Not different enough: coloniality, regionality and cultural difference in visual art of the Tasman-Pacific

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Abstract

As large and small islands in/bordering the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia appear to share much in common. While a ‘special’ or familial relationship connecting the two predominantly ‘Anglo’ countries is habitually assumed because of geographical proximity, history and apparently similar cultural heritage, both non-indigenous visual arts communities have nevertheless been ‘profoundly uncomfortable in their apparent “sameness”’ (Broker 2000). Not unlike a dysfunctional family, they share a long history of virtually ignoring one another’s art and cultural differences while striving for endorsement by northern hemisphere metropoles.

However, this has not always been the case and it seems almost unimaginable that inter-colonial connections between Australia and New Zealand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were regularly undertaken within an identifiable trans-Tasman region known as ‘Australasia’. Again in the 1970s and 1980s the two national Labor governments re-discovered trans-Tasman solidarity within the Pacific region, and the re-evaluation of regionalism was epitomised in a number of significant artist exchanges. Following some inevitable débâcles around unacknowledged cultural differences, especially...
with regard to indigenous and Pacific cultures, by 1985 the art worlds of these two countries again resumed divergent trajectories when Australian desire was directed towards the Asia-Pacific and New Zealand embraced its identity within the ‘other end’ of that hyphen.

In this paper I explore this historical context in response to an immanent cultural trans-Tasman ‘reunion’ now glimmering on Australian art institutional horizons in the form of contemporary Pacific art. This raises the questions: To what extent do Australian curators now rely on New Zealand expertise – particularly focused around ‘Polynesian’ art – for curatorial and acquisitions policies? Where is the ‘Melanesian’ Pacific, so closely associated with Australia’s history? And why do Pacific-Australian artists continue to remain invisible in their own country?

**Introduction**

When we look outside our cultural space in which direction do we look? Up, down, to the side? ... At home it never occurred to us that more benefit could be found by thinking sideways – towards other ‘Southern Spaces’. (Papastergiadis 2003: 1)

As large and small islands bordering/in the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand appear to share much in common. Habitually, political and economic rhetoric concerning trans-Tasman relations in both countries assumes closeness, similarity and, in particular, familiarity, through geographical proximity, settler histories (predominantly colonial and Anglo-Celtic), language and culture. Indeed, the countries share many pasts but, as Mein Smith et al (2008: 13–14) suggest, not necessarily a shared history. Separate national histories of both nations abound and comparative studies exist in the domains of economics, trade, defence, health and science (Sinclair 1987a), but more than 150 years of densely entangled trans-Tasman inter-relationships go largely unremarked. In particular, cultural comparisons between these countries remain surprisingly unexamined and this is nowhere more evident than in the Australian visual arts sector and Pacific/Oceanic studies, two fields of research that rarely intersect.

In examining the intertwined aesthetic histories of Australia and New Zealand, it is imperative to situate both countries within their surrounding Tasman and Oceanic regions.
Such geo-cultural positioning provides an appropriate context for understanding how profound differences have shaped notions of national culture and identity, particularly over the past three decades. New Zealand is an officially decreed Pacific nation, albeit within prescribed bi-cultural and bi-lingual policies (Goff 2007). The Treaty of Waitangi formally acknowledges the Indigenous Māori\(^2\) population (tangata whenua) as first people. At the 2006 census these people of the Pacific represented 14.6 per cent of (Aotearoa) New Zealand’s\(^3\) population while first and second generation immigrant Islanders indigenous to other Pacific countries accounted for 6.9 per cent (Statistics New Zealand 2011). Both Pacific communities enjoy high cultural visibility across the country, including prominence throughout the contemporary visual art sector.

In contrast, Australia’s cultural, political and economic relations within this shared geographical region have taken a very different stance, even though two and a half per cent of this country’s (officially multicultural) population claims Pacific/Oceanic heritage,\(^4\) in addition to half a million New Zealand-born immigrants, including one sixth of all Māori (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011; Rose et al 2009). Australia’s broader Pacific sector is similar in size to populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, whose Indigenous land rights are yet to be comprehensively legislated (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation nd). Unlike New Zealand’s cultural profile, Australian artists of Pacific heritage comprise a ‘vibrant but consistently untapped and overlooked dimension of the Australian art scene’ (O’Riordan 2009). In 1985 Simon During described these divergent situations as New Zealand ‘coming to “know itself in Maori terms [sic]”, while in Australia he discerned a “crisis of emptiness” caused by the continual silencing of indigenous voices’ (in Williams 2004: 739).

