



Primitivism in the Home

Graham Fletcher on the Borderline

RICHARD WOLFE

In 2002 Auckland artist Graham Fletcher experienced an epiphany on the road to Titirangi. While uplifting a painting for an exhibition at Lopdell House Gallery he visited a Mt Eden home, and found it filled with ethnographic artefacts. This and other private collections prompted the inclusion of Pacific motifs in his own work, and encouraged his natural attraction to 'intercultural spaces'.¹

Fletcher's first Pacific references were born largely of economic necessity. He began using incorrectly mixed pigments, sold cheaply by paint shops, and his experimental dripping and pouring were the basis of his first solo exhibition, the *Mistint* series in 1998.² A move to painting on circular discs then prompted the emergence of frangipangi-like forms in his *Stigma* series,³ and for the subsequent *Virgin*⁴ he focused on images of Tahitian women from paintings by Paul Gauguin, blending them into the background and 'camouflaging' them from the Frenchman's gaze. In 2007 Fletcher exhibited his *Eternals* series,⁵ the earliest of these being part of his studies for a Doctorate in Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. They included paintings of Pacific artefacts, based on photographs taken in local museums, and this 'transitional phase' led to an exploration of interactions between the West and the so-called 'primitive' as well as a highly personal perspective entitled *Lounge Room Tribalism*.⁶

This new series owed its theoretical basis to a landmark event of a century earlier. The 'discovery' of African art by European artists can be dated to around 1904-6, when it was admired by Vlaminck, Derain and, later, Matisse and Picasso. A number of late nineteenth-century exhibitions had already paved the way for this appreciation, and it was the African and Oceanic displays that Gauguin saw at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 that convinced him to leave France two years later in search of the primitive.⁷

The early twentieth-century European Modernists displayed varying responses to the primitivism of non-Western art, but it was the Surrealists' penchant for collecting and displaying it that was of particular interest to Fletcher. That movement's founder and chief theorist, André Breton, cultivated the concept of 'objective chance', the seemingly haphazard arrangements of objects which had the power to provide artistic inspiration. The Surrealists relished serendipitous finds at flea markets and junk shops, of curious objects estranged from their own cultures and which could now be given new identities and meanings. As non-taxonomic collectors they were concerned only with the wondrous nature of the object itself, and its potential to stimulate the subconscious and unleash the primitive instincts within. They revered tribal objects for their 'mystical, spiritual and supernatural properties', and had a 'respectful affinity' with Oceanic art in particular, while all was absorbed into an 'ensemble of material

(opposite) GRAHAM FLETCHER *Untitled, Lounge Room Tribalism* 2010
Oil on canvas, 1500 x 1200 mm.

(right) GRAHAM FLETCHER *Untitled, Lounge Room Tribalism* 2009
Oil on canvas, 1620 x 1300 mm.
(Collection: The James Wallace Arts Trust)

culture'.⁸ By the deliberate juxtaposition of mutually unfamiliar items they set out to blur boundaries and liberate themselves from traditional systems and methodologies. At the same time they determined to liberate tribal artefacts from obscurity and neglect, and reinvest them with powers that had been stripped by the various agents of European 'civilization'. This new awareness coincided with the realisation of the inadequacy of Western conventions to express the barbarism and carnage of World War I. Maurice Nadeau, author of *History of Surrealism* (1965), has stressed the impact of wartime experiences on the founders of that movement, for whom the world had become 'permanently surrealist'.⁹

