MARK ADAMS AND THE POLITICS OF PE'A

Australia's current interest in the Pacific is being played out in various arenas, for the visual arts, ‘Tatou’, an exhibition at Queensland University Art Museum (QUM) is one of many arts projects dedicated to exploring and understanding the complexities of Pacific Island culture. According to QUM director Ross Searle, "Visitors to 'Tatou' have been very vocal. The photographs have provoked stronger reactions than many exhibitions we've held before.

Tatou includes Mealino Samoa: Stories of the Matau, a film by Lisa Rouma, and Pe'a, photographs by Mark Adams which describe the practice of Samoan tatou in contemporary Auckland. Specifically the photographs picture the drawing of the pe’a, where a body of arched design is applied around the thighs, buttocks, and lower back with a comb-like tool that is dipped in pigment and hammered repeatedly across the skin. It is a drawn-out, painstaking process and Adams has not censored the brutality of the practice. In traditional communities it is a rite of initiation, expressing deference to elders as well as the maturity, knowledge, and empowerment of youth. In contemporary societies, the pe’a, and more broadly the Samoan tattoo, might be considered as demonstrating ethnic pride through the commitment of the body to a traditional art.

Many of Adams’s photographs feature Paulo Sukuape, a Samoan trained in the tradition of tattoo, practicing his art in New Zealand. It is the photographs of the Samoan tattoo on 'European skin' that spark some of the most heated discussions surrounding the exhibition. The images have become some of the most hotly contested photographic imagery in recent exhibitions in Australia and New Zealand. With this in mind, the prospect of meeting the artist seemed to be somewhat disconcerting. Daunting ever,
peoples is as obvious as that of the Pacific Islander. The somewhat battered blond staircase is a bit of a cavern from the past. The generous ceiling and the almost classic proportions of the room are crammed with the detritus of what has become almost overnight, an arcane craft: analogue photography. In a sense, Adams also bears evidence of having lived through a generous serving of life’s experiences. In terms of presence, he occupies his own space, and this, with an aura every bit as convincing as it is different from that of today’s cyber-gurus. And yet it would be a mistake to characterize this man as a relic from a former era. The images he has produced, and continues to produce, and the stance he takes—often in the face of a litany of tirades and moral indignation—are as elusive and difficult to position as the best of his images. For many of the images, difficult though they may be to reconcile with current theories of postcolonial correctness, survive as compelling, perplexing, challenging and provocative works, despite the corrosiveness of the debate that often surrounds them. When questioned, he doubts again on his motivations for doing the work, and on his responses to the criticism that has doggedly followed him throughout his career, the man seems quietly phlegmatic, circuitously. Still prepared to reflect on the extent to which works can bear re-examination. All of which is remarkable enough in a cultural milieu that prefers artists to fit into tidy ideological taxonomies.

Central to the questions raised about his role as a Palauan artist working with a range of ‘Others’, is his relationship with Paulo Suliapu. Here is an artist who, in response to any questions couched in theory, immediately returns to the personal, to lived experience. He describes how in the early seventies he formed a friendship with Paulo. How Paulo had migrated to Tahiti from Auckland and started mixing with artists, and how that in itself, at the time, was a troublesome beginning. Adams recounts how the mood of local artists in the seventies was one of rebellion, of trouble-making, and one in almost total contrast to the role of the tattooist in Samoan culture which was (and is) esteemed.

In Samoa, the tattoo is taught by succeeding generations of the family and, according to Adams, there is only one other family, apart from Paulo’s, who can practice the traditional technique. Adams states:

"You need to be one hell of a craftsman. It’s a cultural tradition and a respected position. So from the start there was a tension between Paulo’s role as a tattooist in Samoa, and moving to Auckland and mixing with artists."