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\(^2\) Maori is an older spelling for indigenous New Zealanders. Māori is now the accepted spelling of Indigenous New Zealanders in the official *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (2011).

\(^3\) Aotearoa New Zealand is an increasingly used, if contested, term, referring to the country’s indigenous heritage and bi-cultural policy. Government sites are officially titled New Zealand, with a secondary title, such as Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa. Some Māori, particularly those in/from the South Island, are divided on the use of Aotearoa as ‘the Maori name for New Zealand, though it seems at first to have been used for the North Island only. Many meanings have been given for the name’ (*Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand* 2011).

\(^4\) The terms Pacific and Oceania are subject to changing interpretations. In this paper they are used interchangeably when referring to the southern Pacific region.
However, these significant dissimilarities between indigenous cultures and between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures in each country are, along with other major differences such as population, size, climate, topography and sporting cultures, rarely acknowledged in trans-Tasman parlance (Docker and Fischer 2000). Instead, official government and much academic discourse continues to draw upon a long tradition of celebrating both countries' close ties in terms of regional proximity, predominant Anglo-Celtic heritage and language, military pacts such as ANZAC, ANZUS (Holdich, Johnson and Andre 2001) and, since 1983, a comprehensive free trade agreement appropriately named Closer Economic Relations (Templeton 2001). In other words, the historical narratives undergirding trans-Tasman relations, particularly those propounded by Australian political leaders, privilege the myth of a common 'white tribes' culture. Beyond their immediate region both countries are frequently viewed as culturally interchangeable (Hardjono 1993). The perception of a shared monoculture, then, has persisted despite the smaller country's long-held attitudes towards indigenous Māori that differ radically from its larger neighbour's constitutional stance on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Notwithstanding this divergence, a majority white cultural perspective prevailed for more than a century. In this way both countries' discomforting settler histories, which precluded a sense of being at home in the indigenous global South, could be elided. With cultural understandings of homeland firmly fixed in the northern Atlantic until at least the 1970s (Connell 2007; Murray 2010), a shared sense of cultural inferiority hindered deeper investigations of cultural difference within and between Tasman-Pacific locales. Meanjin editor Judith Brett noted that both countries have 'look(ed) steadfastly back to the northern hemisphere with scarcely a sideways glance' (1985: 328). As a result, she observed, ‘Australians’ neurotic superciliousness towards and guiltless ignorance of New Zealand help to preserve us from acknowledging our own smallness and insignificance’ (1985: 328).

Australians’ distinctive lack of curiosity about and often patronising attitude towards its smaller and ostensibly similar neighbour has not only played out within the context of familiarity, but of family per se, and more specifically the model of a happy family. Framed
within a domestic understanding of trans-Tasman relations, divergences and disagreements can thus be subsumed, masked and disregarded in a way that foreign relations between two sovereign nations may not; in a geo-political sense these require more effort. Positioned within a bland and benign kinship category, New Zealand poses no real threat and is often taken for granted by Australians as a lesser version of itself, creating ceaseless currents of slippage between domestic and foreign relations.

Brabazon observed that this awkward partnership in the south-west quadrant of the Pacific often resembles ‘an old married couple [with] nothing left to say ... staring past each other, [and] making assumptions that are not confirmed through conversation’ (2000: 33–34). Indeed this has often been the case in visual arts, where three decades ago New Zealand poet and critic Wystan Curnow noted: ‘All things considered Australia and New Zealand have quite a record for ignoring one another’s art’ (quoted in Hunter 1980: 20). Indeed, negligible information about or interest in New Zealand art has been evident in Australian art institutions until very recently and then, in a limited capacity, through the Gallery of Modern Art/Queensland Art Gallery (QAGOMA). Assumed to be too subtle, too beige and too bland, New Zealand and trans-Tasman cultural histories as ‘a family thing’ have not constituted attractive terrain for contemporary Australian curators and writers, even though distinctive cultural tensions underlie surface appearances and assumptions. Related to this historical omission, neither New Zealand per se or its visual culture have been identified as valid fields of research within Pacific studies in Australian academia, even though issues of Pacific indigeneity have infused New Zealand’s social, political and cultural identity since the mid-nineteenth century, not to mention the ‘Pasifika’ transformation that has taken place during the past three decades (Goff 2007).

