

**LOUNGE
ROOM
TRIBALISM**

**GRAHAM
FLETCHER**

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LOUNGE ROOM TRIBALISM GRAHAM FLETCHER

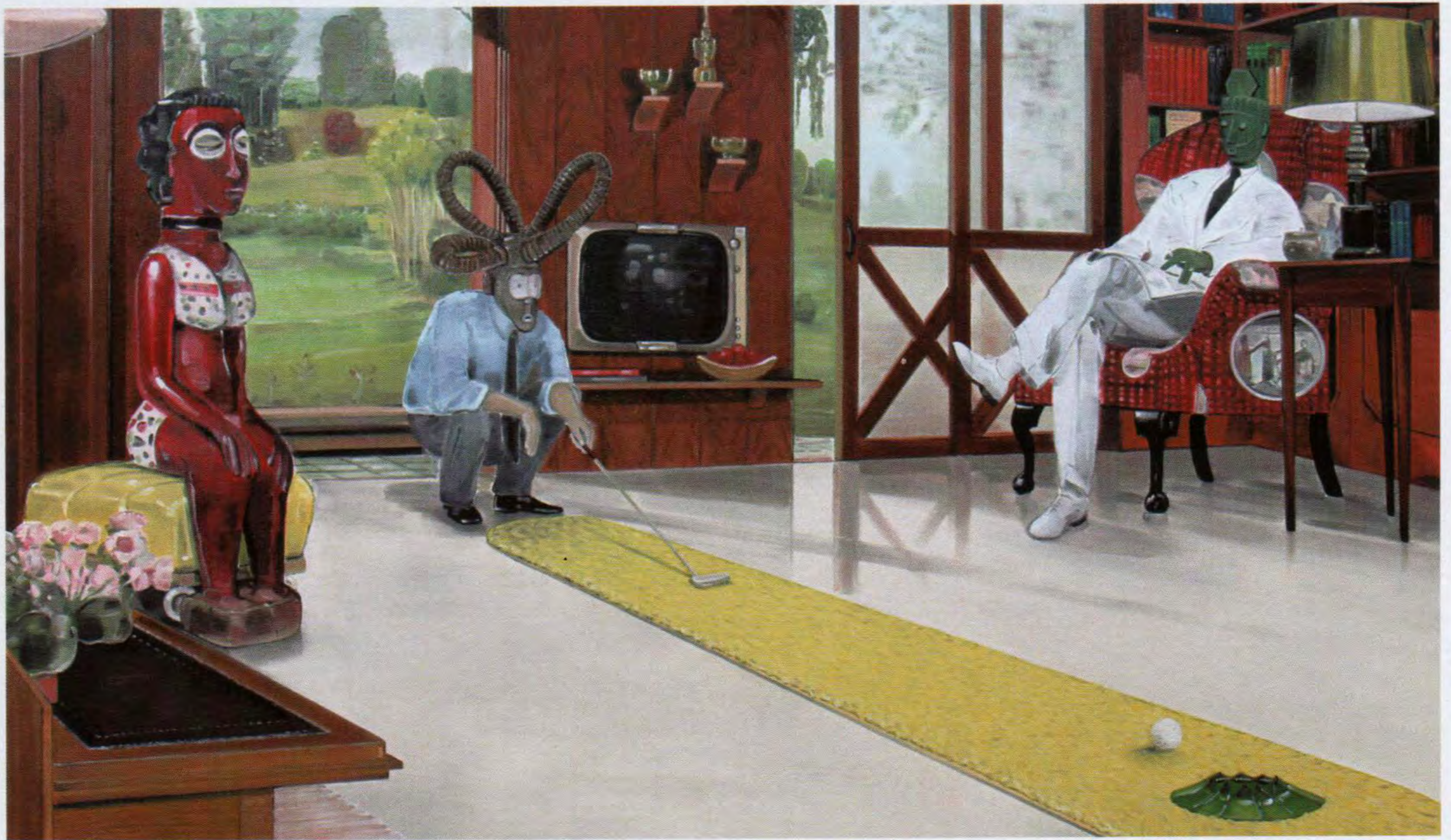
Like pigments painted onto bark-cloth *tapa*, *ta tatau* dyes incised into flesh or *tivaevae* threads stitched onto cloth, Pacific patterns permeate through tissue offering lasting symbols of *mana* and identity. In this way intangible elements of culture are made physical. However, these symbols of identity draw power from a deeper source. Language, customs, ritual and kinship—these are some of the intangible ingredients that bind communities and strengthen identity from within. Without the people, these forms of material culture simply exist as aesthetic objects. In his most recent series of paintings Graham Fletcher locates some of these displaced Pacific art objects on the walls of plush modernist interiors, presenting what Fletcher describes as a domestic cultural eclecticism or ‘lounge room tribalism’.

Objects of this nature can be seen in museums, galleries and private collections across the globe. Enclosed in glass cases and cabinets of curiosity, or sprawled across the walls like big game trophies, such displays present indigenous art objects as anthropological antiquities. This type of display traces its origins to the Renaissance

period and the *wunderkammer* or ‘wonder rooms’ of affluent Europeans who amassed and housed huge collections of art, archaeology, antiquities and science. As microcosms of larger environments, the *wunderkammer* facilitated an understanding of the world through categorical designations that assigned objects to distinct hierarchical groupings demonstrating the power, intelligence and dominance of ‘civilised’ cultures over the natural world to which ‘primitive’ peoples were believed to belong.

