

UC Santa Cruz

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association

Title

ARTventures: Art and Life in the Contemporary Pacific

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/18c5p5jv>

Journal

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association, 21(1)

ISSN

1018-4252

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/PC221155086

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Peer reviewed

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ARTventures: Art and Life in the Contemporary Pacific

Abstract

The unpublished work *ARTventures: Art and Life in the Contemporary Pacific* is a literary memoir recounting Susan Cochrane's unorthodox life as a roaming curator of contemporary Pacific art. The narrative intertwines vignettes of the author's personal life with her experiences as a "poken" (slang for English-speaking foreigner) in New Caledonia; on fieldwork trips collecting art in remote areas of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu; and encountering Māori and Pasifika artists in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Aboriginal Taiwanese in Taiwan. The text is subtly layered with insights into the attitudes and operations of the art world and strategies to establish Indigenous art in its own right.

Keywords: Memoir, art history, contemporary art, Pacific, Oceania, Pacific art



Figure 1. Susan Cochrane field recording with a consultant of the Asaro Goroka Mudmen, at the 2008 National Mask Festival, Kokopo, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of Michel Bonnefis

ARTventures: Art and Life in the Contemporary Pacific (a work in progress) is an art professional's view of art and life in Pacific societies—a literary memoir recounting my unorthodox life as a roaming curator of contemporary Pacific art. The narrative aptly intertwines vignettes from my personal life with eye-opening experiences as a “poken” (slang for English-speaking foreigner) in New Caledonia; on fieldwork trips collecting art in remote areas of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu; and encountering Māori and Pasifika artists in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Aboriginal Taiwanese in Taiwan. As I am a specialist art curator and established writer in the field of contemporary Indigenous art, the text is subtly layered with insights into the attitudes and operations of the art world and strategies to use to overcome stereotypes and help establish Indigenous art and thought in its own right. The story moves between village, urban, and global zones of art creation and display.



Figure 2. Arrival of *Dukduks* for the Warawgira ceremony at the 2008 National Mask Festival, Kokopo, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of Susan Cochrane

The narrative opens with my arrival in New Caledonia in 1995. I had been recruited as a specialist in contemporary Pacific art by the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture (Agence de développement de la culture kanak, or ADCK), which had been charged with the

monumental task of creating the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in time for its inauguration in May 1998. The Centre was the French government’s gift of reconciliation following New Caledonia’s near-civil-war from 1984 to 1988. As the only “poken” among the ADCK’s ensemble of Kanak and French specialists, I had to prove my capabilities in a heady cultural mix with the moral support of my team and my future husband, Michel Bonnefis.



Figure 3. Directors of Pacific Islands museums and Aboriginal Taiwanese cultural leaders at the opening of the exhibition *Across Oceans and Time*, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts (KMFA), Taiwan, October 2007. The Director of KMFA, Jiunshyan Lee, fourth from left; Madame Marie-Claude Tjibaou next to him; Emmanuel Kasarherou, Director of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, third from right; and Susan Cochrane in the centre. Courtesy of Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts

In the book’s first chapters, the Tjibaou Cultural Centre takes shape. My role was to establish a network of connections within New Caledonia and neighbouring Pacific nations. I share memorable adventures of traveling with the Kanak assistant curators to commission and collect contemporary artworks, and on some occasions with my husband for his initiation into neighbouring cultures. The objective was to form a major collection of contemporary Pacific art for the Tjibaou Cultural Centre and to train the curatorial team to take over following its inauguration.

The collection development being undertaken gained attention in Australia and New Zealand, and in 1996 and 1999 I was invited to be on the curatorial team charged with transforming the world's view of contemporary Pacific art through the Queensland Art Gallery's *Asia Pacific Triennial*. In 2000, I was invited to be the guest Pacific curator for the Sydney Olympics Art Festival. In 2005, a new research project and exhibition, *ARTventure*, emerged as a joint project between Taiwan and New Caledonia with the goal of connecting Aboriginal Taiwanese and Pacific artists who shared Austronesian heritage. As the guest curator for the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in Taiwan, once again I found myself in a vastly different cultural milieu.

As prolific writer, I always aim to raise the profile of contemporary Pacific art across a range of genres, from scholarly to general readership materials—theses, monographs, catalogue essays, journal articles, and reviews—as well as through academic and public presentations. My memoir, *ARTventures*, is an exploratory volume telling my story as a roaming curator of contemporary Pacific art from the 1980s to the 2010s: a kaleidoscope of art and artists in diverse cultural settings. My life is a continuing ARTventure.

ARTventures: Art and Life in the Contemporary Pacific

ARTventures: Aventures artistiques dans le Pacifique contemporain

(Unpublished manuscript. Original text in English with French translation by the author)

Susan Cochrane has achieved recognition as a specialist on the Indigenous art of the Pacific region. Her formative years in Papua New Guinea influenced her career path as an art historian, curator, and writer. Frequent fieldwork in Pacific countries has contributed to her long-term professional relationships with Indigenous artists and communities. Her innovative curatorial approach has led to roles as guest curator of or consultant on major exhibitions and art events in Australia. Internationally, she has been a consultant to the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia and Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in Taiwan on several occasions. She has published extensively on contemporary Pacific art and regards writing for diverse publications as an indispensable component to making Pacific art accessible to a wide audience.



Figure 4. Loading a canoe for the Sepik River Project (interpreter Materina Wai in foreground), Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2010. Courtesy of Susan Cochrane