Dutch people, Kiwis, Europeans, Maoris, and Swedes. But the pe’a couldn’t ever be bought. You would have to have a long-standing relationship with Paulo and his brother. There’s a Catholic priest in Northern New Zealand who has a pe’a. It wasn’t controversial then, it was something between friends. All of which might begin to sound self-righteous and, self-consciously innocent, until the inevitable questions about the controversies surrounding his work are raised. In this particular interview, Adams talks about the early seventies as a time when more people felt they had less to lose, and about how, over the three decades since then, there have been different levels of controversy. He is an artist who has lived through the many layers and nuances of objection, not to mention the various styles and fashions of critique, and the various seasons of protest, many of which are contradictory.

To Adams, some of the most important objections come from the Samoan community at home and in Auckland, against the idea of Paulo and his family practicing tattoo on people of European descent. As a strong icon of Samoan identity, tattoo is valued as cultural and intellectual property. Adams has been all too aware of this for several decades:

"Make no mistake, a lot of Samoan chiefs are put out. There was criticism of the photographs of Dutch people with the pe’a at the Auckland triennial last year. Then there was objection to my role as a man of European descent photographing a Samoan custom and Samoan people. I was seen as taking part in that whole European process of objecting." According to Adams’s interpretation of the events, Paulo Suliapu’s responses to the criticism had grown directly from his rebellious streak. Adams explains that Paulo would simply say that it was his business and nobody else’s. And Adams is quick to support Paulo’s positive
tion, questioning the value of notions of ownership and tradition that fire the critics. Adams explains, ‘This is not some new phenomenon. In pre-European times, Tongans were tattooing other people in the Pacific. Samoans have been tattooing Europeans for about two hundred years. What constitutes a tradition anyway?’

In response to the charges that the cross-cultural assimilation of the tradition is weakening Samoan culture, Adams insists that the work ‘makes Samoan culture pretty bloody visible ... globally.’

Then there are the allegations of voyeurism, complaints that a western photographer is moving a private rite into a public arena. In response, Adams points to the realities of his practice: ‘In order to take a photograph everyone has to agree. Most people like being photographed. I’ve never put a gun to someone’s head in order to take a picture.’

The contractual basis of Adams’ photography is something Nicholas Thomas identifies as a process of cultural exchange rather than dominion. According to Thomas, no photograph of Pacific people, past or present, is a one-sided picture of colonial dominance. Thomas argues that such images are the result not only of the photographer’s perception but also of indigenous agency:

It is a framework within which Adams feels comfortably placed.

My photographs are about cultural exchange. To be honest, I’m not all that interested in tattooing. I’m interested in the meeting of two cultures. My photographs are about cultural exchange in New Zealand. They focus on the body because skin identifies who you are.

Although explanations like this have done little to quell an ongoing range of criticisms, the artist claims to have met with little direct critical confrontation. Instead, his awareness of critical reactions has been through institutional responses to his exhibitions. And in answer to the questions about the extent to which such criticisms have affected his re-assessments of his earlier motivations for making the work, he replies, ‘...in the end, the whole deal between my photography and Paulo’s practice was based in friendship. When you boil it all down, that’s all you’re left with.’

A neat way of side-stepping the attacks? Perhaps. But it’s hard to argue with the dead.’ Either way, the images that remain a legacy of that friendship have resisted being unamed by the critical battering for almost three decades and are still provocative and compelling work.

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Notes:
1. Ross Searte, Director, University of Queensland Art Museum, 2 April 2005.
2. The mu'a is the traditional Samoan male tattoo; the fa'a is the traditional male tattoo.
3. All quotations from Mark Adams are from an interview with the authors in Auckland, 10 March 2005.
4. Adams’s approach to his work through theoretical frameworks changed at various stages of his career. In ‘Po’a: Photographs by Mark Adams’, Tātau, (ex cat.) Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, 2003, interviewer Peter Brunt expresses surprise at Adams’s claim about his early motivation. ‘Really? You saw these early photos as pointing the camera back at...? [Adams replies] At me. I was playing with being an anthropologist, or playing the colonial photographer, playing with that idea, but wanting to stand it on its head.’ p. 11.

‘Tātau’ was curated by Sophila McIntyre at the Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, where it was first exhibited. Pat Hopfa is an artist and Deputy Director of the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University; Prua Alivons is a British-based writer who also works at the Queensland College of Art.