

TAUTAI

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graham fletcher a cross-cultural imaginary



Untitled (Lounge Room Tribalism series) 2010 Oil on canvas, 1500 x 1200mm

Images courtesy of Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, NZ

Artist was not on the list of career choices when Graham Fletcher was growing up. After schooling at Richmond Road Primary, Wesley Intermediate and Lynfield College, Graham was employed as a draughtsman at Telecom where he was encouraged to study part-time and over three years he completed a Technical Certificate of Draughting at the Central Institute of Technology in Wellington. He worked for Telecom for six years before heading overseas in the early nineties to travel in America and the UK. Aside from a few trips to Australia this was Graham's first overseas experience and the expansiveness of the States made a big impression; from Los Angeles to Vancouver via Idaho and then to New York by way of Detroit where he saw a city in a state of collapse. The experience was offset by a stay at the Dragon Tea House – a boarding house crammed with Asiana. Once in New York he stayed in Times Square where the energy of the city, the diversity of the people he met and their occupations had a huge effect. London was

similar in terms of impact but the drudgery of pub work, there and in Scotland started him thinking that there must be more to life than this!

Graham came back to New Zealand in 1992 and decided not to return to his old occupation but to study for a tertiary qualification; he considered architecture but eventually decided on graphic design and entered the degree programme at Unitec. The first year was exciting and he met and was impressed by lecturers like Richard Fahey and Gina Ferguson. During Graham's third year of study Richard Fahey was made head of the new painting programme which was to be located in Park House. Graham moved into the programme and remembers feeling that this was when painting began to seem like a viable career choice.

Fahey's influence as a teacher was profound because of his thoughtful, critical analysis. Julian Dashper and John Reynolds were also crucial not just as lecturers but also as mentors. Julian was a significant role model and a particularly big influence partly because he had faith in Graham's

ability and facilitated Graham's connection with Anna Bibby Gallery, but also because he talked about professional practice and how to build a profile. Like Julian, John Reynolds was another successful practitioner with encyclopaedic and anecdotal knowledge that he brought to critical conversations about art and painting. Both were highly visible, well respected practitioners and by example, made an artistic career seem like a possibility. A viable career needed a leap of faith and the leap of faith was Graham's first solo show at Anna Bibby's Kitchener St gallery in 1998. The exhibition was called *Mistint* and showed works on board using paint that had been remaindered because it had been incorrectly mixed, hence the title, which like a lot of Graham's work plays on the slippages in language where words can say one thing but open up a multiplicity of other associations. *Mistint* was the first of a series of successful solo shows and led to more opportunities to exhibit nationally and internationally.

In this period Graham was part of Indicator



Studios in Mt Eden where artists and designers formed a community and created a vibrant, practice driven environment that counterbalanced the sometimes lonely and isolated existence of being a painter. Paint and it's material possibilities continued to be a theme in Graham's work and exhibitions from this time like Quarantine, or Bad Medicine or the Wallflowers works, show an artist who is constantly experimenting not just with the materiality of the paint but also the materiality of the grounds; mining the potential of tapa cloth for example in the large scale works from the Quarantine show; or the implications of acetate for the Wallflowers pieces. The language of ideas was also investigated; themes around the legacy of colonialism in the Pacific and the stigmatisation and marginalisation of Pacific Island peoples within New Zealand were explored. Ideas that still resonate contextually in relation to Graham's ongoing research. Invitations to exhibit mounted up and working from show to show meant that Graham's time for experimentation was restricted so in 2003 he enrolled in the MFA programme at Elam School of Fine Arts. This was a necessity he believes; to have a break from his regular practice and have space and time for re-invention and importantly for any artist; to be able to fail.

Practitioner guidance was still as important as it had been in his undergrad study and Graham valued the experience of staff like Peter Robinson as well as the insightful criticisms and encouragement of Allan Smith, who had also been on the staff at Unitec and would supervise Graham in his future studies. The impact of people like Smith has engendered an approach to

teaching that has been a constant through Graham's career, it also reflects the early influence of Julian Dashper whose philosophical attitude continues to inform Graham's own thinking – that teaching is a way of staying connected and of having an ongoing conversation with people who share similar concerns.