For his response to this confluence of cultures, Graham Fletcher focused on the 1950s and '60s, a period he sees as '[exemplifying] trends in Western materialism and excess'.¹⁰ It was also a time when the culture of non-European societies, traditionally the preserve of ethnologists and anthropologists, was of increasing interest to artists in New Zealand. Early South Island Maori rock art, as recorded by Theo Schoon, had an influence both on Gordon Walters' works in the late 1940s and Dennis Turner's *Oceanic Abstracts*, exhibited in 1951. Aside from Maori objects, those from non-Western cultures—the Pacific in particular—were on public display in museums in the country's four main centres, at least, and traditionally presented in a manner that expressed their function and symbolism. There was less apparent emphasis on formal and aesthetic qualities, but from the early 1950s the Auckland War Memorial Museum reflected recent overseas developments by experimenting with new ways of presenting its rich Oceanic collections.¹¹ A series of special exhibitions culminated in 1962's *Primitive Sculpture*, described at the time by Paul Beadle, director of the Elam School of Fine Arts, as 'the most important exhibition ever seen in New Zealand'.¹² The 66 exhibits included *Kave*, a 2170 mm. high wooden female goddess figure from Nukuoro, in the Caroline Islands, which had entered the collection in 1878 but had apparently languished in storage for the next 84 years. Following its public debut in 1962 the Museum would hail *Kave* as 'one of the world's outstanding works of the kind',¹³ and later place it at the centre of its refurbished Pacific gallery. Further recognition came when this 'magnificent sculpture'¹⁴ was included in the 1984 blockbuster exhibition '*Primitivism*' in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Following the example of the Surrealists, tribal art became an acceptable addition to domestic decor. Popular publications suggested a tentative approach, and a general preference for images of Africans rather than *by* them. The 1951-2 edition of *Decorative Art*, for example, included a carpet pattern with bushman and



animal motifs, while another interior featured a portrait, *An African Boy*, by Australian artist Donald Friend.¹⁵ By 1958 a Winsor & Newton advertisement depicted an African bushman brandishing one of the company's paintbrushes,¹⁶ and one expert put the whole trend in perspective by suggesting that the original 'interior decorator' had been a Paleolithic cave-dweller.¹⁷ Home decorators who were drawn to the new 'casual modern' style of the 1960s were advised of 'the rule' to combine informal things *or* formal, but not both. Ideally, 'accent pieces have a hand-crafted look, [and] are often peasant art imported from other countries'.¹⁸

Among the factors encouraging the appreciation of Oceanic art was the presence of American service personnel throughout the Pacific—including New Zealand—during World War II. A growing awareness of the region took many forms, from the *Art of the South Seas* exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1946 to Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1949 musical *South Pacific*, based on stories by James A. Michener. Sven Kirsten has identified the adoption by Americans of such Pacific references as flowery Hawaiian shirts and leis as reflecting a desire to 'go native' and regress to 'a simpler period of life'. Specialty stores supplied suitable items for the wardrobe and patio: 'Tiki huts appeared in backyards and god-heads were erected by pools and patios, making Tikis the new garden gnomes of America'.¹⁹

In 1965, three years after *Primitive Sculpture*, the tribal and the modern came together in the exhibition *Treasures from the Commonwealth* at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. But if tribal objects could now be shown for their formal and aesthetic qualities, it was acknowledged here that full appreciation of the 'art-object' demanded some experience of the landscape and society from which it was drawn. Many of these



items had once been considered 'superior curiosities', but were now seen as 'substantial works of art'. This exhibition, of nearly 600 items, included Maori and Oceanic material (some 25 each), while the recent New Zealand component included four paintings by Frances Hodgkins, three by M.T. Woollaston, and Colin McCahon's *Northland Panels*.²⁰

An important local precedent for Fletcher's domestic amalgams was a still-life by young Dunedin painter Max Walker, reproduced in *Art in New Zealand* in 1943.²¹ *Conference* was a table-top arrangement of a realistically sculpted European head in the company of objects from non-European cultures, among them



wooden statuettes from Africa and the Pacific, a carved Maori head, an Australian boomerang, and Pacific tapa. In 1994 Francis Pound described the painting as typical of the 'tolerable primitivism' in New Zealand at the time,²² depicting a domineering Western eye impervious to outside influence. But Fletcher identifies the 'true power' behind *Conference* to be the actual grouping of the objects. Walker's arrangement offered a glimpse into what has been termed a 'culturally hybrid' or 'third space', an extension of those spaces normally associated with tribal artefacts and modernist interiors. This new (conceptual) space, or borderline area,²³ displaced the histories that constituted it and now provided opportunities for 'other [non-Western] voices to be heard'.²⁴

For his planned *Lounge Room Tribalism* Fletcher combed international magazines for images of interiors, some already possessing 'a glimmer of [tribal art]'. At the same time he gleaned images of suitable artefacts, seeking a 'magical aspect' which could be conveyed in paint. While ownership of actual objects would be ideal for such a project, Fletcher—a self-confessed 'passive collector'—relies mostly on two-dimensional images from published sources. From these he assumes the challenge of creating the illusion of a three-dimensional object, as well as the



(above left)
GRAHAM FLETCHER *Untitled, Lounge Room Tribalism* 2009-10
Oil on canvas, 1500 x 1200 mm.

