

Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program

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Ceremonial women's skirts, Ussaii people, Manus Province, Papua New Guinea, breadfruit tree bark, seed, bush string and red cloth strips, 104 x 83 cm, 86 x 43 cm, donated to University of Queensland Museum of Anthropology by Mrs Alfred Robinson in 1950, courtesy University of Queensland Anthropology Museum, Brisbane.



'Talking Tapa: Pasifika Bark Cloth in Queensland' considered the various permutations of the Pan-Pacific textile artform, *tapa*, across ten different island nations in the south-west Pacific region. As such, the exhibition was more an archiving of the divergent trajectories of the tapa medium than a critical discussion about its relevance within an art historical context. Curator Joan G. Winter worked in partnership with a number of diverse Pacific communities and specifically with the large population of Australian South Sea Islanders in Queensland who are descended from labourers indentured to work on sugar plantations in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This discursive curatorial method worked to dismantle a number of the museological hierarchies usually implicit in such a show.

Despite the multiplicity of language, style and function embedded within the works, a common thread that ran throughout was the way in which each evolved along the historical paths of travel and trade. Tapa – a material made from beaten bark cloth – is an artform not endemic to any one place in particular, so the exhibition naturally mapped an array of diasporic patterns and intercultural links within the Pacific region. As such, it was equally an exploration into Pacific socio-anthropological history as it was into its art. For instance, visitors learnt that when the initial waves of Austronesian people began to settle the Micronesian and Polynesian archipelagos, they transported and introduced the southern Chinese paper mulberry tree. It flourished in the volcanic soils and quickly made the use of the native dye fig tree obsolete outside the sandy atoll areas.

As its title suggested, the exhibition intended to celebrate the variety of tapa held by Queensland institutions and local private owners. But it also explored the different modes by which tapa is typically absorbed by such institutions and individuals – often via indentured labour recruits, early colonial ships' masters, crew, and other government agents. Primarily reflecting the collections of Brisbane's University of Queensland Anthropology Museum and Queensland Museum (the main lenders for 'Talking Tapa'), the most heavily weighted presence in the exhibition came from Papua New Guinea (PNG). The ten Papua New Guinean examples illustrated a cross-section of traditional usage and techniques including female ceremonial skirts adorned with seeds, bush string and strips of red cloth, and four small rare panels that derive from the central New Ireland mortuary ritual *ulfi* – once reserved for leaders, but now no longer practised.

The most underrepresented region, conversely, was the former West Irian Jaya, now the Indonesian province of West Papua. As the exhibition and its comprehensive accompanying catalogue lamented, the provenances of specific tapa are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish as the cultural practices surrounding bark cloth production continue to wane due to introduced customs and trading schemes. The province's sole representative was the cloth *Maro – kulit kayu*, 2004, by Agus Ongge from the Lake Sentani region in West Papua, which functioned as a gentle reminder of Papuan resilience and an attempt to preserve a culture that is currently facing a veritable threat of extinction. Ongge's *Maro* reflected the communal importance of the sago palm in Papuan culture, where tradition sees it planted by a father to be later harvested by his son. The artist depicted the palm and the Papuan people as a single, intertwined entity.

'Talking Tapa' was not altogether pessimistic, however, as the sense of encroaching extinction nascent in the exhibition was counterbalanced by the equally prevalent theme of adaptation. In the small island country of Wallis and Futuna, for example, tapa production adapted to the nineteenth-century introduction of Christianity and new standards of 'modest attire' by hybridising the material of traditional tapa-based ceremonial robes with the style of missionary dresses. These are now assembled using a sewing machine, as evident in the included work by Valelia Likuvalu.

By presenting a single medium within a simple discursive context, 'Talking Tapa' urged a re-examination of our own economies of intercultural exchange in the realms of art and design, but also – and perhaps more urgently – within the broader spheres of political, financial and social development. Perhaps even more pressingly, the exhibition raised questions pertaining to the institutional framing of art by highlighting the wavering taxonomies of artforms such as Pacific Islander bark cloths. While questioning what is 'traditional', 'Indigenous' and 'contemporary', what is 'art' and what is 'craft', the answer that eventually emerged was that the primary function of these labels is to elucidate the hegemonic structures that we impose on such works rather than the works themselves.

For this eighth Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and Art & Australia Emerging Writers Program review, Helen Hughes was mentored by Dr Alex Baker, Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. **Talking Tapa: Pasifika Bark Cloth in Queensland**, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, 12 February – 11 April 2010.