While genteel familial indifference in Australian art and academia has rendered all but invisible the cultural, racial and political realities distinguishing the smaller sibling country, a few instances of intense trans-Tasman interest and exchange may be discerned through what Mein Smith et al referred to as ‘hidden histories’ and ‘repressed [family] memories’ (2008: 16). The Tasman region may have experienced countless individual cultural flows and
crossings but three distinct and short-lived periods of consciously intertwined art exchange may also be identified: these are late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interchanges within Australasia; collaborative trans-Tasman visual art programs in the 1970s and 1980s; and early twenty-first-century glimmers of Australian interest in recent New Zealand visual culture now self-consciously branded as Pasifika. This latest development has been initiated almost entirely by Brisbane’s QAGOMA collections and its APTs (Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art) (1993–), which followed Sydney’s modest and short-lived Pacific Wave Festivals in 1996 and 1998 introducing Polynesian/New Zealand art to Australian audiences.

In each example of enthusiastic trans-Tasman aesthetic accord, however, the dormant volcano of national differences and unexamined attitudes has rumbled across or erupted through the thin surface of assumed kinship to reveal deep fissures of misunderstanding and/or discord. Invariably, as in family dynamics, well-intentioned relations eventually became strained and sometimes hostile after a time, and the core of most trans-Tasman tensions has involved national attitudes and policies concerned with indigeneity, Pacific regionality and more recently exoticisation. In these encounters, white Australia, even with its later multicultural policies, is consistently revealed as a darker sheep within the Tasman-Pacific family.

While detailed analysis of these cultural, ethnic and racial minefields lie beyond this paper’s scope, I hope to offer Australian visual arts research a reorientation towards an ‘undiscovered’ region, literally and metaphorically close to home. In particular, I argue for more considered awareness of cultural and political differences distinguishing Australian and New Zealand art histories and the role of indigenous and Pacific issues and policies in shaping these distinctive narratives.

The family way

The Australia–New Zealand relation is a strange, complex one. Historically, no two countries on the face of the earth have had more in common – language, Anglo-Saxon
heritage, a pioneering push to the edge of the world, white skins on a brown frontier, colonial experience, very similar political and legal systems ... 

New Zealand and Australia have gone to war together; citizens of each country shuttle back and forth chasing the sun, opportunity or peace and quiet ... the two countries are major trading partners. Yet few countries bicker and grizzle about each other more without actually going to war. (Grant 2001: 9)

Official Australian rhetoric concerning relations with New Zealand has long drawn upon tropes of family and war in order to maintain close political and economic connections. Repeated declarations of sameness and kinship, however, often belie numerous unacknowledged differences between a large and economically dominant country and its smaller neighbour within cordial and occasionally sentimental trans-Tasman discourse. The most recent example was during Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s 2011 visit to New Zealand’s parliament in Wellington, where, paying tribute to the two nations’ ‘shared defence history’, she proclaimed: ‘Australia has many alliances and friendships around the world ... but New Zealand alone is family’ (Woodley 2011).

For all ANZAC’s apparent mutual accord, however, its legendary blood bonding has been challenged by numerous New Zealand diggers whose accounts of Gallipoli and Egypt chronicled deeper differences – including off-battlefield conflict – between the 1915 allies than the distinctive shapes of their hats (Gammage 1974; Brabazon 2000: 23–25). Notwithstanding this ‘bickering family model’ (Broker 2000), the ANZAC legend was cherished and elevated to foundational national myth by former Prime Minister John Howard (Basarin 2011: 42), a leader not otherwise at home in Tasman Pacific regions where his coalition government (1996–2007) was widely viewed as ‘deputy sheriff’ for US foreign policy (Kerr 2008). Unlike its Tasman neighbour’s increasingly more fluid position within Oceania during the 1980s and 1990s, Australia’s regional reputation with its island neighbours became one of benevolent but patronising ‘big brother’ (Kelsey, in Braddock 2004) as it instead sought economic acceptance within the Asian sector of a booming Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, as late as 2000 New Zealand was considered ‘outgrown’ as an Australian regional priority when Gregson
Edwards, Director of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Cultural Relations Branch, remarked that New Zealand was regarded ‘almost like Tasmania’ and quoted former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s warning that the Australian government should ‘mend our ... relations with Asia [or] Asia would soon look at Australia like Australia looked at New Zealand’ (Helen Stacey, personal communication, 11 November 2000). In the same year expatriate New Zealand curator David Broker noted similar attitudes prevailing on the mainstream art front where non-indigenous Tasman cultures were ‘profoundly uncomfortable in their apparent sameness’ and subject to ‘sibling rivalry, with petty jealousies and meaningless competition ... sum[ming] up the relationship’ (2000).

