

Greg Dvorak

S/pacific Islands: Some Reflections on Identity and Art in Contemporary Oceania

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The S/pacifics of Salt Water

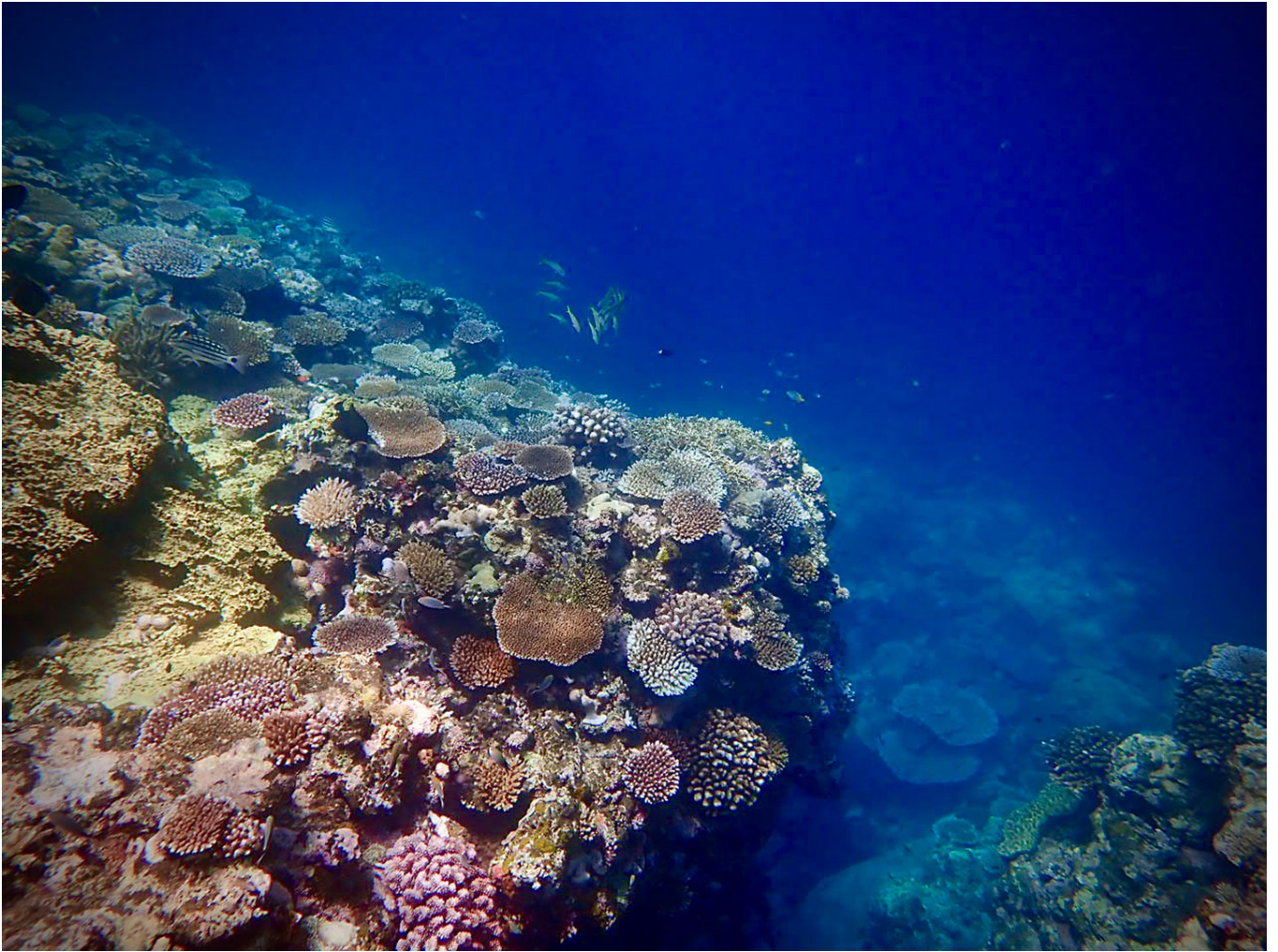
Humanity emerged from the oceans, as did all life on this planet. Our bodies are 60 percent brine – we carry this marine heritage with us however far we travel from the sea, detached and diasporic as we may become. Perhaps we could even think of ourselves as self-contained mini-oceans teeming with fluid universes that have tragically lost their consciousness of shared oceanhood. While these poetic imaginations appeal to a collective human yearning for the sublime, the universal, and the utopian, such a metanarrative skips over the real lives, bodies, and territories of those people most intimate with the sea on islands and coastlines across the planet.

Specificity matters. Having grown up between the Marshall Islands, the United States, and Japan, I am concerned with a specific ocean – the Pacific – and in it, the specific islands and communities of people, as well as the art in this part of the world. As my late friend and mentor Teresia Teaiwa, a scholar of Banaban and I-Kiribati heritage and one of Oceania's greatest minds, punned in her own writing, it is essential to emphasize the urgency of specific notions – or rather “S/pacific n/oceans” – of Oceanian history and art: the specificities of genealogies, crossings, colonialisms, wars, struggles, and resilience of the people who live throughout the Great Ocean.¹ It is in this spirit that I write this essay, which is not meant to be a curatorial text narrating a tidy story of which artists to watch from Oceania. Instead, I am interested in nudging this conversation beyond the ambiguities of the ocean to the specificities of Oceania, in order to foster more receptivity toward art and artists from this region.

