

*Enjoy*

# COLONIALISM'S WHITE BONES

COLONIAL VALUE SYSTEMS  
AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF  
HOW PACIFIC ART IS VALUED

*FAITH WILSON*

IT'S INCREDIBLE, IT'S ALL OURS  
CHANTAL FRASER  
JULY 2 – JULY 25

## COLONIALISM'S WHITE BONES

FAITH WILSON

Chantal Fraser's exhibition is an installation of handmade fabric items. Some are suspended in between the floor and ceiling by nylon, pinned into corners of walls, or laid on the ground, surrounded by mounds of coloured sequins. Most items are different shades of white, some are gold, and some are embroidered with sequined patterns. They are eerily beautiful, spectral in the way they loosely hang mid-air, enticing the viewer with the desire to draw closer, to linger, whilst at the same time their ghostliness and ode to something disremembered repels. Reflected in the precariousness of their installation, in the delicate assemblage, is their potential to disrupt.

There is nothing typically 'Pacific' about this exhibition. There is instead a notable absence of the stereotypical Pacific. The gallery is literally a white out. Each piece is Fraser's interpretation of female clothing and adornment typical of colonial culture, from veils to laced gloves, unspecified satin adornments to what could be a disfigured jester's hat and a mask that looks uncannily similar to KKK headwear. The culture of colonialism that still pervades in Samoan culture is the culture that emanates from these garments.



In Samoa, the history of white superiority has become a part of the fabric of the culture. *Meauli*, the Samoan word for the 'black thing', is a derogatory term, yet is the only word in Samoan to refer to someone with very dark skin. Whiteness is culturally valuable: the white body is of value, the black body is of a lesser value. Black lives matter less because they are less desirable. Desirability equals cultural capital. According to this value system, the biologically non-white body can never attain the same value as the white body, unless value conditions shift to allow cultural capital and status to be attained by material means. Because the white body is already inherently valuable in the capitalist paradigm, the non-white body must try harder, must be more successful within the parameters that this system deems successful; rich, beautiful, something that can replace money as currency. With whiteness seen as desirable, the things associated with it are also desired, as their attainment signals a potential rise in status or value. The garments in *It's incredible.....it's all ours* represent this desirability, its associated value and transversely, that colonised cultures are worth less because of their non-whiteness.



In Samoa, these people who favour the white lifestyle are referred to as being *fia palagi*. The effects of post-colonial identity confusion in Samoa and many Pacific Islands are visible in local attitudes towards whiteness. In Samoa, females are often propagators of this myth of white superiority. The ideal identity in Western Colonial Culture is the white cis-gendered male. To assume a positive identity, to have complete control over one's body is therefore to inhabit the body of the white cis-gendered male. The desire for completeness/wholeness/autonomy in those who don't fit this mould (women, people of colour, ie. Samoan women) can result in a displacement of desire, where the impossibility (pre-cosmetic surgery days) of achieving such a body is replaced with the sexual ability to inhabit or be consumed by this body. In Capitalist models, where success is white male cis-gendered wealth, sexual exchange becomes a method by which to achieve this. The sexual desire of colonising men regarded women's value as solely sexual. To be desired and thus inhabited by the white man then is to be valuable, is to mean something. In exchange for sex, a Samoan woman could have access, albeit limited, to these signifiers of post-colonial success – the only price was her body.

Fraser has deliberately chosen typical objects of female adornment – bedazzled garments and delicate materials – because she wanted to recreate the sense of wonder that the colonisers of the Pacific might have experienced upon arrival in the islands. The 'it's all ours' mentality of the colonisers was mostly applicable to men. In Fraser's version, it is women who are doing the seeing and the wanting, a reversal of roles that signals the far-reaching effects of colonialism. That is, the sense of cultural value has become so morphed and transfigured that many Samoan women actually *want* the whiteness.



The association of whiteness with success is the rotting backbone of colonial and post-colonial cultural exchange. What becomes of Samoan culture then? The colonisers assess it in terms of capital. The entitlement with which the colonisers approached Samoan and other Pacific cultures, the *laissez faire* freedom that Fraser harks to in the title *It's incredible.....it's all ours*, is the entitlement to use and take from colonised culture anything they wanted. The effect of this is twofold: the culture of the coloniser becomes more valuable to the minority, as they begin perceive their own culture as inferior and of lesser value, while the culture of the colonised is assigned a commodified value in the Western Capitalist system.