(above right)
GRAHAM FLETCHER *Untitled, Lounge Room Tribalism* 2009-10
Oil on canvas, 1620 x 1200 mm.

(left)
GRAHAM FLETCHER *Untitled, Lounge Room Tribalism* 2009-10
Oil on canvas, 1620 x 1200 mm

(opposite)
GRAHAM FLETCHER *Untitled, (Nordischefreikorperkultur)* 2010
Oil on canvas, 1680 x 2140 mm.

sense of it being convincingly 'at home' in a particular interior.

Fletcher's stated mission was to create works that reflected 'borderline environments that combine and recombine . . . the elements of traditional ethnic forms with "tasteful" modern interiors.'²⁵ The lounges selected for treatment are of a particular type—fully-furnished and colour-coordinated—while well-stocked bookcases and such details as a typewriter suggest these may be homes of academics, perhaps even ethnologists. The views are generally oblique, towards the corner of a room, and include sofas, armchairs and coffee tables, along with obligatory fruit bowls and flower arrangements. The many patterns and textures of the floor coverings and furnishing fabrics are diligently recorded, along with feature walls of fashionable brick and natural timber—all orchestrated to provide a backdrop for tribal art.

The 1984 *Primitivism* exhibition attracted criticism for fostering the perception that the production of tribal art had occurred in the past. Many of the objects had been 'discovered' at flea markets and in museums, and—in the words of James Clifford—were about to be 'aesthetically redeemed' and 'given value in the object system of a generous modernism'.²⁶ Thus tribal art appeared to have been 'rescued [and] made valuable and meaningful', and some three decades on from *Primitivism* we might consider the nature of the 'affinity of the tribal and the modern' in Fletcher's *Lounge Room Tribalism*.

With the notable exception of *Untitled (Nordischefreikorperkultur)*, the largest in the series to date and depicting two mask-wearing males playing indoor golf and reading, Fletcher's paintings are distinguished by their lack of both individual titles and a human presence. However, the casual placement of pipes and gramophone records suggests

the owners of these lounges are only temporarily out of the picture. These highly ordered interiors are similar, and further united in their commitment to tribal art, and in purely pictorial terms the placement of the one within the other is generally harmonious. The dramatic potential of a turquoise Aztec skull is counterbalanced by the mass of a yellow chair, the strong form of an oval mask is offset by a rectangular television set, and several carved figures are matched in scale by adjacent pot-plants and lighting fixtures. The skill of the 'interior decorator' is evident throughout, in the sympathy between the tribal objects and the forms and colours of their surroundings.

The original Surrealists displayed tribal art alongside other like-minded material within their own homes and studios, while the *Primitivism* exhibition positioned it firmly in the service of Modernism. But the relationship between the two main cultural components in Fletcher's carefully composed 'third space' seems more complex. At the very least, tribal art is the dominant art form on show, and in the face of considerable visual competition it brings a much-needed injection of individuality to these interiors. Similarly, the implications of these conjunctions go far beyond being simply cases of ethnologists taking their work home. This tribal art is in unfamiliar territory, but there can be no doubting its status; it invariably occupies prime spots, such as chimney breasts above fireplaces. However, some pieces have been 'tamed' for their new domestic purposes; a neatly framed tapa cloth, a massive Malagan (New Ireland) funerary item which has been reduced to fit, and life-sized figures seated in chairs to conform to lounge-room etiquette.

Fletcher's objects have been removed from the contexts of both traditional anthropology and the

(continued on page 88)



Primitivism in the Home

(continued from page 47)

modern art museum, but in the process may have become subject to yet another form of colonization. Just as tribal art was validated by *Primitivism* as a fertile source for Modernists, it may be seen to be subservient to a different social need in these lounge rooms. In a sense it has been returned to a variation on the anthropology museum, except that the ambient anthropology is foreign to the objects in question. But far from being merely accessories to another culture's lifestyle, these individually selected examples of tribal art are an essential point of difference. They may appear somewhat out of place, and perhaps empowered by their surroundings, but the latter would be characterless without them. These large paintings also act as picture windows, allowing glimpses of an imaginary world of cross-cultural cohabitation. No doubt the story of this evolution, from tribal origins to the museum and beyond, is well documented in the extensive libraries found in several of these paintings.

