I grew up was special until those kinds of moments, where you realise, okay, maybe it's not normal to know your way around a sewing machine at 10 or to spend a full Saturday painting in your bedroom at 15. My mum is a graphic designer, so she's creative too. She taught me my way around InDesign during my high school years—she still helps me now—and so when I went to art school at Elam,⁵ I would pass on what I knew of InDesign, like it was passed down to me. Now, my biggest creative outlet is my PowerPoint slides—how things change!

Andrea:

That background of creativity is a common denominator, of course, but also it's thought I have had reinforced by this book is the transdisciplinary capacity of so many of the artists. Is this the gig economy/gig worker/career portfolio market at work? Or are there other social dynamics that you've noticed?

Lana:

I think that's the nature of being an artist, at least in my experience: that you just are creative and that way of thinking infiltrates all areas, but also it's necessary to survive financially as an artist. Very few artists in the book had a full-time arts practice that is solely about making art, and those artists who did had support networks selling and marketing their work and people to manage their administration. What seemed more common for people was a hustle in their work, and also bursts of making and exhibiting that were flanked with various jobs, careers or hustles, or also time out to have families or care for family members. So, the read that this is a gig worker portfolio is really interesting, and I think it's also just that's the most plausible way to make art.

Andrea:

Why is it that Pacific people have such an impact on the arts, right across the board, from all popular musics to dance, from opera to what Leone Samu Tui calls the “kitchen table” jewellers, theatre, painting, sculpture, comedy, animation and filmmaking to Yuki Kihara’s selection for the Venice Biennale?

Lana:

That’s the question, right? In one of the pieces in the book Jonathan Lemalu talks about opera and writes, “I believe that what I do as an opera singer is in part an extension of my culture’s oratory and performance practice traditions” (p. 379). I think that’s such an important point: that while opera seems so far away from Indigenous practices, when you break it down it’s about storytelling, oratory and music, and those are things that have existed in Pacific worlds since forever. So, there’s the chapter in the book about enduring art forms, and we might think more immediately about things like tatau (tattooing), siapo (barkcloth) making or dance, but we can also think about things like poetry, painting and theatre, because when you break down what is at the heart of those art forms—metaphor, symbology, comedy, performance—those things too have existed in Pacific worlds since forever.

Andrea:

Earlier you mentioned the importance of Makerita Urale’s instigation for the collecting of artists’ stories in their own words. How important is it to have Pacific people represented in arts and cultural institutions?

Lana:

This book would not exist now if it wasn’t for Makerita and that idea that led to the digital project. And, of course, there was a whole team of people and body of authors, photographers, designers, editors and what have you that made it possible, but still it took a Pacific person in a position of power, with a seat at the table, to have that initial vision and gather the collective that then made it possible. I think it’s vital to have Pacific people in arts and cultural institutions. But I think representing people is not enough: it’s about having people within these spaces that have power and resources behind them. This project, the advocacy behind it and the funding required for a book of this scale required a phenomenal amount of work behind the scenes. That was only possible because of people like Makerita and her wider team. So, if we don’t have people in spaces, then these kinds of things don’t happen.

Also, one thing worth mentioning is that I knew really early on that this needed another person working on it, and I really wanted to bring Faith

Wilson in because she's a phenomenal editor and a great writer, and also someone knowledgeable about the arts. So, an internship was created for her at Penguin, funded by Creative New Zealand, and she project-managed the book and has subsequently been hired by Penguin as a project editor. I think the representation of Pacific editors within publishing houses is also really important and something that I hope also continues to grow and increase, so our stories stop being underestimated and so, too, our buying power.

Andrea:

The intergenerational and interdisciplinary reach of this book is vast. I can't think of another space where you will find poet Alastair Campbell, 1990s hip hop group Sisters Underground, curator Jim Vivieaere's pioneering art exhibition *Bottled Ocean*, visual artist Ani O'Neill and jazz singer Mavis Rivers, for example, all contextualised together. It is an education as much as anything, an expression of the "history making" of this book.