This commodification means that the culture of the colonised is prone to misappropriation and misrepresentation by the coloniser, as they use it for their own interests. The continued removal of a culture from its own cultural value system means that the references assigned to it originally are lost through generational amnesia/whiteout; or aspects are seen by colonial culture as representative of an entire minority group. Culture then becomes a kind of souvenir, an object that can represent only stereotypes and broad generalisations. It fails to be its own sign as any employment or reference to it is appraised within Western sign systems. It cannot then refer to a private or secondary system within Western culture without being labelled as 'traditional' or 'heritage' or 'Pacific'. The value it has in its own cultural sign system is not necessarily devalued, but as the roots of capitalism are deep, it takes stronger efforts to maintain the teaching and intergrity of an alternative sign system, efforts required to further save it from becoming kitsch.

How does Fraser's exhibition respond to this system of values, and how does it disrupt them? Does it allude to a reconfiguration of Pacific art, one that doesn't hark to Western capitalist notions of value? Or is it saying that the hegemony of capitalism and western values need to be diffused before we can even think about what a new Pacific art looks like? Post-colonialism, Samoan art and culture risks losing its ability to represent itself: it is increasingly more difficult for it to be its own sign, especially due to the saturation of colonial capitalist culture not only in Western countries but in Samoa itself.

Fraser's art circumvents this trap by making Pacific art that uses the signs of the coloniser to say that things that are typically 'Pacific' art have lost their ability to speak within Western circles because of this cultural saturation, and the exploitation and misappropriation of Pacific 'heritage' art by colonial cultures<sup>1</sup>. This work and work by other progressive temporary Pacific artists must be appraised within the same field as Western art. It is only by diffusing stereotypes and expectations from within the paradigm of the oppressor that an entire shift of consciousness may occur.

By recreating the conditions of colonialism, *It's incredible.....it's all ours* challenges the present day system of values that have become normal in contemporary culture and society. Kolokesa Mahina-Tuai says, in her essay 'Looking Backwards Into Our Future', that "in the Moana/Pacific [we] walk forward into the past and backward into the future where the past is put in front as a guiding principle and the future, situated behind, is brought to bear on past experiences".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention to dismiss forms of Pacific art deemed by Western systems as 'traditional' and 'heritage' – my point here is that the expectation of Pacific artists is to make this kind of art, and because it is inherently devalued in Western

<sup>2</sup> Kolokesa Mahina-Tuai, "Looking Backwards Into Our Future," in *Home AKL : Artists of Pacific Heritage* in Auckland, Ron Brownson et al. (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 2012), 34



Occupying the past and the present, this exhibition questions the future of art made by Pacific artists. This show occupies both colonial past and colonial present, both feminine dominated and masculine dominator, both West and the Pacific, desire and repulsion. Fraser uses the tools of the oppressor to reappropriate Pacific art. She does so beguilingly – the viewer isn't immediately confronted with institutional expectations of the Pacific, but the viewer is unwittingly a participant in this version of Pacific art. The viewer's impressions are immediately preyed upon, as what initially appears a magnificent display of colonial apparel begins to unsettle the viewer.

Upon first impression the viewer thus occupies coloniser, as they experience the same seductive wonder of the colonisers of the past, and through the desire to inhabit, touch and own these goods, the position of the colonised is equally at play. In each case, it is the attainment of whiteness that appears to be the zenith of this journey. But the effects of the work don't stop there. Whilst also occupying the colonised, it is the brown, Pacific feminine space that the viewer is occupying/identifying with. The multiplicity of the gaze renders the viewer both passive and active. This is the linchpin of Fraser's work. The viewer who occupies this split-personality unwittingly becomes a pawn in this setup – you cannot occupy this space without submitting yourself to this subversive gaze. One aspect of the work in particular feels as if it is gazing directly at you, that is the KKK-like hood afore mentioned. It is stark white, with a pointed top and circles cut out for eyes and a mouth. Of all of the garments in this exhibition, it is the most penetrative in its ambiguity.