The family and the cultural neighbourhood

Since the time of colonial settlement the overwhelming emphasis of the (white) Australian and New Zealand art worlds has been on Euramerican and British models of production and distribution, consistently seeking affirmation from northern hemisphere metropolitan centres and major events such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta (Murray 2009a, 2010). These locales, rather than antipodean places and relations, have defined and continue to dominate notions of international aesthetic value for both countries’ art cognoscenti. Only in the last two decades have Asian cultures been introduced to the aesthetic mainstream of both countries’ art institutions, while Oceanic/Pacific art has experienced considerably later and less impact upon Australian culture than in New Zealand where, over the past three decades, it has contributed significantly to shaping the national imaginary (Goff 2007). For most of both countries’ art histories, cultural identification with northern metropoles, including Britain as ‘home’, created a vertical rather than lateral understanding of internationalism. In 1987 expatriate New Zealand writer John Salmond commented on his birth country’s recent embrace of the Pacific region:

Forty years ago the fact that New Zealand is geographically part of the Polynesian chain was not something to be stressed but ignored. Linked to Britain, as we were by chains of cultural heritage, economic dependence, and imperial sentiment, geographic location seemed irrelevant. (1987: 310–311)
This was not so in Australia. Three years earlier distinguished Indian theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1984) reminded a large Futur-fall audience of intellectuals in Sydney of Australia’s responsibility to ‘re-invent its place on the map’, rather than ‘manufacturing the voice of Atlantic Europe’. This plea came sixteen years after another Indian visitor, Indira Gandhi, ‘urged Australians to see themselves as bridging the East–West gap between South Asia and the new world of the Pacific’ (Spivak 1984). In fact, Australia’s art mainstream embraced Asian culture only from the 1990s (Asialink 2012), while Pacific Island cultures are still widely regarded as happening somewhere offshore to the east of Brisbane, not as a vibrant fact of Australia’s artistic life.

Complex relations between Pākehā New Zealanders, Indigenous Māori and Pacific Islanders have been significantly different to those experienced between white Australian settlers and Indigenes (Brady and Carey 2000; Schech and Haggis 2000; McIntyre 2000) and until the last decade infrequent instances of trans-Tasman artistic connections overwhelmingly featured non-Indigenous artists from Australia. Whereas artists of Māori (and more recently Pacific Island) heritage have been embraced as integral to New Zealand’s identity, Australian Indigenous culture was only acknowledged within national art institutions as contemporary art – as distinct from ethnography – from the later 1980s – after its value was affirmed by (western) international art markets (Berrell 2009). Moreover, beyond art world and/or sporting success, Indigenous Australia remains ‘other’ to mainstream society where a condition of forgetting Indigenous dispossession has resulted in profound cultural and psychic dislocation in terms of Australia’s literal and metaphorical place in the world. Schech and Haggis explained:

The resonance of migrancy is compounded in Australia by the twinning of the always having arrived with the wilful forgetting of the nature of that arrival – such that a sense of belonging and being at home was always reliant on a tension between awareness of arrival and skating over the nature of that arrival and its consequences. This need to actively cover up the story of arrival and conquest reinforced the need to have an external point of reference, Britain, for constructing a sense of being here. (2000: 232)
In this way the construction of a monocultural family chronicle connecting the settler societies of Australia and New Zealand allowed both white tribes, to some extent, to elide any literal skeletons in metaphorical family closets. Inevitably, however, each society’s different and complex historical experiences of race relations within the Tasman-Pacific region and the consequent effects upon cultural and artistic attitudes were exposed during a few sustained – or even brief – encounters. Living in an ‘unhomely’ region at the bottom of the world for most of their histories, New Zealand and Australia as two small and insignificant western settler societies have been, in a sense, uncomfortably yoked together, distanced not only from northern ethnic and cultural peers but from Indigenous inhabitants of the region, at least during colonial times and in varying degrees thereafter. In these circumstances where cultural foci remain ‘elsewhere’ (Murphy 1982: 47), it is not surprising the issue of size – which is common in familial transactions – comes to determine relative power relations between large and little Tasman relations. With historical, economic, ethnic, social and topographical differences regularly subsumed under the aegis of kin, mutual interest in each other’s cultural and artistic domains has rarely been evident, particularly from the western side of the Tasman. As in sibling rivalry, dominance and/or indifference and resentment have thus oscillated as persistent tensions beneath apparent family resemblances.

