

From Avarua to New York City | Mahiriki Tangaroa & the Art of the Iconic Island Image

Cook Islands Artist Mahiriki Tangaroa is at the forefront of an avant garde art culture on Rarotonga.

From Avarua to Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, Sydney, Paris and most recently, New York, Tangaroa's popular canvas works have been exhibited and shaped by a unique set of circumstances and experiences.

A graduate of Ilam Arts School, Canterbury University with a major in photography, Tangaroa returned to the islands of her family's genesis in 1998 and set about establishing & ultimately leading the existing contemporary art movement. Beginning with the traveling exhibition Paringa Ou (organized with fellow Cook Islands artist Ian George), the artist's temporary return to Rarotonga soon turned into a full time residency.

It was during a three year tenure as curator at the Cook Islands National Museum that the opportunity arose for Tangaroa to research Cook Islands artifacts. She states: "In viewing the photographic collections of artifacts in overseas museums you come to realize that these were in fact artistic creations. Although many of these artifacts are locally condemned as heathen idols in a wider art history context, the photographed objects serve as valuable records, demonstrating the visual aesthetic of a particular time."

Tangaroa quickly became recognized for her non-traditional illustrative technique, her engaging yet potently subdued canvases representative of idiosyncratic elements of Cook Islands culture, past and present.

The artist states that "The earlier art work (1998 - 2003) is based on visual impressions, much of it resembling early photographic work. The experiential narrative approach has been consistent, a style formerly pioneered by modern American photographers."

In 2004 Tangaroa's style evolved, her focus shifting to interpretations of past beliefs, specifically questioning the manner in which they remained relevant in a modern Cook Islands society.

Manifest in the art works are the supreme Cook Islands deities Tangaroa, Rongo and the Aitutaki Goddess.

Tangaroa says "the decision to focus on Cook Islands traditional gods was prompted by a combination of reasons. It was firstly observing the mass production of the Tangaroa / Tiki on the local tourist market (in its conventional rigid like form) and having viewed photographic documentation of overseas collections that revealed quite a different sculptural approach. The Gods have undergone a series of interpretive changes, from objects of cultural worship to tourist memorabilia, the Tangaroa religious figure now transformed into a contemporary cultural icon."

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The stylistic presentation of Tangaroa's art over the last few years (2005 -08) has undergone notable change. Family relationships, immediate and extended, have become a significant focal point within the work.

Family relationships have always played a defining role within Cook Islands society but as a new generation of Rarotongan's come of age, new priorities emerge and the stringent belief systems of generations past come into question.

Tangaroa astutely observes the evolution of customary family relationships within a defined Island environment very much at odds with its history and introduced Christian values. At the same time the observation (usually in text) becomes slightly rhetorical, this scrutiny is being offered from an 'outsider's' perspective, the artist herself born and raised in New Zealand seemingly steps outside the canvas to stand alongside the end viewer.

Tangaroa says that "This came after experiencing the grand cathedrals of France and the overwhelming impact of the magnificent brightly lit stained glass windows. It was an awe inspiring experience of the light, colour, form and the narrative that played throughout the series of windows".

However, the Gods continue to play a central role, their visual presence taking on human context, an idea that originally derived from the writings of Alfonse Kloosterman.

In the book "Discoverers of the Cook Islands and the Names They Gave" Kloosterman notes that "Polynesian Gods had been human ancestors before they were made divine" certain natural phenomena and evolutionary concepts were added to the pantheon in the personification of Atea, Papa and Te Tumu. At one stage of their theological development, priests recreated stories to provide the divine family with supernatural parents.

On a recent visit to New York it was by sheer coincidence that Tangaroa and entourage encountered the exhibition "Notes on Cultural Preservation". The exhibition highlighted cultural distinctions between Idols and Icons and the transformation of the former to the latter. In the provided statement it explained how the artists aim to signify reparations within the collective cultural imaginary and reveal how Icons retain relevance through transmutation.

The surreal transformation of realities from Avarua town to New York City & (perhaps) the resulting universal affirmation of her work inspired Tangaroa to once again return to the photographic medium.

During the two week visit, the artist captured a stunning sequence of images that were exhibited in March 2009 at Beachcomber Galleries, Rarotonga. Of special significance, it marked the tenth anniversary since Tangaroa had last exhibited photographs.

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The new photographs presented an energizing examination of a foreign city seen through the eyes of a visitor unburdened by expectation.

The almost mischievous but non the less astute presentation once again allowed the artist to emerge from her work to take her audience hand in hand on a playful sojourn with the icons, moods and people of the city that never sleeps.