The emphasis on Pacific art reflects Fletcher's own mixed Samoan and European heritage. He is less comfortable about including Maori objects, his only such references being an arrangement of three pounamu mere. Mindful also of matters of ownership, he restricts his image-borrowing to those which are already well circulated, either in printed or electronic form. As a matter of principle he adheres to the form of the original tribal artefacts, and in the spirit of Surrealist René Magritte's apple and steam locomotive his only alterations are to scale.

In 2006 Fletcher began working in an extra dimension. Stimulated by tribal pieces in museums and the works of Alberto Giacometti and Louise Bourgeois he began making carved and painted wooden sculptures, intended to consciously 'resonate somewhere within the borderlands of a "third space"'.²⁷ One such sculpture, a deference to Auckland Museum's Kave, was included in a group exhibition at the University of Waikato.²⁸ Like the original, one leg was truncated as a result of decay, and Fletcher compensated for this by supporting the sculpture on the very spray-can he had used for its underpainting.

English painter Patrick Caulfield (1936-2005) was noted for his interpretations of coffee bars and wine bars, but it is with the highly personal interiors of Neo Rauch (b. 1960, Germany) and Dexter Dalwood (b.1960, England) that Fletcher's work has been compared. However, the idea of domestic space as a setting for tribal art is uniquely his own. And in another exception to his rule, a sole (nocturnal) view looking inside from a darkened patio may yet lead to a wider investigation of suitable spaces beyond the lounge.

Around 1908, at Derain's urging, Picasso visited Paris's Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro and, although repulsed by the smell of dampness and rot, he stayed and made his first serious study of *l'art nègre*. That institution, founded in 1878, became a 'jumble of exotica' from foreign lands,²⁹ and in 1937 was replaced by the new Musée de l'Homme. The ethnographic collections from the latter, along with those from the Musée National des Art d'Afrique et d'Océanie (founded in 1931), were then relocated to the Musée du quai Branly, which opened in mid-2006. Not surprisingly, this rearrangement of non-Western collections within the museums of Paris, made on the basis of aesthetic rather than scientific criteria, was a matter of further debate. In 2006 Graham Fletcher viewed a selection of Breton's personal collection at the Centre Georges Pompidou, and also visited the recently opened Musée du quai Branly. These experiences reinforced his awareness of the historical changes in attitudes towards tribal art, a process that began when Picasso, Matisse, Braque and others had first set their eyes on the same objects a century earlier.

1. Graham Fletcher, *Myth, Magic, Mimicry and the Cross-Cultural Imaginary*, written component submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Doctorate of Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts, the University of Auckland, Auckland 2010, iii.
2. *Mistint* series, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 1998.
3. *Stigma* series, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 1999.
4. *Virgin* series, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 2001.
5. *Eternals* series, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 2007.
6. *Lounge Room Tribalism*, exhibited at George Fraser Gallery, University of Auckland, February 2010 (10 works). Also, three works were included in the group exhibition *Metroland* (curated by Melanie Roger), Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 27 October–20 November 2010, and five works were included in a two-person exhibition (with Tim Thatcher), Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland, 26 January–19 February 2011.
7. Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1986, pp. 86-7; Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson Ltd., London 1994, pp. 69, 111-4.
8. Fletcher, pp. 12, 15.
9. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnology, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994, p. 119.
10. Fletcher, p. 33.
11. Richard Wolfe, 'Primitive Perceptions: Changing Attitudes Towards Pacific Art', *Art New Zealand* 69, Summer 1993-4, pp. 76-81.
12. *Auckland Star*, 24 May 1962.
13. *Auckland Institute and Museum Annual Report*, 1967-8, p. 19.
14. William Rubin, 'Primitivism' in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984, vol. 1, p. xii.
15. Rathbone Holme and Kathleen Frost (editors), *Decorative Art 1951-2: The Studio Year Book*, The Studio Publications, London & New York, pp. 64, 118.
16. Frank A. Mercer (editor), *Modern Publicity* 27, The Studio

ART BOOKS

*celebrating 35 years of
bookselling in Auckland*

Parsons Bookshop, 26 Wellesley St East, Auckland 1010
Phone 09 303 1557 Fax 09 357 0877
books@parsons.co.nz www.parsons.co.nz