I use “Oceania” in conversation with the influential and oft-quoted Tongan thinker Epeli Hau'ofa, who used that word to gesture toward an expanded and decolonized view of the Pacific Islands as the largest region on earth, and who described it as a “sea of islands” interconnected by ocean, rather than disparate and remote landmasses. But I find utility in both “Oceania” and “Pacific,” considering how the latter is a colonial term, a reminder of the embedded and entangled imperial forces that named and mapped this ocean, and that still need to be confronted. Increasingly, historians and curators from outside the region over-quote Hau'ofa's landmark manifesto “Our Sea of Islands” with utopian and pan-Oceanian glee, thus making it seem as if decolonization is complete, while wallpapering over the immense differences between island topographies, Islander cultures, and contrasting colonial histories.² After all, just as there are diverse islands, there are multiple Pacifics: competing imaginaries seen from



Lisa Reihana, *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015–17. Ultra HD video, color, 7.1 sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist and Artprojects, and New Zealand at Venice. With the support of Creative New Zealand and NZ at Venice Patrons and Partners.



Nearing the edge of the reef, Ishigaki Island, Okinawa, August 2020. Photo: Greg Dvorak. Courtesy of the author.

different colonial vantage points. Western mappings of the Great Ocean created the legacy of the “nesias” – Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia – based purely on racialized perversions and fantasies of European explorers and colonists. Mapmakers romanticized Polynesians as “noble savages,” termed Melanesians solely for the darkness of their skin and a perception of them as being murderous barbarians (simply because they successfully fought white invaders away for so long), and coined “Micronesia” as a belittling term to cover all the miscellaneous scraps and leftover islands of the equatorial and northern Pacific that didn’t fit into the prior two categories. And from these Western biases emerged hierarchies – with Polynesia at the top, leading to a sense even today of a privileging of Polynesia as metonym for the entire region at the exclusion of all other places, cultures, and histories, sometimes referred to as “Polycentrism.”

Japan, too, had its own imaginary of Oceania, which it called Nanyō – a vague and broad frontier originating in Micronesia and eventually including all of the island Pacific and Southeast Asia. (“Nanyō” simply means “The South” – from a Japanese perspective.) In the twentieth century, Japan would attempt, and mostly succeed, to subsume this entire southern frontier, until it was wrested away by the United States and its allies and mostly reborn in the form of the postwar American Empire.

This essay says nothing new, at least in terms of what scholars and artists in and around Oceania often talk about. Rather, I want to propose an understanding of Oceania as a verb and not a noun, as dynamic rather than static, an open-ended conversation, sentence, question, and to recenter Oceania, to demand its centrality in the Middle of Now and Here as opposed to “the middle of nowhere.”³ As Teresia Teaiwa poignantly wrote, “We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood.”⁴ She meant this not as a universalist call to all humanity, but rather as an affirmation of a shared Pacific Islander identity and heritage in the context of decolonizing history, with an investment in the larger project of trans-indigenous solidarity. I would reverse that paradigm as well, to suggest that the ocean itself is made up of the blood and sweat and tears of countless generations of Islanders who have struggled and persevered there, against incredible colonial and environmental adversity. We must remember, too, that humans cannot survive in water; we live on land, and land – especially in the Pacific Islands – is part of the fabric of one’s very being. It is flesh. In many Austronesian languages, for example, the word for “land” (*whenua* in Māori, *fenua* in Tahitian,

fanua in Samoan) is the same word used for “placenta,” which is typically buried in the land. As many Pacific writers have emphasized, land – the island itself – is thus also a mother.⁵

My own connection to Oceania is not as an Islander, but as a person who grew up riding the currents of colonialism. I am a fourth-generation European American, descended from the combined Atlantic crossings and subsequent struggles and romances of Jewish, Romanian, Italian, Czech, Dutch, and other immigrants to the United States. I am also a first-generation immigrant and a twenty-year permanent resident of Japan, where I live most of my life speaking Japanese and working as a university professor in Tokyo. But most importantly, though I am not indigenous to it, I consider Oceania my first home. In the early 1970s at the height of the Cold War, my father – an earnest, peace-loving systems engineer who worked for a major American defense company – brought my mother and one-year-old me with him to the Marshall Islands, where for nearly eight years he would help to test intercontinental ballistic missiles (minus their nuclear warheads) at Kwajalein, the largest coral atoll in the world.

Kwajalein Atoll is a vast and beautiful ring of land and lagoon that has been inhabited by brave and resilient Marshall Islanders for thousands of years. Along with much of the surrounding islands of Micronesia, after hundreds of years loosely under Spanish domination, it was colonized by Germany (1885–1919) and Japan (1919–1947).⁶ The United States colonized the Marshalls even longer, beginning with its so-called “liberation” of these islands from the Japanese government in the 1940s, followed by sixty-seven devastating nuclear tests conducted at Bikini and Enewetak Atolls between 1946 and 1958, and then by its ongoing missile-testing and space defense projects at Kwajalein Atoll, which began in 1964 and continue through to the present day, even after the formation of the sovereign Republic of the Marshall Islands in the mid-1980s. This is a proud S/pacific nation that symbolizes the perseverance and optimism of Islanders over the horrors of colonial and military violence and climate change; yet it rarely is mentioned in Western descriptions of the Pacific, which tend to favor fantasies of tropical pleasure and escape rather than the bitter truths of conquest and domination.

As a teacher, artist, and curator working with Islander colleagues between Japan and Pacific places, I situate my own story here to invite others like me with non-Pacific heritage to realize and acknowledge their own indebtedness to Oceania and the violent histories of colonial exploitation. As a child, in my privileged position derived from legacies of stealing Marshallese

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land for the sake of American security and wealth, I lived and breathed the military settler colonialism hidden in plain sight all around me. Had it not been for Islander teachers and friends who patiently shared their stories with me, I might have completely ignored the deeper truths that Kwajalein wanted me to learn. Through them I would begin to unpack the horrors of imperial trespass and feel humbled by the incredible resilience, strength, wisdom, and agency of Pacific Islanders.