Lana:

Isn't that just so indicative of the incredible nature of Pacific arts and artists—it is so vast! That vastness, or what I've described elsewhere as dynamism, is one of the big takeaways that I hope people leave with. I hope it draws those otherwise separate moments together so people can see this bigger, wider web within which the moments exist—like moments of the movement.

Andrea:

These influential cornerstones of Pacific arts have been like a coded language, in a sense, because they are absent from the mainstream record. Vela Manusaute's comment on page 273 about the stereotypical roles offered to Pacific performers and the importance of reclaiming the power and making the creative work ourselves is an important one. This DIY approach means that the "socials"—YouTube, thinking particularly of Lisa Taouma and The CoconetTV, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok—are culturally significant means of communication and reaching intergenerational audiences not served by mainstream media.

Lana:

Yes, they are absent from the mainstream record, but people know, right, so it's about taking what's held in memories and in casual conversations and giving them their moment and also placing them in the record so our stories can be remembered for as long as the book exists in the world.

Andrea:

Moana cosmopolitanism, a phrase and concept developed by you in your thesis, is a thread in this book as well. Many of the artists exemplify that notion of “globally routed, yet locally rooted” (Lopesi 2021: 1).

Lana:

I think simplistic depictions of Pacific subjectivity are really a result of the colonial imaginary that tries to confine complicated Pacific lives to unidimensionality, which is so quickly disproven when you think about the range in the book. Pacific lives have always been complex and multilayered and, I would say, have also always been cosmopolitan in that there has always been travel and exchange across the ocean. Pacific artists make this complexity really clear, especially when we look at all of their work together, as in a volume like this. It’s become glaringly obvious that there’s no one way to be a Pacific person, and by extension there’s also no one way to be a Pacific artist, and so we see all of these incredible innovations in Pacific art that draw on rooted Indigenous cultures and routed cosmopolitan worlds.

Andrea:

Your work with Ioana Gordon-Smith on *Marinade* strikes me in this way too—foregrounding voices and movements and ideas, as well as subjectivities. Cultural averaging is at play in the day-to-day of Pacific lives, but this is a force in the other direction.

Lana:

I’m just not that interested in waiting for inclusion, and I am actually not very interested in inclusion within the systems that we have now. I feel like it takes too long, and it also feels conditional on what the people of the time want or how you can be of use to the person who includes you. So why not start your own thing?

It’s ironic that I say that while working in academia, but I think there’s ways that you can be within institutions and not be waiting for their validation. You can build your own things, find your own moments of joy, and that’s what *Marinade: Aotearoa Journal of Moana Art*⁶ is for me. I have a tremendous amount of respect for Ioana Gordon-Smith, the journal’s cofounder and my coeditor, and it’s so much fun to think with her, our advisory board and the authors and artists we work with. I guess ultimately I feel really strongly that our art is important and deserves serious attention and consideration, and that’s what *Marinade* is, and it’s what *Pacific Arts Aotearoa* is too.

Andrea:

The methodologies of *suʻifefiloi* and transdisciplinarity, which you employed in your PhD, seem to be at work here—can you expand on that?

Lana:

Suʻifefiloi was a methodology that I used for my PhD. The term was borrowed from Samoan novelist Sia Figiel. Broken down, *suʻi* means to sew or stitch and *fefiloi* means mixture, so the idea is about stitching together a mixture of things to create something new. Figiel uses it to talk about stitching or sewing *pua* (flowers) and daffodils to describe her process for writing as a postcolonial literature.

I love this, because I just think it describes being an Indigenous Pacific person in the diaspora, where there is a kind of remixing happening all the time. We have to be careful not to fall into traps of self-essentialising and romanticising ourselves, our islands and our cultures, and I think *suʻifefiloi* offers a culturally grounded way to think about the combining that happens every day, which is not a melting or blending but a process of combining multiple things that hold themselves and their forms but exist in relation to other elements.