Such anxieties tend to go unnoticed by the larger (read senior) partner so that, in short, little in the way of New Zealand culture as a distinctive entity is seen or validated in the larger society. Consequently, the Kiwi cousins’ cultural efforts have been assumed similar but necessarily inferior, given their relative size within a partnership based on mutual inferiority and in thrall to Atlantic paradigms. By 1986, for example, following an exceptional series of Australia–New Zealand art exchanges between 1970 and 1985, New Zealand was declared ‘the last place of exile’ for Australian artists craving international affirmation (Ewington 1986: 30). It may be no coincidence that the year before saw New Zealand exiled from the 1951 ANZUS defence alliance by its partners, Australia and the US, when it denied that latter’s navy entry into Auckland’s nuclear-free harbour (Holdich, Johnson and Andre 2001).
Without regular opportunities to test regional assumptions, non-indigenous New Zealand art has remained virtually unshown and unknown in Australia, with the following major exceptions: regular cultural crossings in *fin de siècle* Australasia (my emphasis); the aforementioned 1970s and 1980s art exchanges; and occasional acknowledgement of internationally renowned Kiwi filmmakers and artists such as Jane Campion, Colin McCahon (Murphy, in Smith nd) and more recently Len Lye, who have been identified as ‘exceptional Antipodeans’ rather than New Zealanders (Zeplin 2004a: 410). By the new millennium New Zealand’s burgeoning film industry had stirred international re-evaluation of this small country’s cultural value, although Australia’s budding re-assessment of New Zealand art has been confined to an exoticised Pasifika principally generated by QAGOMA’s Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane.

Meanwhile, apart from the relatively modest Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art exhibition at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992 and the Unnerved exhibition from the QAGOMA art collection touring to the National Gallery of Victoria in 2010–11, no major New Zealand survey exhibition has appeared in an Australian state gallery – notwithstanding regular historical, contemporary and thematic Australian exhibitions being regularly featured in New Zealand state and private galleries. Such imbalance is not so surprising, as critic Johanna Mendelssohn explained in her review of Headlands: ‘The terrible truth is that most Australians’ concept of New Zealand is as a place for cheap skiing holidays and aggressive football where the locals can’t pronounce the difference between “sex” and “six’’ (1992).

Tara Brabazon observed in 2000: ‘there is not one Australian tertiary institution that teaches New Zealand studies’ (2000: 34), a situation almost unchanged in 2011, despite the fact that a number of Australian studies courses, including art history, are taught throughout New Zealand. With rare exceptions, neither is contemporary art studied in Australian Asia-Pacific studies. In recent years a number of southerly publications have explored various domains of antipodean culture, such as Raewyn Connell’s *Southern theory* (2007) and various writings by Margaret Jolly (2001, 2007) and Kevin Murray (2009a, 2009b), as well as the journal
Southpaw. Australia–New Zealand relations, however, are barely addressed, apart from two trans-Tasman studies: Brabazon’s *Tracking the Jack* (2000) and Mein Smith et al’s *Remaking the Tasman world* (2008). Even here, mention of visual culture is cursory and limited to cartoons, photographs and maps.

**An Australasian world**

Mapping, nevertheless, was an important aspect of the Tasman world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Australasia was experienced as an identifiable region incorporating New Zealand, Australia and, optionally, Pacific Oceania. Today it is hard to imagine thickly entwined flows of cultural traffic across the Tasman during this period, rendering both countries highly permeable within a ‘cohesive region’ (Mein Smith et al 2008: 16). With large numbers of Australians residing in New Zealand relative to the situation today (Salmond 1987: 302–303), this ‘perennial interchange’ (Arnold 1987: 53, 64) demonstrated that ‘together Australia and New Zealand once [proudly]’ wore the name “Australasia” (Mein Smith and Hempenstall 2003: 1) at a time when, according to artist Colin McCahon (1964), no New Zealand or Australian artist stayed at home. This now amorphous term Australasia was not only located as a significant regional identifier of the Tasman region and beyond, but was celebrated by writers, poets, performers and artists, even if its definitive contours had receded by the early twenty-first century to New Zealand and Australia and, at times, the western Pacific. The term is no longer acceptable to many New Zealanders (Arnold 1987; Salmond 1987; Mein Smith et al 2008).

This period saw intercolonial connections facilitated by inexpensive steamship travel, allowing regular exchange of ideas between writers, artists and others. Pivotal in these 1880s and 1890s currents was *Bulletin* magazine, described by Salmond as a ‘progenitor of shared Antipodean culture’ (1987: 302–303). Iconic Australian painter of bush nationalism Tom Roberts worked as an illustrator on equally popular journals *The picturesque atlas of Australasia* and *The Australasian sketcher* at a time when regional images, particularly cartoons, packed significant political punch. Artists plying trans-Tasman and Pacific routes included Eugene Von Guerard, Augustus Earle, William Strutt, Nicholas Chevalier, Edward Fristrom, Tom
Roberts, Girolamo Nerli, Elioth Gruner, Charles Goldie, Henry Grant Lloyd, James R Jackson and Frances Hodgkins – all but the last four claimed within Australia’s art history canon.