Outside of the Pacific Islands, most of us are indeed beholden to these histories, and yet our imaginary of this Great Ocean is oddly vague and romantic. I often ask new students to “draw the Pacific.” 99.9 percent of their illustrations are maps – typically rendered as if looking down at earth from space or the heavens, the ubiquitous “God’s eye view” that most Google Maps users take for granted today as “reality.” They draw a political/economic map that emphasizes the contours of “important” countries that border the Great Ocean, and in the middle of the map is always little more than a vast and undefined stretch of blue – a void, sometimes peppered with little dots that are supposed to represent islands, sometimes not. Sometimes the islands are labeled – at most, the Hawaiian Islands, Aotearoa-New Zealand, perhaps Fiji or Papua New Guinea. This is an imperial worldview, an overview that audaciously and even violently attempts to encompass the wholeness of the largest region on earth and reduce it to remote specks in blue vagueness. Zoom in on Google Earth on any of these ill-defined dots, however, and you will soon discover that even the smallest islands can take a human being days to traverse by foot in the hot sun.

A more S/pacific view invites us to look at how an ocean wayfinder, a navigator, would visualize Oceania, if they even privileged the visual in the first place. True navigators in the distant islands of “Micronesia,” like Mau Pailug – the influential Satawalese teacher of wayfinding – could feel with their bodies the rhythm and the texture of the ocean, the subtle echoes of waves and surges and currents crashing against and flowing around islands. Chants passed down through generations and perpetuated in hula and other Islander oral traditions gesture toward specific markers on the surface and depths of ocean, even the smells of seaweed, of places and islands – as Chamorro-Pohnpeian scholar Vince Diaz writes, the olfactory map of the Pacific is also rich and nuanced.⁷ And so, a S/pacific perspective demands that we remember the contexts, the relativity of size to one human body, and the importance of place and environment. If it is even worth “drawing the Pacific” to begin with, at

the very least it is essential to realize that at sea level, from an island-based visual perspective, one might not sketch out a map but rather a single unbroken line dividing the expanses of sky and water, what Westerners commonly refer to as “the horizon.”

Coral and Concrete

Triangulating across and between horizons helps Islanders navigate Oceania and the current crises of our world. Even in my own triangulations between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands, I find a deeper sense of located-ness amidst the complexity of coral and concrete. These two substances are rich metaphors that can help to narrate S/pacific histories in helpful ways that facilitate more humility and interaction between islands, oceans, and people in relation to each other while being mindful of power and inequality.⁸ Oceania’s culture and geography is all about connections between islands, maintained through the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next through stories and the genealogical bonds of family (not necessarily blood relations as much as kinship through shared affinity and commitment). Coral is like this – organic, migratory, relational, ancestral, rhizomatic. But we must also call out the abuse of power and violence – to identify the aggressors who literally and figuratively crushed those coral reefs and mixed them into “concrete” to pour for their imperial endeavors. Amidst the turbulence of globalization, climate change, militarism, and even the Covid pandemic, Oceania is the site of an ongoing competition between coral – the “little histories” of real human lives – pitted against concrete – the “big histories” of empires and wars.⁹ In the grander scheme of things, despite the imperial or military pretense of concrete permanence, it is always the coralline collective struggles and creative ingenuity of individuals formed into communities which overcome and survive across generations.

Coral is a microorganism that spawns annually, coral polyps projecting their eggs and sperm onto the ocean currents, which become baby polyps that navigate the seas on epic journeys to find hospitable new sites where they can attach and build new reefs. Coral thus builds a genealogical structure out of diverse and disparate journeys, making sense of chaos, growing in deep time over thousands of years, literally transforming from the microscopic to the macroscopic. I liken the crossings of people to coral. It is estimated that Austronesian people left their homelands in or around present-day Taiwan about five to six thousand years ago, voyaging and wayfinding across tremendous distances in waves of outmigration as they

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The arrival of canoes from across Micronesia at the Festival of Pacific Arts in Guam, 2016. Photo: Greg Dvorak. Courtesy of the author.

developed better and better maritime technology and knowledge, settling different corners of island Oceania from west to east. These progressive crossings and layerings gave birth to diverse but interconnected island cultures and transoceanic trade routes, languages, heritages. But I include in my metaphor of coral the other crossings of ordinary people – of castaways and people who drifted off course, of missionaries, of people captured and forced away from their families, of the later flows of settlers like laborers and prisoners, of the migrations of soldiers and colonists.

The coral image doesn't condone the horrifically violent encounters that happened along the way as a result of these migrations; rather, it as an allegory for an inventory of all of these contradictory influences, an inclusive metaphor for the sloppy but strangely elegant sedimenting of diverse truths into complicated reefs. In English, it is said that coral "colonizes," but in fact coral actually *decolonizes*: reclaiming, resistant, dynamic, strong. And reefs embody how colonial encounters *always* entail resistance, nuance, and peril; for coral can be soft, colorful, and beautiful, but also messy, harsh, fragile, sharp, and jagged. The reef can sink a ship; coral can infect a wound and kill. Coral is built upon the bones of those who came before, simultaneously life and death, sometimes strong as rock and sometimes frail as flower petals. Coral is thus the embodiment of resistance to all that would attempt to flatten, essentialize, or appropriate it into a singular narrative of domination.

In contrast to the complexity and resistance of coral, concrete is the stuff of oversimplification: imperial contrivance, the farce of permanence, the lie that the people who came before were somehow complicit and submissive in their own colonization. Before and after the Pacific War, Japanese and Americans both literally dredged up the Marshallese coral reef ancestral fishing grounds that surrounded the main island in Kwajalein Atoll, pulverized it, and mixed it with cement to make airstrips and fortifications in the service of empire and war. Bunkers, blockhouses, and bureaucracies: concrete is collective violence and oppression – it is orientalism, nationalism, and fascism. Concrete is war. It is ecocide. It is the wall that separates us and the sickening hubris of petty world leaders who boast of building walls. It is the output of general contractors who dump tons and tons of it onto islands and oceans. It is the giant blocks poured by the United States military at Henoko in Okinawa to coat the reef there and make yet another new and unnecessary Marine base. It is the gargantuan tetrapod objects heaped along the coasts of Japan in a

triumphant (but futile) warning to the ocean that no tsunami shall wipe away the seaside infrastructure of capitalism, is if the waves would listen. Concrete is the rotting carcasses of Japanese war-era administrative buildings and bomb shelters buried deep in the jungles of Chuuk, Peleliu, Jaluit, Saipan, or Palawan, the aircraft carriers asleep on the bottoms of lagoons. It is also the golf courses and tourist infrastructure spread out across the Pacific today. They say that concrete has a lifespan of only a hundred years, which is really about the same as a human life, and yet empires praise it as if it were eternal.

Even if coral is bleaching because of our warming seas, its reefs will always stand as ruins and monuments to these incredible histories that far outlast concrete, and it is plausible that long after humanity has perished and oceans have cooled, coral will regenerate and continue its (de)colonizations. Over millions of years, coral reefs have built islands out of their migrations and interconnections. In the clockwise-flowing Kuroshio/Pacific Current along which I live alone, in this part of Northern Oceania, oceanographers know that the reefs of the Marshall Islands give birth to the reefs of Kosrae and Pohnpei, which in turn beget the islands and atolls to their west, all the way across to the Philippines and up across Okinawa and Amami, up to Kyushu and Honshu. This eternal cycle is overlaid with the millions of crossings of canoes and ships and airplanes, the landings and flights, the unions of individuals that result in children and their children's children. We are deeply, deeply entangled with each other, but the concrete our nations pour can make some of us the inheritors of great privilege and others the inheritors of dispossession. In fact the coronavirus pandemic starkly reveals this: the biggest factors enabling mass infections among the poorest and most marginalized might well be our concrete cities and concrete barriers of capitalistic inequality. But it is also the coming together of disparate people for common causes that build new reefs of resistance, to fight for the health of Pacific Islanders and also to insist that black and brown lives matter – not only in predominantly white places but everywhere, including in Oceania itself, such as in Indonesian-occupied West Papua, where Islanders are oppressed and killed simply for asserting their own identity.

Consuming Oceania

It is the Western obsession with concrete that explains why Spain has already begun making a big fuss about the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan, notwithstanding that 2021 also marks the five-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the European-led genocidal violence he initiated in

Oceania. It was really only Magellan's bad luck, ignorance, and the sheer enormity of the Great Ocean that enabled him to cross southeast to northwest without making landfall once until his crew, starving, exhausted, and bored, reached Guåhan (Guam) in March 1521, having declared this ocean so uneventful and unimpressive that it earned the moniker "*pacífico*" – the name Pacific stuck. Sailing into the bay of Humåtak, Magellan proceeded to order the burning of the entire village and the murder of many innocent Chamoru people, after which his crew reportedly cannibalized these bodies to replenish their health. The first recorded European history of cannibalism in the Pacific was thus by white people eating natives, and not the other way around.

That was the gruesome beginning of Western consumption of "The Pacific," and it has continued ever since. And since the trespasses of Magellan, James Cook, and many others like them, it has been fashionable for Outsiders to project their imperial fantasies of Paradise onto the Pacific Islands, erasing like the military airstrips and concrete resort hotels of Honolulu the lives of real people and the bitter truths of the very colonization they themselves and their forebears wrought upon those islands on behalf

of various empires.¹⁰ Many artists, from Picasso to Gauguin, were particularly notorious for this in their pursuit of "the primitive" fantasy that they sought in Pacific Island cultures. Gauguin, for example, gladly invited himself to Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, where he spread syphilis and slept with teenage girls, all the while painting a vision of an eden that existed as if solely for the pleasure of European hetero-hungry men. And despite this, French tourists still seek out their dream of the Polynesian wahine dusky maiden, and Air Tahiti Nui has Gauguin paintings decorating the interior of its aircraft. And for all the fantasies of Pacific Paradise there are just as many nightmares of a Pacific Hell; for the Pacific Islands regularly show up in Western imaginations – including in journalism and contemporary art¹¹ – as the condemned nuclear wastelands of the past or the doomed bleached reefs and submerged homelands of the future, often devoid of the Pacific Islanders for whom these places matter the most.

Thus, the Pacific has long been consumed in very "concrete" ways, absent its deeper "coral" histories and of S/pacific localities and local communities in all their diversity. So my hope here is to advocate against one-sided consumption and rather for a more equal



Curator Sana Balai (center, with microphone) and members of "Women's Wealth" at the opening of the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, November 2018. Photo: Greg Dvorak. Courtesy of the author.