Mahiriki Tangaroa is represented by Bergman Gallery (formerly BCA), Rarotonga & Gallery De Novo, Dunedin, New Zealand.

CURATED EXHIBITIONS:

- 2014 ÷Atua - Sacred Gods from Polynesiaö (Co-curating with Dr. Michael Gunn), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
- 2010 ÷50 Years of Painting in the Cook Islandsö, Cook Islands National Museum, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2010 ÷Manuiaö, (Co-curated with BCA Gallery) American Indian Community House, New York, USA
- 2010 ÷Captive Imagesö, (Co-curated with USP) Photographs by Donald Stanley Marshall, BCA, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2003 ÷Te Ata Ou, Gallery Oö, Christchurch, New Zealand

PUBLISHED ARTICLES:

- 2013 ÷Cook Islands Art - Origins, Eras and New Prospectsö, Festschrift for Ron Crocombe
- 2010 Escape Issue 13, ÷Art in the Public Arenaö, Sculptural Installation by Eruera Nia
- 2004 Escape Issue 3, ÷Art, Repatriation and Reaffirming Identitiesö, The Art of Ian George
- 2003 Escape Issue 2, ÷An Artist Rebornö, The Art of Loretta Reynolds
- 2002 Escape Issue 1, ÷Contemporary Visual Art in the Cook Islandsö

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

- 2015 Blessed again by the Gods, Bergman Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands.
- 2009 ÷M101ö, BCA Gallery, Photographic Exhibition, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2008 ÷Mangoes in the Morningö, Gallery De Novo, Dunedin, New Zealand
- 2008 ÷Exit of Itoroö, Reef Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2007 ÷In Due Courseö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands 2005 Vataroa, Reef Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2004 ÷Kaveinga Auö, Reef Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand 2003 Avatea, Letham Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2002 ÷Passing Through Paradiseö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2002 ÷Te Ara Kuraö, Letham Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

- 2015 50th Constitution Group Show, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands.
- 2010 ÷Manuiaö, BCA Gallery @ the American Indian Community House, New York, USA
- 2007 ÷Scriptures from the Westö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2005 ÷All Abroadö, Gallery De Novo, Dunedin, New Zealand
- 2005 ÷(Re)settled / (Re)viewedö, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, USA
- 2005 ÷Pacific Rhythmsö, Letham Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

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- 2004 ōTatou Tatouö, Bondi Pavillion Gallery, Sydney, Australia
- 2004 ōClose to Homeö, Inanui Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2004 ōTuramaö, Salamander Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand
- 2003 ōExiles in Paradiseö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2003 ōOøora Te Moengaö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2003 ōTe Ata Ouö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Gallery O, Christchurch, New Zealand
- 2002 ōReturn Descendantö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2002 ōAroa Rarotongaö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2002 ōTatouö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2001 ōJourney in Timeö, Tahiono Gallery, Niue, Chevrell Gallery, Stockholm
- 2001 ōNo Taku Ipukareaö, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2000 ōTe Paroeö, Whangarei Arts Museum, New Zealand
- 1999 ōTu Faøtasiö, Aotea Centre, Auckland, New Zealand
- 1998 ōParinga Ouö, Cook Islands National Museum, Cook Islands, Fiji Museum, Fiji, Fisher Gallery, Auckland New Zealand

PROFILE ARTICLES:

- 2010 Art Monthly Australia, Issue 232, öCook Islands Art Nowö
- 2009 Artlink, Volume 29 No.2, öOld Gods New Livesö, Exhibiting Traditional Cook Islands Art
- 2009 Escape, Issue 10, öFrom Avarua to New York Cityö , Mahiriki Tangaroa and the Art of the Iconic Image
- 2009 Essentials Australia, Issue 12.5, öWaiting for the Clouds to Clearö , The Art of Mahiriki Tangaroa
- 2003 Spasifik, July / August, öArt Across the Wavesö

PUBLICATIONS:

- 2008 Frangipani is Dead, Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, Dr Karen Stevenson

PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS:

- 2011 ōThe Role of Traditional Art Objects in Contemporary Cook Islands Societyö, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
- 2011 ōArt and Creativity in Polynesiaö, 5th World Art Summit, Melbourne, Australia
- 2011 ōTraditional Art and Religion in the Cook Islandsö, PAA Seminar, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2010 ōArt and Craft in the Cook Islandsö, UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshop, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2010 ōContemporary Art in the Cook Islandsö, Manuia Exhibition Opening, New York, USA
- 2009 ōCarving out a Future in Cook Islands Artö, Cook Islands Research Association Conference, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
- 2003 ōArt Objects of the Cook Islandsö, VII Pacific Arts Association Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand