

Honolulu Biennial

NGAHIRAKA MASON // THE ISLANDS COME TO US

By Gan Uyeda



Ngahiraka Mason served as the Curator of Māori Art for two decades at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, New Zealand’s largest public art museum. There, she greatly expanded the representation of Māori art and culture, while consistently demonstrating cross-cultural and intergenerational linkages between thinkers and makers. I sat down with her at her home in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, where she has lived since 2015, to discuss her career, her curatorial outlook, and her most recent project: co-curating the inaugural Honolulu Biennial with Mori Art Museum Director Fumio Nanjo. The Biennial opened in March 2017 with sites across Honolulu.

GAN UYEDA: I want to start with your first position—you were the Curator of Māori Art at the Auckland Art Gallery for twenty years. How did you first come into that role?

NGAHIRAKA MASON: Yes, my specialty was historic, modern and contemporary Māori art, but I worked across the museum’s entire collection—from fourteenth-century European art to colonial and historical New Zealand art to modern and contemporary art. How did I come to work there? I was a security guard! I was completing a BFA at Elam School of Fine Art in Auckland and I was not sure of the direction I would take. I submitted an application for a security guard position at the museum. I believe the Maltese man who hired me, Laurie Teixeira, did not know that I was female by my name. He thought I would be a burly Polynesian man until he phoned me and I spoke. I was a complete surprise to him and I loved him for his genuine response.

My security guard position put me in front of art and the public and I really appreciated that learning. As a guard, you hear what the public thinks and says about art, which can be insightful and very different from the museum’s perception of public engagement.

What the museum visitor shares with a security guard is different from what is collected in a survey. This was my training ground and I loved every moment.

GU: Right—that type of public access is usually siloed as part of an audience engagement position, or within the museum’s education wing, which is separated from curatorial.

NM: Yes, the ‘visitor experience’ has become part of a survey process rather than a genuine interaction between the public and museum. Telling the public what is good for them is not listening to their views. I was tapped on the shoulder to involve myself with some of the museum curators’ exhibition projects including research and artwork interpretation. I also looked to the collection during research for my MFA. The museum has a great historical photography collection which led me to cataloguing historic photographs in the museum’s database. I had never really thought about curating as a career, but when you are at a crossroads in life, opportunities come to you in a way. As a security guard, I was also the first female Māori employee at the institution. The museum opened in 1888, and this was in 1994. I spent a couple of years doing





various projects with the historic collection as a gallery assistant by which time the Māori community had organized and lobbied to create a Māori curator position in charge of areas of the museum's collection to help make Māori art and culture visible within the institution. The local government gave an unprecedented directive to the museum to create a Māori curator position in 1999, and I was the first one to inhabit that role, which I held until I left in 2015. I worked initially with two collections from the late 19th century and went on to develop the modern and contemporary Māori and New Zealand art collections. So, this introduction to curating was partly about timing and being in the right place at the right time. The fact that the position was brought to bear by the community made the position political, contested, and invaluable to the community at large.

GU: As a security guard, you saw the public directly interacting with and interpreting these works of art. How do you think that experience has directed your curatorial activity?

NM: It made all the difference. I entered the field of curating from a fine art discipline, which was considered an unconventional way to enter this kind of position in a museum. The traditionally trained art historians at the institution felt I had slipped in under the radar. I was a maker with art history training, but I also had life experience. I was not intimidated by the opinions of colleagues. I was comfortable with my own worldview and those of the community that placed me in the institution. The truth is that I did not know there were rules in the profession, so I unconsciously broke every one of them. In some ways, my position ruptured the conventions within an institution that was prideful of its traditions. Eventually, I realized that our publics just want to understand what museums put in front of them and why. I knew that my personal curatorial approach was based on my own need to understand the ways ideas, subjects, genres, different knowledges and themes all intersect. Hence, I make exhibitions for understanding. Period.

GU: I am interested in the relationship between the curator and the permanent collection at an institution. Could you talk about the difference between working with a collection and working in various

capacities with biennials and triennials? What is the contrast in working approach?

NM: The great thing about working with a museum collection is it allows you to play across time rather than be restricted in time. In my former institution, I would mix things up to show the continuities of an idea across different ages. Working with a collection allows the curator to take new approaches in applying how one thinks, how one sees, how one knows about the world. I loved walking along racks of paintings, pulling out screens, peering into sculpture storage, opening drawers of prints and drawings. Having a living database like that is an amazing resource for a curator. I could just live there. Accessing the research library was critical, just to read and examine why thinkers from the nineteenth and twentieth century held particular views. These things teach one to approach history as if it were a living history and to understand that there is a living thread to all narratives. It is also recognizing that you can never truly "tell" histories; histories are living and still being formed. In my work as an independent curator unhooked from a collection, I produce exhibitions that look different than museum shows, but my approach to exhibition making remains the same.

GU: As you were transitioning out of your role at Auckland Art Gallery and relocating to Honolulu, you initiated a project called *Mana Moana*. Could you speak to the development and parameters of that project?

NM: I had worked with an artist, Star Gossage, and four other painters to make a contemporary painting exhibition in late 2014. As I was leaving the museum, I felt I had not had enough time to expand on some ideas from working with Gossage. She is a self-taught painter, rural, introspective. Before relocating to Hawai'i, I had a studio visit with O'ahu artist Solomon Enos. He was working across a range of media including painting, diorama installation, science fiction illustration, and street painting, and I felt there was a strange yet potent alchemy between their individual approaches to making art. Their values and cultural research methodologies were similar. People were at the center of their thinking and making. I thought this could be interesting.