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Kathy Jetr l-Kijiner holding a basket of coral stones on the concrete dome of Runit Island, which houses radioactive waste from nuclear testing at Enewetak Atoll, from her video work *Anointed*, 2018 (HD digital video, 6 min). Photograph and cinematography by Dan Lin. Image courtesy of Kathy Jetr l-Kijiner.

conversation, collaboration, and engagement with Oceania and the artists of the Pacific Islands region. It is not my intention to attempt a history of art in Oceania, which would be audacious and inadequate, given that I am not an art historian, nor has that been my research specialization up until now. There are many meticulous art historians and curators, such as Peter Brunt, Nicholas Thomas, Sean Mallon, and their colleagues, who have done magnificent work in this arena with their *Art in Oceania: A New History*,¹² and later, the “Oceania” exhibition in 2018–19 at the Royal Academy in London and Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. This show, which painstakingly pulled together hundreds of works by people all over Oceania from past centuries, gathered from European collections and mindfully chosen with regard to the integrity of their provenance, also included a substantial body of works from contemporary Pacific artists that were highly engaged with urgent questions over colonialism, militarism, racism, war, the environment, and globalization. Still, this exhibit was criticized, for example, by Native Hawaiian curator Noelle Kahanu, one of its advisors, who lamented that although these precious objects, many imbued with immense spiritual and ancestral significance, were presented in Europe, the show was also significant in that “those [Pacific people] who would most benefit, who would most deserve to see that which is here, [were] absent.”¹³ She added that it remained the task of the visitor to draw their own connections to realize the violent history that confined such collections to European audiences, far away from the Pacific Ocean, with the work of contemporary Islander artists asked to bear the burden of interpreting all of this, as is if it were an afterthought. This is a crucial critique that echoes those previously leveled against the Musée du Quai Branly itself, which anthropologist Margaret Jolly argued enables a forgetting of modern art’s “primitivist” colonial collusion, concluding that “if cultures are talking [there], it appears that only certain people are party to those conversations and empowered to talk.”¹⁴ And so, although “Oceania” was a breathtaking exhibit that marked a turning point in the reframing of art made by Pacific Islanders, perhaps with a more coral-like attention to the lives of real communities and real artists with names, this was only the beginning of truly embracing indigenous art from Oceania on the global scene.

There has, nonetheless, been momentum building toward a fairer conversation and reclamation of agency by Pacific artists closer to home for many decades, and Pacific art is linking more and more with indigenous art around the world in fascinating and exciting ways, with the

advance of social media and better communications facilitating more trans-indigenous and global connections with audiences worldwide and in the international art world. For over forty years, the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FESTPAC) has been held every four years to celebrate and perpetuate indigenous Pacific Islander art throughout the region, most recently in Guåhan in 2016. Aotearoa-New Zealand has also long been a major, thriving center for Pacific art, as a gathering place of both Māori indigenous communities and the Pacific Islander diaspora in urban spaces like Auckland and Wellington, who have had to negotiate the tough tensions of settler colonialism and racism but have nurtured rich and meaningful government-sponsored protocols and indigenous arts support infrastructures that foster effective creative production and networking. More recently, however, indigenous art, especially from Oceania, has gained an international foothold, such as in the formation of the Honolulu Biennial or the latest iteration of the Sydney Biennale, which featured mainly indigenous and First Nations artists.¹⁵

But these kinds of spaces and movements are still few and far between, and are lacking in significant parts of the greater Pacific Ocean area, particularly in smaller islands and up in the northern hemisphere, such as in Japan, where “art from Oceania” still means dusty artifacts devoid of context or genealogy on display at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. Isolated showings of contemporary Pacific artists have been held from time to time, most recently in the 2015 Aichi Triennale or 2020 Yokohama Triennale,¹⁶ but these works have not been linked to larger conversations around decolonization or confrontation with Japan’s colonial past – nor has there yet been any meaningful curatorial project that brings Pacific Islanders into conversation with the indigenous communities of Japan, such as Ainu or Okinawans. Mayunkiki, a contemporary Ainu musical artist from the colonized northern lands of Ainu Moshir (commonly known as Japan’s Hokkaido), was invited to participate in the recent Sydney Biennale, but for the most part Ainu artists today are virtually unknown in Japan – even if, for example, Ainu cultural histories have been featured (or appropriated) in the work of Japanese artists, such as Nara Yoshitomo. Works by Okinawan artists, whose ancestral Ryūkyū Kingdom was overthrown and annexed by Japan, have gained international attention in recent years, such as the art of Yamashiro Chikako or Miyagi Futoshi, both of whom reference the gritty realities of war and militarism in past and present Okinawa in their work. Okinawan

Ishikawa Mao's stunning oeuvre of photography and activist writing has for decades shown how Japanese public complicity in the Japanese-American military embrace perpetuates more racism, base construction, and sexual violence against women and girls in Okinawa; yet her work – which is, in fact, highly nuanced and conscious of interisland tensions – is almost impossible to show in Tokyo. As recently as 2019, when Ishikawa was granted a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Photographic Society of Japan, a photo of hers was censored from the accompanying exhibition – an image depicting a likeness of prime minister Shinzo Abe being crushed by one of the huge concrete blocks used to cover the reef and build the new base in Henoko.

S/pacific Art

I remember being with Samoan/Rarotongan/Tahitian artist Michel Tuffery in Kanaky (the indigenous name for New Caledonia) many years ago, marveling at the exhibition “Kanak: L'Art est une Parole,” a show which was curated by Emmanuel Kasarhérou and shared between the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea and Musée du Quai Branly (a rare example of art collected in Europe being shared back in its place of origin). As we walked through this exhibition, the first of its kind to gather intricate carvings and sculptures, masks, and other creations of centuries of Kanak heritage, I remember looking at Michel, who stood silent, seemingly awestruck. He was not beholding these items as artifacts in glass cases mounted on plinths but rather conversing, it seemed, with their ancestral creators – human beings who could have been ancestors along the Great Migration, people who had encoded messages and knowledge and wisdom into these treasures. Visibly moved, he looked up at me and said, “You can just feel the *mana* leaping out at you, can't you?”