In the twentieth century this culture of collecting was challenged when the supply of so called ‘authentic primitive’ art and objects started to become scarce. As a result, collectors and authorities on the subject began expressing concerns about the number of inappropriately modern indigenous art objects entering the marketplace, splitting opinions about whether there was indeed such a thing as an ‘authentic primitive’¹. If so, how should this material culture be contextualised, valued, treated and displayed?

Encountering a *wunderkammer* of sorts in a small bungalow owned by an elderly lady in central Auckland, artist Graham Fletcher felt the need to paint these sorts of spaces where ‘authentic primitive’ art and objects were displayed as an indication of the owner’s style, class and culture—in a sense re-creating his own *wunderkammer* of collected objects of Western fancy. In his doctoral exegesis Fletcher makes note of the fashionable trend amongst Surrealist artists during the 1920s and 1930s to collect indigenous art objects and create concept spaces within their homes, facilitating a cross-cultural intermingling between Western and non-Western forms of material culture. In his paintings Fletcher re-imagines this period of dynamic cultural interaction, questioning why and how these objects symbolising indigenous culture and identity made the remarkable conceptual shift to become statements of Western culture and sophistication.



The decline in the *wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosity style of display in public institutions can in recent decades be attributed to a willingness on the part of museum and gallery professionals to engage with indigenous communities as living cultures – not static groupings of people confined to, and defined by, their past. In a 1982 article, the late Douglas Newton, curator emeritus of African, Oceanic and American Art at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, stated that non-Western forms of creative expression were of equal merit to Western art and needed to be treated not as anthropological articles, but as living objects which continue to exist on a contemporary continuum². Newton was involved in the design and curation of several major

exhibitions which challenged established museological practices around the collection and presentation of indigenous art and objects, including *Art of the Pacific Islands* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington (1979), *Art of Oceania, Africa and the Americas* (1969) and the landmark *Te Māori* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1984).

In the 1990s, as customary indigenous art and artists gained a greater profile, contemporary indigenous artists faced another problem in that they were often still categorised through ethnicity. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Jim Vivieaere, curator of the landmark exhibition *Bottled Ocean* (1994), stated 'Today the art of the Pacific Islanders is trapped within its category. The display cases of the

institution have not been shattered... Institutions are caught by a need to both legitimize themselves and acknowledge (and perhaps attempt to control) the art of migrant communities.³

Bottled Ocean gave voice to a new generation of Pacific artists, but to Vivieaere raised new challenges around the question of whether these artists would have been provided a space had the exhibition not been based on ethnic lines. Addressing this issue through the exhibition design, Vivieaere created an expansive *wunderkammer* or glass case with giant sheets of clear acrylic behind which he placed a specific selection of art objects, forcing the viewer to stand on the outside and observe from a distance. In this way Vivieaere played with and challenged ideas of contained cultures, cabinets of curiosity, ethnic 'window dressing' and insider/outsider perspectives.

Since *Bottled Ocean* contemporary Pacific artists have gained a greater public profile, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. The Deane Gallery for Māori and Pacific arts at City Gallery Wellington, in which Fletcher (who is of Samoan descent) finds his work contained and contextualised, is a product of these conceptual shifts. This is the legacy and challenge which Graham Fletcher has taken up. *Lounge Room Tribalism* brings these issues into public discussion, provoking conversations around the presentation, reception and treatment of indigenous art and objects. *Lounge Room Tribalism* asks what is the purpose of indigenous material culture if it is taken away from its people? How does it

operate outside of its customary cultural context, and if such *taonga* simply exist as aesthetic objects does that make them any less valuable?

Reuben Friend

Curator Māori and Pacific Art

Artist biography

Graham Fletcher is of New Zealand-born Samoan descent and has been a practicing artist since 1997. He completed a Doctorate of Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland in 2010. Exhibiting extensively nationally and abroad, Fletcher has received numerous prestigious awards such as the Waikato National Art Award, the Wallace Award and has works in several major collections including The Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand. Significant exhibitions include the *Biennale d'art contemporain de Nouméa*, Tjibaou Cultural Centre, New Caledonia (2000), *IKI and Thanks for All the IKA*, Contemporary Art Centre, Lithuania (2003), *The Secret Life of Paint*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery (2007), *Samoa Contemporary*, Pataka Museum, Wellington (2008) and the *10th Festival of Pacific Arts*, American Samoa (2008).

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1. David J. Butts, *Māori and Museums: The Politics of Indigenous Recognition*, (unpublished doctoral thesis), Massey University, Palmerston North, 2003, p. 13.
 2. Jonathan Stevens, 'Museums and Indigenous Peoples: Through the Display Glass', *Cultural Survival—Ethnic Art: Works in Progress*, 1982, 6 (4). Accessed 10 June 2011 from: <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/museums-and-indigenous-peoples-through-display-glass>
 3. Jim Vivieaere, 'The Island Race in Aotearoa', *Artlink*, 1996, 16 (4), p. 57.



This brochure has been published in association with the exhibition *Lounge Room Tribalism* (2 July–31 July 2011).

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Cover image: Graham Fletcher, *Untitled* (*Lounge Room Tribalism*), 1620 x 1300 mm. Collection of Wallace Arts Trust. Image courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery.

Inside fold image: Graham Fletcher, *Untitled* (*Lounge Room Tribalism*), 2010, oil on canvas, 1500 x 1200mm. Private collection.

Inside image: Graham Fletcher, *Untitled* (*Nordischefreikörperkultur*), 2010, oil on canvas, 1680 x 2140mm. Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery.

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