Andrea:

The book itself provides a holistic vessel for the multiplicity of voices you engage—there are over 95 pieces by artists across a huge variety of practices.

Lana:

It's also the right to range for me. Pacific people (and all people) have the right to range, and the right to exist across every spectrum possible in terms of creative expression, lived realities and aesthetics, and so on, and for me the place of the collective voices is also to remind ourselves of this. Every one of these artists is Pacific art, and yet they're also so different, and isn't that so exciting?

Andrea:

You've written a chapter on collectives. In your view, is there a propensity for Pacific people to work in this way as a solution—strength in numbers—when resources are so stretched?

Lana:

Every collective has their own reason for forming, and I definitely wouldn't want to centre the art world in that decision. Speaking for myself, I love working collectively—ideas are better, the work is better, and it's more fun. We're in an individualised world that works to keep us apart. That just feels lonely and boring.

Andrea:

In your introduction you say, "The creative production from our communities far exceeds our socioeconomic realities" (p. 13), in defiance of the negative narratives that are so readily applied to Pacific lives in Aotearoa.

Lana:

That line from Karl Pulotu-Endemann that "[t]he arts is the only arena in which Pacific people are not in the deficit" (p. 13) really stuck out to me, because I think it is really telling. Pacific people are not well represented in statistics around education, health, income, poverty, you name it—and yet our artistic production across the range of art making is prolific. It goes back to your earlier question about why Pacific people have such an impact on Pacific arts—you can't separate the art from the people, and in many Pacific contexts the arts are part of Pacific lifeworlds.

Andrea:

I'm interested in an issue that comes up in the chapter on internationalism (chapter 8). At FESTPAC⁷ 1995, some contemporary Pacific performers were excluded because of a perceived contemporary/heritage arts divide, but also a notion that they didn't represent Aotearoa, because they were not Indigenous to Aotearoa, thus underscoring a sense of Pacific people as indigenous but not Indigenous. How (if at all) can Pacific people in diaspora represent their own cultures as part of an Aotearoa New Zealand delegation?

Lana:

We see the representation of Pacific diasporic artists now in FESTPAC with the New Zealand delegation, which is great. I also think since 1995, people have had the conversation about Pacific and Māori relationality a bit more, or maybe feel more comfortable with it—this acknowledgement of relation before colonisation, but also the place of non-Māori Pacific people as guests in Aotearoa New Zealand. We have capacity for all of it, and it's important

that every Indigenous experience is represented. I think where we have to be careful is that diasporic representation doesn't also stand in for Pacific representation from the islands. If we include everyone and widen that space, then we have something much richer.

NOTES

1. *The Commute*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 22 September–22 December 2018. Featured artists: Natalie Ball, Hannah Brontë, Bracken Hanuse Corlett, Chantal Fraser, Lisa Hilli, Carol McGregor, Ahilapalapa Rands and T'uy't'atnat-Cease Wyss. Curated by Lana Lopesi, Freja Carmichael, Sarah Biscarra Dilley, Léuli Eshrāgi and Tarah Hogue.
2. Creative New Zealand is a government agency that supports and promotes the arts in Aotearoa New Zealand.
3. Lagi-Maama Academy and Consultancy is a cultural organisation based in Aotearoa New Zealand, founded by Toluma'anave Barbara Makuati-Afitu and Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai.
4. See <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/categories/pacific-arts-legacy-project>.
5. Elam School of Fine Arts, Waipapa Taumata Rau The University of Auckland.
6. Andrea Low is a member of the *Marinade* advisory board, which also includes Peter Brunt, Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen and Luisa Keteiya Tora. <https://www.marinadejournal.nz/>
7. The Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FESTPAC) has been held every four years since 1972. The thirteenth festival was originally scheduled for 2020 but was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. It will be held this year, 10–21 June, in Hawai'i.

GLOSSARY

The terms in this glossary are Samoan.

fefiloi	mixture
pua	flowers
siapo	barkcloth
su'i	sew, stitch
talanoa	conversation
tatau	tattooing

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