Regional cartography held special significance during the 1890s when the ‘seven colonies of Australasia’ (Coghlan 1904) envisioned Australia and New Zealand united within a federated Commonwealth by 1901. By this time Australasia’s parameters had shrunk from de Brosses’ 1756 cartography inclusive of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific to the ‘sphere of British influence in the South Pacific’ (Mein Smith et al 2008), otherwise known as ‘the Anglosphere’ (Reynolds 2011). By 1900 ‘Maoriland’, as it was widely known (Adams 1899) and used in less than romantic terms by the Sydney Bulletin (Stafford and Williams nd), nevertheless declined joining the new Commonwealth following initial 1890s enthusiasm. This was regarded as ‘the most important decision that the New Zealand people have yet made’ (Sinclair 1987b: 90). Among numerous reasons to decline federation was New Zealanders’ disdain for their neighbour’s loathsome convict origins and, even worse, treatment of its ‘natives’: Australians,

5 ‘Maoriland … refers to the literature of incipient nationalism of late colonial New Zealand, roughly 1880–1915. The term originates in the Sydney Bulletin as a way of pointing to what distinguishes New Zealand from Australia: the Maori, who are figured as a “dying race” whose archaic and romantic past can thus be borrowed by Pākehā (European) writers to give their settler culture the authority … of history’ (Stafford and Williams nd).
on the other hand, had ‘recoiled ... from the inclusion of the Maori in such a federation’ (Macintyre 2000). It is pertinent to note that by 1867 Māori were granted four electorates in New Zealand’s parliament, 100 years before Indigenous Australians were enfranchised (Elections New Zealand nd). In this way ‘the place of Māori in New Zealand identity’ proved ‘an important if unequal ... distinguishing element’ of Kiwi nationalism (Phillips 2009).

A striking 1900 cartoon image ‘How we see it’ by New Zealand artist ‘Scatz’ encapsulates this trans-Tasman political-racial divide, with New Zealand taking the high moral ground within an otherwise shared Australasian identity. Depicted as a (white) New Zealand maiden wearing a Māori cloak and holding hands with a young ‘native’ man, ‘innocent’ ‘Zealandia’ repels a brutally primitive ogre who represents convict Australia, complete with shackles. To the ogre’s entreaty ‘Come into these arms’, the maiden replies: ‘Nay, sir, those arms bear chains’.

Scatz, ‘How we see it’, New Zealand Graphic, 20 October 1900.
Image courtesy Alexander Turnbull Library,
National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa
Claims of New Zealand’s moral superiority and genteel national demeanour abounded during this period and were critically interrogated by Stafford and Williams (nd) as being less about virtuous enlightenment than romanticised colonial notions of ‘Māori exceptionalism’ among the categories of racial ‘otherness’. In 1898, for example, a common New Zealand attitude was exemplified by the comment: ‘The average colonist ... looks on an Australian black as very near to a wild beast; but he likes the Māoris, and is sorry that they are dying out’ (Reeves, quoted in Williams 2004: 745). Romantic nostalgia for what seemed inevitable ‘native’ extinction was imaged by many artists and writers in both countries, namely Australian artist Tom Roberts and European artists working in Australia and New Zealand like Edward Friström. Melancholy depictions of ‘the native race’s demise’, however, were more systematically taken up by New Zealand portrait painters and photographers such as Charles Goldie and Gottfried Lindauer, further indicating ‘New Zealand’s sense of its difference from Australia, especially with respect to Indigenous race relations’ (Williams 2004: 745). Legendary Australian writer Henry Lawson who lived, worked in and wrote about ‘Maoriland’ in the late 1890s revealed tougher literary depictions of the ‘native question’ than much sentimental New Zealand writing (Williams 2004: 746–747). For all their apparent difference on the question of race relations, both countries shared fierce opposition to Asian immigration (Williams 2004).

Many New Zealanders resident in Australia or Europeans journeying within both countries continued to cross the Tasman to exhibit and/or become subsumed within the Australian art history canon, among them Nicholas Chevalier, Eugene Von Guerard, Girolamo Nerli, Roland Wakelin (Australia’s most celebrated post-impressionist artist) and pioneer abstractionist Godfrey Miller. However their achievements are rarely geo-culturally identified (Riddler 2010), even in 1982 when New Zealand expatriate artist Rosalie Gascoigne represented Australia in the prestigious Venice Biennale. This invisibility as ‘phantom kiwis’ is compounded by a dearth of contemporary New Zealand and Pacific art held in Australian state galleries. As Daniel Thomas explained, it ‘falls’ between museological classification of ‘Australian’ and ‘European/international’ collections (interview with the author, Hawley
Beach, Tasmania, 30 September 2003). The elusive New Zealand category would further confound art taxonomies into the next century when it incorporated Pacific art.