Mana is a Polynesian word, which has some equivalents in other Pacific languages as well, meaning something along the lines of “power,” a life force or energy that can flow through all humans and objects and places, and can be cultivated. More importantly, it is appreciated and respected. There is also the Polynesian notion of *tapu*, which basically means “sacred” and is where the adapted English word “taboo” comes from, mainly because *tapu* can essentially mean “so sacred that it is off-limits to ordinary people.” This is similar to the Marshallese concept (which would commonly be thought of as “Micronesian”) of *mo*, which also imbues places and people and things with a sacredness and energy, similar to *mana*, that only chiefs and other powerful people can access.¹⁷ As the

authors of the book *Art in Oceania* emphasize, art from these communities has thus been not only about aesthetics but also about transmitting power and purpose through carvings, intricate tattoos, weavings, barkcloth, paintings, drawings, sculptures, performances, songs, dances, and other creations that communicate and convey this kind of *mana* or energy for the community and for other generations.¹⁸ As is true for most indigenous communities, art often belongs to a space of ritual and even sacredness.

Mana can be felt in the work of Māori artist Lisa Reihana – who represented New Zealand in the 2017 Venice Biennale with her phenomenal and epic multimedia piece *In Pursuit of Venus Infected* (part of an installation entitled *Emissaries*) – which imbues her work with a ceremonial consciousness and multiple perspectives that embrace the diversity and collective trauma of transoceanic and transcolonial encounter in the Pacific Islands. Focusing on the expeditions of James Cook in Polynesia, whose mission was in part to observe the transit of Venus from the South Pacific while also “discovering” and claiming Australia for Britain, Reihana's work digitally hijacks the eighteenth-century decorative wallpaper designed by Joseph Dufour based on painter Jean-Gabriel Charvet's romantic and orientalist vision of a Polynesian utopia. Animating this wallpaper with meticulously rendered live-action reenactments of the violence, resistance, wretchedness, and messiness of these encounters between specific Islander communities and white colonists, Reihana subverts (“infects”) this paradise with Oceanian agency. The artist, who has pointed out that POV can stand for both “pursuit of Venus” and “point of view,”¹⁹ reconfigures the narratives of first contact that are common throughout the islands colonized by British Empire, defying the hackneyed trope of Cook's heroism that runs through so much of Western versions of Pacific history. Reihana explained to me that the inclusion of scenes of contact with Aboriginal Australians, who suffered enormously as a result of Cook's conquests, in the final iteration of the work were a way of bringing the story around full circle and honoring the very first migrants to the greater Pacific (the first Aboriginal people likely arrived nearly sixty thousand years ago in what we call Australia today) and the last migrations of Pacific Islanders to Aotearoa to become Māori (over seven hundred years ago). In the scrolling, we see seamless scenes and audioscapes, moments of confusion, despair, rape, and murder, disease and dispossession of Islanders – but we also see the boredom, sickness, and discontent of the white settlers, the extensive gifting of objects and knowledge by Islander

elders to Joseph Banks and others in Cook's crew, the fluidity of *fa'afāfine* third-gender Samoans, the angry responses of chiefs, the myriad rituals of mourning and war, and the ritual return of Cook's dismembered remains to the British after he has been killed in Hawai'i. While her work critiques a Cook-centric narrative arc that deals mainly with the southern hemisphere and a story that is most familiar to Polynesians, it is a project that resonates powerfully with indigenous and colonized, marginalized people all over Oceania and everywhere else. Her art speaks on its own terms to collections of indigenous art and compels curators to rethink how and what they exhibit with respect to real people and the communities they belong to.²⁰ It broadcasts *mana* across horizons in ways that help to fuel a trans-indigenous conversation about decolonization. It is coral infecting concrete: creating space to ritually acknowledge these trespasses and reclaim stolen narratives.

Opening Up Ocean Space

Creating space for conversation, respect, and ritual is perhaps one of the most central elements – both in practice and outcome – of art from Oceania. We see this even in the work of emerging artists from the region, such as Auckland-based young urban Pacific Islander artist collective FAFSWAG, who see themselves as “navigating together as a family” around core values of mutual respect for each other and for their communities, while also holding space for marginalized queer indigenous and Pacific Islander youth.²¹ Functioning together as a group and also as individual artists, their projects have crisscrossed interactive filmmaking initiatives, online spaces, Instagram-driven drag vignettes, vogue ball events and sites,²² and reconfigurations of postcolonial gender and sexuality, drawing on tradition and bravely tackling missionary and other Western influences to carve out a queer and gender-nonconforming genealogy of their own that is built on support and care. As artists Elyssia Wilson-Heti and Tanu Gago point out, their collective navigation is also an important model for artist support in the predominantly white world of contemporary global art – how to move through space and how to define “success” on their own terms.²³

Increasingly aware of this honoring of space, family, community, process, and agency, the Asia Pacific Triennial, held by the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) in Brisbane, Australia, has embraced more and more art from Oceania in its recent iterations, learning from its mistakes and using more grassroots approaches to engage on equal terms

with local practitioners. Ritual matters in all encounters in Oceania – an asking for permission to enter, the granting of that permission, the mindfulness that one is on someone else's land, and some form of ritual to bless this new connection and relationship, or the return of people who have come back. The opening ceremonies for the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial (APT9) in 2018 were not only emblematic of this kind of respect for one's hosts and the ceremonies of joining and gathering; they were, in fact, also a fundamental part of activating and blessing the art itself and bringing people together. The Welcome to Country, led by representatives of the different indigenous custodial communities of the land where the gallery sits, began with a number of protocols in which all artists and visitors were invited to participate, together with brief speeches, songs, chants, and words of welcome. In return, artists from different indigenous communities were invited to respond with their own gifts and performances. Watching these rituals unfold, as artists from Kiribati, Bougainville, and Aotearoa shared their responses, it was clear that space was being made for connection, that something was being *opened* in the true sense. Ishikawa Mao, whose early photographs were on exhibit, explained to me that she was impressed by the solidarity between marginalized groups and the honoring of ancestral land, having never seen anything like this in Japan – where she has always felt like an outsider to the scene.

