

waka kuaka

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



The Polynesian Society

Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland, New Zealand

REVIEWS

LOPESI, Lana (ed.): *Pacific Arts Aotearoa*. Auckland: Penguin Books, Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, 2023. 544 pp., ack., afterword, contribs., foreword, gloss., index, intro., notes, timeline. NZ\$65.00 (hardcover).

SONYA WITHERS

*Sama'i, Falelatai, Sāmoa; Aotearoa New Zealand
Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa | Massey University*

I want to begin by acknowledging previous publications that have participated in this journey of documenting the rich history of Pacific creative practice. There is a plethora of positioning in terms of the concept of “art” and its interpretation and labelling across the Pacific. Karen Stevenson’s provocatively titled *The Frangipani Is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985–2000* (2008) presented the artist’s insights on contemporary Pacific art in Aotearoa New Zealand. Prior to Stevenson’s book there was *Speaking in Colour: Conversations with Artists of Pacific Island Heritage* (1997), featuring interviews with Pacific artists, and then *Pacific Art Niu Sila: The Pacific Dimension of Contemporary New Zealand Arts* (2002), both edited by Pacific curators Sean Mallon and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira. These publications began to map the influences of social historical events in Aotearoa and the Pacific as a trigger point for the production and movement of Pacific arts practice.

This publication builds on what others have begun—cataloguing the expansive landscape of Pacific arts in Aotearoa—and does so by including the voices of the artists themselves. The authors of the contributions represent a range of backgrounds and approaches, from community collectives, fine artists, filmmakers, musicians and craft practitioners to curatorial pieces, narratives and, at rare points, visual and redacted essays. There are 11 chapters, each featuring titles that will spur the imagination for Pacific readers: for example, “Seeding the Vanua”—how did the Pacific arts start out in Aotearoa?—or “Practising Endurance”, reciting key collectives and artists that have come together to support Pacific peoples’ wellbeing in Aotearoa, whether through social engagement or craft revitalisation practices. Through many of the contributions, the voices do not isolate the artworks themselves but take the reader on a journey, welcoming them into their lounge room, pointing out their family members and their migration to Aotearoa from abroad. Acknowledging gafa (genealogy) and its importance to the artist in conceptualising their practice is a theme throughout the book. The stories of ‘āiga (family and extended family) are diverse, displaced and at times

underpinned by light-hearted hyena laughs throughout their recollection. A standout chapter, “The Pacific Question” (Chapter Four), opens with an excerpt from the late Jim Vivieaere: “Today the art of the Pacific Islanders is still trapped within its category” (p. 179). Perhaps we politicise our own traps through the labelling and categorising of Pacific arts and its identity politics as a dominant feature for the conception of Pacific arts and its potential parameters. Hastings-McFall critiques this through her contribution (and art practice) in which she navigates her own identity politics and their relationship to the category of Pacific arts, exclaiming, “I’m not even a proper coconut!” (p. 204)—a phenomenon many Aotearoa-born Pacific peoples have encountered through their upbringing. Despite these challenges, the book also illustrates the voices of collectives that were started in the back of a state house, such as theatre and music company Kila Kokonut Krew, or the use of the internet to create a myriad of spaces for Pacific arts and critical discussions in response to “the Pacific question”.

Ioana Gordon-Smith highlights the power of disrupting traditional positioning of critique through comment sections online: “While there is an element of personality discords that bias the comments, these comments suggest that the Pacific arts community was not always the single-opinion-holding community” (p. 323). The post-Y2K era saw successful online spaces such as Pimpiknows.com and the now offline Hashtag500words as significant and inclusive alternatives beyond the institutional scholarship on contemporary art that in turn connected Pacific audiences and creatives to Pacific art, practice and the gallery space.

The chapters of the book do not present a linear journey through Pacific arts in Aotearoa but rather many routes of response, critique and practice in addressing “the vexing question” of the classification of Pacific arts in Aotearoa, as Pereira is quoted in Chapter Four. Towards the end of the book, a new question on Pacific arts is positioned speaking to the most recent turn of Pacific expressions across the third, fourth and fifth generations of Pacific artists, evidencing the space for infinite possibilities of interpretation and interrogation towards “that” question, and in doing so, along with levels of criticality among our Pacific artists and audiences, forgetting the old trope of Eurocentric gazes and instead working towards critiquing “the Pacific category and its institutionalization, in the same way their predecessors had done in the 1990s” (p. 447).

Unfortunately, even a book of this scope cannot capture the expansive and lively nature of Pacific arts in Aotearoa. As acknowledged by the editor, not all artists are featured, and some perhaps are yet to be recognised on paper. Like the publications mentioned earlier in this review, this book is not “the” publication on Pacific arts in Aotearoa but rather “an” expansive piece of documentary participation in the worlds of Pacific arts in Aotearoa. Fortunately, the varied sociocultural positionings documented

model experiences of grit towards the conception of successful shows and collectives and even the hard truths on rejection from some of our own leading arts trusts. These insights provide a gafa for the next generation of makers (and audiences) to work from or critique towards new reflections on Pacific arts and their place in Aotearoa.

The heftiness of this publication is a representation of the layered and complex obligations and responsibilities taken up by the editor and the contributors in their attempts to capture the broad intersections of Oceanic creative practices and their place in Aotearoa.

After reading this publication, I hope that in the future the documentation of our creative practices can be shared through different formats such as podcasts, performing arts festivals, fashion shows or film documentaries—formats that equal the institutional mana (authority) a publicised book provides for the canon of Pacific arts and our Pacific artists. I am thinking about our grandparents (who might struggle to read the small text) and our young people (who roll their eyes when presented with reading for study). However, I can imagine this publication being the va'a (canoe) an emerging or established creative is navigating as they move towards new worlds of Pacific arts across Aotearoa.

References Cited

- Mallon, Sean and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira (eds), 1997. *Speaking in Colour: Conversations with Artists of Pacific Island Heritage*. Wellington: Te Papa Press.
 —2002. *Pacific Art Niu Sila: The Pacific Dimension of Contemporary New Zealand Arts*. Wellington: Te Papa Press.
 Stevenson, Karen, 2008. *The Frangipani Is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985–2000*. Wellington: Huia.

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JONASSEN, Jon Tikivanotau Michael: *Pe'e Māori: Traditional Cook Islands Chants*. Rarotonga: Mana Heritage Publications, 2022. 280 pp., biblio., list of chants, photos, plate, tables. NZ\$50.00 (softcover).

LIAM KOKA'UA

Ngāti Makea Ārera, Rarotonga

Tāmaki Paenga Hira | Auckland War Memorial Museum

Pe'e Māori was the last book published by Jon Tikivanotau Michael Jonassen before he died in 2023. To use a kama'atu (verse of wisdom) published in one of his earlier works, *Kama'atu* (2005: 123):

Na te rima 'uru'uru tena i rave.

It was done by hairy (accomplished) hands.¹