**Trans-Tasman ‘tie-ups’ and the white ghosts of ANZART**

Although notions of Australasia were submerged following 1901 Federation, later periods of concerted Australia and New Zealand art exchange took place during the 1970s and 1980s, which attempted to explore regionality as an alternative form of internationalism. Nevertheless, these antipodean investigations investigating Tasman genealogies further uncovered Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations as important markers – or fault lines – of difference between the countries. Along with other socio-cultural divergences, these regional encounters later eventuated in an unexpected family feud that fuelled Australian managerialist organisations to aspire to more professionalised and internationalised (read Euramerican) art opportunities for at least the next two decades.

Fifteen years prior to this neo-conservative turn, and after decades of cultural cringing, there was a brief time throughout the 1970s when Labo(u)r governments on both sides of the Tasman officially recuperated policies of regionality (Whitlam 1995), encouraging artists to explore their geographical identity. Later, in the early 1980s context of the CER (Closer Economic Relations) trade agreement ‘trans-Tasman tie-ups’ were supported by both governments as cultural diplomacy exercises in ‘Closer Esthetic Relations’ (Curnow 1983).

1970s government policies on regionality coincided with a time of intense artistic experimentation. Mildura Sculpture Triennials in rural Victoria provided major opportunities to investigate the Antipodean ‘backyard’ by trying out non-object art – performance, installation and video – in informal environments. Here, participating New Zealanders’ bold innovation was highly acclaimed by Australian critics (Zeplin 2004b) and enduring new trans-Tasman bonds were forged through New Zealand participation in the 1976 Biennale of Sydney, followed by strong trans-Tasman protest activity after their country’s unexpectedly reduced representation at the 1979 Biennale of Sydney: European Dialogue (Zeplin 2004a). These new exchange opportunities were enthusiastically and programmatically pursued until
the mid-1980s through Adelaide’s Experimental Art Foundation and three major
government-funded ANZART (Australia New Zealand Art Exchange) events in Christchurch

Notwithstanding many successful trans-Tasman projects and enduring relationships over
fifteen years, emerging differences between national groups continued largely unaddressed as
New Zealanders privileged small, informal and individual values and cross-cultural political
issues, while by 1983 mushrooming Australian contingents became preoccupied with an
‘alternative art establishment’ of professionalised careers and industrial rights (Vizents in Van
den Bosch 1983: 18), a divide that appeared neo-colonialist to the smaller and less assertive
group of country cousins. Divergent approaches to indigeneity and racial politics increasingly
characterised these events, particularly at ANZART-in-Christchurch through exposure to the
South African Springboks’ 1981 rugby tour and related Māori land rights movements
(Berriman 1983). Visiting Australian artists’ ignorance of and/or indifference towards urgent
racial issues facing their neighbouring country contrasted with politicised work by Māori and
Pākehā artists.

Australians might have returned with a vivid sense that New Zealand’s race relations were
different from their own but the next ANZART-in-Hobart saw no Australian Indigenous
representation (Van den Bosch 1983: 19). Moreover, the 1985 ANZART-in-Auckland event
was the only trans-Tasman exchange to include an Australian Aboriginal artist, Tracey
Moflat (Dauth 1985). Together with Australian organisers’ sometimes hysterical
misunderstanding of Māori protocols and vehement criticism of host organisation and
professional facilities (during a severe recession), a cultural standoff occurred between
Australian officials and New Zealand artists; the visitors were described by an Australian
critic as ‘walking around like Texans’ (Ewington 1986: 30). This dysfunctional ‘family’
debacle summoned the unfortunate military spectres of 1915 ANZAC Cove and ANZUS four
months earlier, resulting in an Australia Council declaration that further interaction with
New Zealand was of ‘dubious value’ (Wolfe, in Woodham nd: 3). Henceforth, Australian art
was virtually divorced from future trans-Tasman connections as the country’s foremost arts
bureaucracy once again directed its international desire northwards, notwithstanding a minor dalliance with Southeast Asia, in Perth, along the way (Marcon 1993).