“Women's Wealth,” an exhibition within APT9, cocurated by Sana Balai, together with at least twenty women artists, is a stellar example of how Pacific art can be conceived and exhibited in ways that are beneficial to local places and communities while also facilitating further connections. Emphasizing an onsite intensive weeklong workshop in Bougainville, a matrilineal society that has been heavily colonized by mining and strained by years of civil war, the project emphasized and celebrated women's ingenuity and resilience and encouraged them to share and create together. Exhibited together with *Habitat, 2018*, a powerful video work by Bougainvillean/Australian artist Taloi Havini that compassionately helped to contextualize the trauma of capitalism and patriarchal power around the Panguna region, while articulating the many intricate works made by these women – most of whom were present for the opening in Australia – this was a showing of Pacific art in the truest sense: grounded in both tradition and contemporary social engagement. It was also grounded in a larger conversation that had more to do with a living, breathing community and land than with the air-conditioned white cube.

Approaching its thirtieth iteration, I am

humbled to be able to work as cocurator with Ruth McDougall and Ruha Fifita for the next (10th) Asia Pacific Triennial to be held in late 2021, for which I am helping to facilitate a similarly workshopped and collaborative curatorial process together with Micronesian counterparts in Northern Oceania.²⁴ As part of this, I have been fortunate to team up with Marshallese artist Kathy Jetn̄l-Kijiner and observe her process, which is also deeply imbued with a consciousness for ritual. Jetn̄l-Kijiner, who has become known globally for her influential climate change activism and charismatic spoken-word art, is keenly aware of the challenges of nuclear testing and ecological disaster her country faces. Setting aside the important but repetitive quotes and statistics that render Marshallese people as victims of military and ecological colonialism, her work enacts and channels a deeper sense of indigenous spirituality, drawing on legends and chants to stand up to the horror of atomic catastrophe and displacement, while opening space to grieve and express anger. She expresses her fury passionately and evocatively, rightfully calling out the abuses of the past and present but simultaneously and gracefully rising above them. One example of this is how in her video work *Anointed* (2018), conceived in collaboration with cinematographer Dan Lin, Kathy voyaged to the former nuclear testing site of Enewetak Atoll, where local communities returned to live after American soldiers in the 1970s – in an inadequate gesture of compensation – buried tons of irradiated surface soil (only a fraction of the horrific amount of waste generated) under a colossal concrete cap. Standing atop this dome – known by local Islanders as “the Tomb” – she places coral stones atop the concrete, a ritual gesture of mourning and purification. This work, like all of Kathy’s art, is simultaneously a call to action, a lament, and an act of healing that summons local knowledge and projects it defiantly, resistantly, throughout the world. It is fluent, literally and figuratively, in the language of coral, honoring living and dying and the endurance of culture and identity via the resilient reef.²⁵

Valuing the S/pacifics of Oceania

The international art world seems more concerned with concrete than with coral. It is a world that moves and functions primarily in terms of material culture and money, in the logistics of transporting and exhibiting, buying and borrowing physical objects, and privileges those histories of Things over the ephemeral, the microscopic, the ritual, the coralline, the contradictory. But opening up to coral and what it offers us in terms of deep time, deep

connections with origins, compassion, care, may be the shift that is needed in these challenging times. Art from Oceania, and art grounded in indigenous thinking in general, provides hints for how to do this.

And in considering the ocean, I return to where I began in saying that valuing and opening minds to ocean space requires us to value the intimate and specific passages, traversings, and encounters of real people who connect the dots and link these islands together across that ocean space. As with the Indian, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Arctic, Oceanian space is a space of turbulence, violence, and change – nothing truly “pacific” at all. I argue for S/pacificity, for the awareness that the ocean is no void – it is inhabited and alive and loved, and it has much to teach us. Sensing the entirety of the ocean is one thing, but what truly matters is to learn from those who know how to navigate, weather, resist, and ride its waves.

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e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Greg Dvorak
S/pacific Islands: Some Reflections on Identity and Art in Contemporary Oceania

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- 1
Teresia K. Teaiwa, "Bikinis and Other S/pacific N/oceans," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 87–109.
- 2
Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 27–40.
- 3
"The Middle of Now-here," the name of one of the sections in my book *Coral and Concrete: Remembering Kwajalein Atoll between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), was adopted as the title for the inaugural Honolulu Biennial in 2017, which focused especially on contemporary art from Oceania and for which I served as one of the curatorial advisors.
- 4
Teresia Teaiwa, "We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 2 (2017): 133–36.
- 5
Burying of the placenta in the earth as ritual and linkage to land appears in the literary and theoretical work of Samoan writer Albert Wendt, French Polynesian writer Chantal Spitz, and Māori writer Witi Ihimaera, for example.
- 6
These dates are based on the adoption of international treaties that officially conferred governing status to Germany or Japan, respectively. In terms of local realities, the "Japanese period" began as early as 1914, when Japan defeated Germany in a significant battle of World War I and subsequently began settling the Marshall Islands and other island groups. Likewise, though a clear postwar treaty was not worked out until 1947 with the formation of the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Japanese civilians and military, and all Japanese rule, had been eliminated from Micronesia by 1945.
- 7
Vicente Diaz, "Stepping in It: How to Smell the Fullness of Indigenous Histories," in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, ed. Chris Andersen and Jean M. O'Brien (Routledge, 2016), 86–92.
- 8
I explore these metaphors more deeply in my book *Coral and Concrete*.
- 9
Here I pay homage to Tessa Morris-Suzuki's meditation on intersecting "little" versus "big" histories in her book *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 13.
- 10
As a scholar of Pacific history, I

am especially concerned by how the Pacific has often been framed a sort of "new frontier" by faraway academics, artists, and curators who sometimes appropriate Pacific knowledge, designs, stories, and secrets deprived of their original context, recolonizing the Pacific over and over again with no respect for who and what was already there.