“When he was on the ocean headed to Tahiti from Hawai‘i, the Hawaiian navigator Nainoa Thompson famously said, **‘We do not sail to Tahiti—Tahiti comes to us. We stay present and remain aware of our surroundings.’** This is what I attempted to create within the *Mana Moana* construct, to reach into the tacit knowledge of the artists and their approaches to making, to examine their understanding and awareness of themselves in the contemporary Pacific.”

— NGAHIRAKA MASON

About the title *Mana Moana*—a friend, Karlo Mila, coined the term. She was carrying out her postdoctoral research in the field of Pacific mental health, and making connections between language, wellbeing, and shared meaning. *Mana* (ocean) and *moana* (authority and responsibility across time) are two words that all Polynesian languages and cultures share. I wanted to interrogate what is meant when we say we are related through language, culture and meaning—how are these connections manifested today? What might that look like as an exhibition? Following a conversation with Gossage about the international contemporary art scene, I asked whether she thought she should be out in the wider world exhibiting and selling internationally. She shared that her elders spoke these words to her: “We do not believe you have to go out into the world, Star. The world will come to you.” I was struck by this, as I had heard a similar idea spoken by Polynesian ocean way finders. When he was on the ocean headed to Tahiti from Hawai‘i, the Hawaiian navigator Nainoa Thompson famously said, “We do not sail to Tahiti—Tahiti comes to us. We stay present and remain aware of our surroundings.” This is what I attempted to create within the *Mana Moana* construct, to reach into the tacit knowledge of the artists and their approaches to making, to examine their understanding and awareness of themselves in the contemporary Pacific.

GU: I also think this idea of the islands coming to you—the world coming to you—is especially pointed in conjunction with the idea of a biennial, and how the global system of biennials and triennials are described as “a circuit”. There is this idea that the audience travels from place to place absorbing this airportized system. That idea is clearly in opposition to this indigenous articulation. How did you approach the Honolulu Biennial with that in mind, and who is the audience?

NM: The Biennial was made for Honolulu, for the Hawai‘i arts community, and for Island residents. With all biennials, international visitors come to the opening week and then they leave. As far as models go, I think we need to stop overstating the global impact of biennials and understating the original thinking related to why these events were created in the first place. If we go back to the nineteenth century and the “Great Exhibitions” of the 1850s, these were Imperial events. These original biennials were expansionist in concept, global in outlook, and founded on the commodification of art, culture, and geographical diversity.

Biennials today are the modern versions of the Great Exhibitions. The Venice Biennale paved the way in 1895. This is where the “canon” was invented, admission was charged, beauty and taste was







openly discussed and challenged. Biennials today repeat aspects of that original nineteenth century thinking.

The field needs new language about biennials and whom they are for. The Honolulu Biennial is a grassroots and volunteer run organization. It was formed by individuals working outside an arts institution, creating infrastructure from the ground up. Its founders forged ahead, without a brick and mortar space that could present the Biennial experience. Despite challenges, the event was achieved and celebrated. It's true: the world will eventually come to you, but you have to understand your context and recognize what you have to offer.

GU: Where do you hope to see the Honolulu Biennial go?

NM: Hawai'i is an archipelago, so the future could include a component of the Biennial on a neighboring island. As the 2017 Biennial recognized Island thinking I hope this is retained and continued going forward. I am new to Honolulu, so I feel I have witnessed small and big changes. I have been told that the Honolulu Biennial experience has been transformative for Hawai'i. In this way, the Biennial can re-set the bar for contemporary art by expressing our distinct Island thinking within a global milieu.

The Honolulu Biennial, *Middle of Now / Here*, ran from March 8–May 8, 2017.

TITLE PAGE:

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, *Islands in a Basket 1-3*, 2017. Single-channel video with sound installation; image courtesy of the artist and Honolulu Biennial Foundation. Photo credit: Chris Rohrer

PAGE 95 :

Lee Mingwei, *100 Days with Lily* (series), 1995 / 2017. Silver dye bleach prints (ilfochrome); 5 pieces, 65.6 x 45.3 inches each. Image courtesy of the artist and Honolulu Biennial Foundation. Photo credit: Chris Rohrer

PAGE 96 , LEFT:

Zhan Wang and Choi Jeong Hwa installation shot at IBM Building. Photo credit: Chris Rohrer

PAGE 96 , RIGHT:

Choi Jeong Hwa, *Gather Together*, 2017 at Honolulu Hale with marine debris collected by Sustainable Coastlines. Image courtesy of the artist and Honolulu Biennial Foundation. Photo credit: Chris Rohrer.

PAGE 97 , LEFT:

Zhan Wang, *Artificial Rock No. 133*, 2007. Courtesy of Taiji and Naoko Terasaki. Image courtesy of Honolulu Museum of Art/ Shuzo Uemoto

PAGE 97 , RIGHT:

Beatrice Glow, *Rhunhattan Tearoom*, 2015. Acrylic and decal collage on ceramics, ink on paper, terracotta infused with scents of colonial commerce; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Sama Alshaibi, *Wasl (Union)*, video stills, from the project Silsila, 2016, courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

BELOW:

Drew Broderick, *Billboard I*. (The sovereignty of the land is perpetuated in righteousness), 2017. Neon, vinyl; 12 x 24 feet. Image courtesy of the artist and Honolulu Biennial Foundation. Photo credit: Chris Rohrer