**A new Tasman accord?**

From 1987 to 1998 ANZART exchanges were replaced by biannual Perth-based ARX (Artists Regional Exchange) events where New Zealand participation and (what was left of) trans-Tasman accord was virtually extinguished in favour of Southeast Asian artists. Importantly, ARX established a strong (if unacknowledged) artist network for QAGOMA’s Asia-Pacific Triennial of Australian Art (APT) initiated in 1993. APT aligned at least one major Australian art institution with Australia’s national trade and foreign affairs agenda, providing a minor alternative to the prevailing (Euramerican) international art world. Within two decades this development has introduced an estimated 1.8 visitors to contemporary art of the Asia-Pacific region (QAGOMA 2012). However, since this landmark event has privileged northern Pacific and other Asian art over South Pacific art (represented by an average of 12 to 20 per cent of works between 1999 and 2006), we might ask how this Australian event focusing on Asia and the Pacific affects the course of trans-Tasman relations? After all, interest in Asian art was not taken up in New Zealand until well into the following decade, a century after both countries’ hostile abjuration of Asia.

In invoking a new and enlarged geography of de Brosses’ 1756 Australasia, which originally included Southeast Asia, the APT has re-introduced New Zealand art to Australian audiences. Such a reunion also appears to reverse historic Australian antipathy to New Zealand’s ‘native question’ since the majority of APT’s New Zealand selections have been framed within a new Pacific/Oceanic context, notwithstanding that this adjacent region constitutes a very minor part of each exhibition. Growing Australian acceptance, however, has not embraced the neighbouring ‘white tribes’ but a newly branded Aotearoa New Zealand where Auckland is the world’s largest Polynesian capital of sassy, exportable Pasifika culture. While Australian art was disdaining its junior sibling’s lack of sophistication in the 1980s and 1990s, the latter
had grown up, proudly independent, to become a site of hip-hop street culture, quirky fashion, *fa’aafafine,* hobbits and female political leaders.

At APT this new exciting New Zealand sensibility mostly took the form of spectacular drag performances, gothic photography and funky jewellery, all glossed with exotic Pacific/Māori Polynesia. This Pacific dominated QAGOMA’s regional vision, and in 2002 it developed the only dedicated state collection of contemporary Pacific art in Australia, now ironically reliant on New Zealand curatorial expertise. Notwithstanding the political, racial and cultural complexities between Oceania and Australia, which has close historical links to Melanesia, rather than Polynesia (Cochrane 2007), QAGOMA’s website unashamedly proclaims its ‘particular focus’ as ‘contemporary works from New Zealand … [with] … emphasis … given to collecting works by significant Māori and Pacific Islander artists … born or living in New Zealand [who] address issues of indigeneity in various ways’ (Page 2012).

In 2012 this section’s three main website images still feature ethnic Pacific/New Zealand work while fourteen out of seventeen ‘selected collection highlights’ link to contemporary New Zealand art. The gallery’s 2010 Unnerved exhibition of contemporary New Zealand art was sourced entirely from its own collection, which privileges a recent vogue for the exotic and/or the gothic (Page 2010).

**Conclusion**

In the last few years, this narrow curatorial bias has been slightly broadened to include work from across Oceania, but important questions about Australia and New Zealand’s differences arise, including their respective relations with Oceania. At QAGOMA why is all New Zealand art classified as Pacific and not international? Why is Pacific art overwhelmingly viewed through a New Zealand – rather than Australian – lens which excludes Melanesian, Micronesian and Australian artists of Pacific heritage? Is this another instance of the different ways in which the New Zealand and Australian art worlds have operated regarding indigenous issues in the region, for example, APT’s belated recognition of Australian-Asian

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6 *fa’aafafine:* a Samoan term for boys who are raised as girls.
artists and minor inclusion of Indigenous Australia? In QAGOMA curators’ rush to embrace the new vogue in cross-cultural exotica, what happens to older, white tribes’ genealogies? Have these Tasman countries’ separate and entwined histories been submerged beneath spectacle and/or postcolonial embarrassment?

I am tempted to conclude that recent recognition of New Zealand art by at least one major Australian art gallery signifies the beginnings of a new trans-Tasman era of exchange, an expanded Australasia that extends the regional ‘family’ throughout Oceania. However, local history reminds us of longstanding, fraught and hidden family differences, particularly in regard to Indigenous/Pacific issues, which Australian art institutions are yet to address. What then appears as current Australian enthusiasm for Pasifika/Aotearoa art may not signify respect for changing family values so much as opportunistic appropriation of a confident exotic other. Until non-indigenous as well as indigenous art histories across the Tasman and Pacific regions can be locally interrogated, they will remain, except for a colourful but fleeting interlude, flat and bland and blank as Australian settler inhabitants in this region continue questing northwards in search of ancestral identity.

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