11
Take, for example, Bruce Conner's 1976 *Crossroads*, which features twenty-seven minutes of edited archival footage of the Baker test, one of the first atomic weapons tests conducted at Bikini Atoll, which meditates on the sublime spectacle of nuclear warfare without regard for the displaced Marshallese people and their brave acts of resistance and ongoing fight for compensation. More recently, Julian Charrière's photographic work in Bikini Atoll (in his 2018 Berlin exhibit "As We Used to Float") is an example of important and devastating work that brilliantly draws attention to the horrors of nuclear war in its depiction of unnatural, irradiated Marshallese landscapes and seascapes, but it also emphasizes remoteness, desolation, and annihilation as it literally ponders Cold War concrete ruins while relegating Islanders to the past. As harbingers of impending climate apocalypse, Pacific Islands are also often portrayed as sites of future ruin by environmental activist artists from outside the region, who typically render Islanders as helpless victims or leave their voices out of the story entirely.

12
Peter Brunt, Nicholas Thomas, Sean Mallon, et al. *Art in Oceania: A New History* (Thames & Hudson, 2012).

13
Noelle Kahanu, plenary comments during the "Oceania" Exhibition Curatorial Talk, 23rd Pacific History Association Conference, Royal Academy of London, December 3, 2018.

14
Margaret Jolly, "Becoming a 'New' Museum? Contesting Oceanic Visions at Musée du Quai Branly," *The Contemporary Pacific* 23, no. 1 (2001): 123.

15
In 2017, I helped to advise the inaugural Honolulu Biennial, directed by Fumio Nanjo and Ngahiraka Mason, who prominently featured Hawaiian and Pacific indigenous artists – a curatorial intention that was built upon again in 2019 by artistic director Nina Tonga. In 2020, the Sydney Biennale made history when it highlighted over one hundred artists mainly of First Nations heritage from around the world, under the artistic direction of Brook Andrew, who titled the exhibition "NIRIN," a term from his

maternal Wiradjuri Aboriginal heritage that translates approximately to “Edge.” “NIRIN” is an example of how international networks of indigenous curators have been catalyzing meaningful changes in how artists are chosen and exhibited globally, and Oceania is a major hub of these movements, particularly between Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia, but also in conversation with First Nations communities in Canada, and in collaboration with artists, curators, galleries, and initiatives in Hawai’i, Guåhan, Sāmoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and other island sites. Indigenous artists from Taiwan, too, with their ancestral Austronesian links to Oceania, began participating in the Festivals of Pacific Arts in 2004, and have since collaborated with and exchanged with Pacific artists in Kaohsiung, Taipei, and other cities. Later this year, “Toi Tū Toi Ora: Contemporary Māori Art” at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki will be the largest ever exhibition of indigenous art from Aotearoa-New Zealand.

16
These were Australia-based Bougainvillean artist Taloi Havini and Marshallese artist Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner, respectively. I also curated a special program of indigenous Pacific Islander film at the 2019 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival entitled “Am/nesia: Forgotten ‘Archipelagos’ of Oceania,” which focused on the virtual disappearance of Micronesia as a result of the war between Japan and the United States in the Pacific.

17
See Ingrid Ahlgren, “The Meaning of Mo: Place, Power, and Taboo in the Marshall Islands” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2016).

18
Brunt, Thomas, Mallon, et al., *Art in Oceania*, 11.

19
Dee Jefferson, “Lisa Reihana: A Monumental, Immersive New Artwork Reanimates the Story of Captain Cook and First Contact,” *ABC News*, August 31, 2018 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-31/lisa-reihana-in-pursuit-of-venus-reimagines-australian-history/9376114>.

20
Personal communication with Lisa Reihana and James Pinker, August 27, 2020.

21
Personal communication with FAFSWAG, September 3, 2020.

22
See for example <http://www.fafswagvogue.com>.

23
Personal communication with FAFSWAG, September 3, 2020.

24
When the Covid-19 pandemic erupted we had already been engaging in conversations on the ground, visiting artists in Guåhan, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Majuro, talking locally with singers, chanters, navigators, weavers, painters, and poets. This process, though seemingly interrupted by the grounding of planes and closing of borders, has actually gotten richer and more innovative as artists in each community facilitate their own conversations and share with us and each other in weekly transoceanic Zoom workshops. Micronesians, who are experts in overcoming distance and isolation, are patient teachers of bridge-building and celebrating togetherness across the water.

25
Australian-based Tongan artist Latai Taumoepeau also deserves mention here for her attention to ritual and custom in her performance and video art while addressing the severe injustices of colonial encounter and environmental harm. *I-Land X-isle* (2012), in which the artist suspends herself bound intricately by ropes to a massive melting block of ice, symbolizing the direct consequences of the melting polar glaciers for Pacific Islander communities, could be read as a direct response to the kind of climate art I mentioned earlier that deprives Islanders of agency by disarticulating islands from their inhabitants. In the 2020 Sydney Biennale she performed a piece called *The Last Resort*, referencing the resilience, struggles, and vulnerability of Pacific Islanders living on the front lines of climate change. The piece evokes the communities stacking up sandbags to fend off the rising sea, symbolized by bags filled with glass bottles (originally derived from melting sand/silica), which she pounds using traditional practices and crushes wearing shoes made of bricks.

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