This is another success of Fraser's choice to exhibit colonial apparel – the cultural reference to the KKK, whether intentional or not, is almost inevitable within the parameters of the Western cultural system of signs. This, and the horrors it may reference, epitomise the disgust/desire dialectic that this exhibition sways upon – KKK narratives are shocking and gruesome, and yet Western culture is still infatuated with them. The viewer at once must acknowledge this reference and furthermore, must locate its meaning in amongst the rest of the items in the installation, none of which are as immediately referent as this mask is. This mask is the locus of the male gaze.

The male gaze and its focus on conquering the non-white woman is strongly evoked. The offering of the goods Fraser reappropriates in this show to Polynesian women by colonisers was symbolic of an exchange – take these goods, and we take your bodies. Again, this capitalist system of values is saying black bodies matter less, black female bodies matter even less. The supposed benefit of the exchanges for Polynesian women was of course status. To be with a white man was worthy, because he resembled power and wealth. These were not inherent within the systems of Samoa before colonisation, but the power that these men wielded over the people of the Pacific quickly made visible that to regain autonomy, one had to mimic the white man, submitting to his values of capitalism, patriarchy, and all that it entails.



Whilst the seduction of whiteness for Pacific females relates back to an ingrained inferior status in which the body became a woman's currency, the work in *It's incredible.....it's all ours* creates a feminine space. So whilst the KKK-like mask is the locus of the male gaze, it sits within this feminine space. This work doesn't entirely efface the male gaze – this would betray the power of the work. Rather, its presence, though off-centre, is pervasive enough to unsettle the viewer – it is the skeleton of this work. Its function is to upset. The hovering white male gaze is there to remind us that within current institutional Western frameworks, no matter our attempts to demilitarise, diffuse, make feminine and non-white our space, the colonial gaze is already informing the architecture of the space.

*It's incredible.....it's all ours* is truly a gallery experience: you can't come out of the exhibition without having seen a different perspective. This is art that actively challenges accepted notions of Pacific art and Pacific female art. This is art that lives up to its promise, art that doesn't shirk away from its responsibility to say something about the conditions of the society and culture that it is built from. This is intelligent, transformative and game-changing art.

Fraser's work questions the system of values thrust on Pacific art and the reading of Pacific art within a gallery space. Consequently, she is also saying that Pacific art needn't incorporate any of the so called traditional symbols or methods of Pacific art practice for it to be Pacific. In a way, she's saying so what about Pacific art? Or Western art? The very act of appraising art as Pacific gives currency to the system of values that operate inherently to devalue non-white art, or at least always consider it in opposition to white art. It is always white art's subject.

So what would a new way of seeing look like? How can we begin to consider this framework and its limitations, in order to move towards a different understanding of how we view Pacific art? What would a paradigm shift look like for art appraisal and critique, that doesn't rely on capitalist notions of value? I'm not sure if I can entirely answer these questions, but I believe that Fraser's work is a step in the direction of the decentering of this value system. Albert Refiti says that these two questions must inform a new theory of Pacific art:

1. What does it mean for Pacific art to claim a Pacific identity today?
2. If we have already taken a place in the house of contemporary art, then what have we lost and gained, and what of the future?<sup>3</sup>

These are both important questions and I agree that a new *theory of Pacific art should answer to them. Additionally, I think* it we need to ask that a new shift in the way of thinking about Pacific art should ask what we can do as artists of Pacific descent to fight for female, queer and minority voices. Unless Pacific art actively moves in this direction, I believe that expanding any theories of Pacific Art will be a redundant effort. We need to do away with the stagnant bones of colonialism. We need to build a new value system. We need to excavate our own bones.

<sup>3</sup> Albert L. Refiti, "Building the House of the Noa Noa and Lave Lave: A Possible Theory of Pacific Art," in *Home AKL: Artists of Pacific Heritage in Auckland*, Ron Brownson et al. (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 2012), 12

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In this essay I occupy the viewpoint of the cis gendered female, who can identify both with Aotearoa Pacific and Aotearoa Pakeha culture. The reading I offer is written as if this installation is targeted at a cis-white market, the reasons for which I hope are apparent in the writing above. I also wish to acknowledge the many Pacific artists who are currently working to disrupt and challenge accepted norms of Pacific art, and the institutional and cultural biases that they meet alongside it. These are the artists who together are informing a cultural shift.





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