

The Loni & Roni Show

Lonnie Hutchinson & Veronica Vaevae. Curated by Stephanie Oberg

'Getting down with the Brown' in Christchurch, what appears on the surface to be the most English of all New Zealand cities, can be as it states in *The Loni and Roni Show* exhibition catalogue, 'as comfortable as all year round sea swimming...'

Curated in the heart of the southern winter to coincide with the 7th International Pacific Art Association Symposium held in Christchurch June 2003, *The Loni and Roni Show* was both lighthearted and serious.

The Loni and Roni Show – its name a parody of the British comedy duo The Two Ronnies – provided a 70's style luau, an entry though the jet-set lounge in to a Pacific paradise. The Physics Room became, for the opening night at least, an escapist adventure from subzero Christchurch temperatures complete with coconut palms, blue glassy ocean, bikini babes, oiled beauties serving drinks, lyrical men and dusky poetic maidens, sea sounds, AstroTurf, spa pools and American cultural imperialism.

The aim of *The Loni and Roni Show* featuring Samoan/Maori artist Lonnie Hutchinson and Rarotongan artist Veronica Vaevae, was combined with the Pacific Art Association symposium's intention to challenge attitudes and ideas about the Pacific and the arts of the Pacific. The superbly subversive curatorial intent of curator Stephanie Oberg, leaped off from and paid homage to the equally subversive 'Bottled Ocean' curated by Jim Viviaere in 1996. Like the PAA symposium, Oberg took the Pacific's history in hand and considered the Pacific today through a political and artistic lens. Tourist and primitive art definitions were parodied and themes of migration, tourism, consumerism, and changing forms of cultural currency were explored. The artists' upbeat and contemporary urban expression and conceptual depth were showcased. A particularly potent work was *Lole Lole*, a large aeroplane wall-work, made from coloured jelly jet planes by Hutchinson.

Lole Lole made reference to the horror story nightmare of jellyfish babies, a term used by the women of Rongelap for babies born after nuclear testing in Micronesia on Bikini A toll in 1954.

'Now we have the problem of jellyfish babies. These babies are born like jellyfish. They have no eyes. They have no heads. They have no arms. They have no legs. They do not shape like human beings at all. But they are born on the labour table. The most colourful, ugly things that you have ever seen. Some of them have hairs on them and they breathe.'

Within the opening paragraphs of the exhibition catalogue Oberg states, '...experiences of Polynesian heart, art, identity and culture rarely spill out into the everyday life of the mainstream but manifest as guest appearances, performances adding 'colour' to formal and official occasions... a hothouse flower one minute, literally out in the cold the next...'

Particularly true of Christchurch with its conservative chilliness, hidden undercurrents and anxieties about status, race and culture. The city's 'brown experience' including Maori (and perhaps the reason why the famous Pacific Underground theatre group which emerged from Christchurch named themselves 'Pacific Underground') is mostly covert, and often experienced fleetingly – no compulsory bicultural politics in this town! *The Loni and Roni Show* at the Physics Room managed to roll Christchurch over and expose its brown underbelly so we could see it. Now all know it is there...

Megan Tamati-Quennell

¹ Darlene Keju Johnson, *Pacific Women Speak Out for Independence and De Nuclearisation*, Zoh de Istar, Raven Press 1998