Objects and carvings that relied on ethnographic references formed part of Graham's masters project. An idea began to crystallise during that time after a seminal experience from 2002 where he chanced upon a curious mix of modern art and ethnographic objects within the domestic setting of an art collectors home. This was to form the crux of his new research and eventually lead to a proposal for more postgraduate study. The awarding of a substantial doctoral scholarship enabled him to study full time and in 2006 he began his Doctorate in Fine Arts at Elam. What follows is an excerpt from the prologue to Graham's doctoral exegesis *Myth, Magic, Mimicry and Cross Cultural Imaginary*. It describes the experience that left an indelible mark on Graham's painting; recent works are large scale, fifties inspired interiors, inserted into which are ethnographic items of ambiguous provenance:

Once my eyes had adjusted to the dim light, I was confronted by a strange yet astonishing sight of all manner of 'things'. The room was brimming with paintings, sculptures, prints and ethnographic artefacts—all painstakingly arranged to achieve maximum consideration for anyone lucky enough to be invited within the inner sanctum. Such a room, abundant with mystery and the marvellous, would require several visits to grasp the entirety of the collection—but I recall a number of fantastic folk-art paintings and a fine collection of Papua New Guinea shields among many other ethnographic relics... But my attention was ultimately captured by her lounge and its odd yet complimentary mixture of the contemporary and the sacred... in many ways it has never left my mind.

During the first year of his doctoral studies Graham travelled to Europe for a four-week research trip to visit ethnographic collections in museums and also to look at as much

contemporary art as possible. A Kandinsky retrospective at the Tate Modern surprised him with the impact it made – seeing the entirety of Kandinsky's practice and viewing firsthand the brilliance of the colour and composition and the thematic dedication. At the Musée du quai Branley in Paris the Oceanic and African ethnographic influences on artists like Picasso and Matisse were striking as were the stunning works from Papua New Guinea and seeing what looked like significant chunks of Greece and the Middle East in the plundered installations of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Contemporary artists like Franz West at the Gagosian, Albert Oehlen at Whitechapel, Thomas Scheibitz in Berlin were inspiring as was enjoying the immersive experience of being able to spend time dedicated to looking at and absorbing art.

After four years Graham's study culminated in January of this year with an exhibition titled *Lounge Room Tribalism* at the George Fraser Gallery – the exhibition consisted of ten of the large scale painted interiors as well as a collection of objects and carvings and in April of this year Graham achieved his Doctorate in Fine Arts. While connections with the University of Auckland continue with his new position as Pacific Doctoral Programme Coordinator, painting remains his core occupation and in 2011 he will install works from his doctoral show in the Deane Gallery at City Gallery Wellington as well as sending works to Los Angeles where he will participate in ATA, 'an international gathering of work by contemporary artists of the Samoan diaspora', curated by Dan Taulapapa McMullin and Chuck Fe'esago at Arena One in Santa Monica.

While the doctorate provided a hiatus from the pressure of showing work and gave him time to develop his practice, Graham's first foray back into public exhibitions was rewarded earlier this month when he won The Wallace Arts Trust Development Award for his work *Untitled* (NordischeFreikörperkultur). The award provides him with a two-month residency in Vermont at the Vermont Studio Centre, USA.

Andrea Low

wihaan



As a part of the Auckland City Council Micro Sites initiative Tessa Laird and I generated a collaborative project with the Thai Buddhist community of Auckland. We designed, built and installed a temple in Albert Park calling her *Wihaan*. The site we chose was the banana grove in Albert Park, as the natural temple like structure seemed apt for a work with sacred sentiments. Known for being a problematic area in Albert Park we fought hard for her installation there, amidst fears she would not remain safe.

Wihaan was/is meant to be installed for three years with a roster of artists with designated colours to honour her, and yet despite becoming

a functioning temple for many locals just three weeks into the project she was seriously vandalised. This act has created a series of meetings with council and local body representatives in order to find resolution and a way forward to address this issue of disrespect and destruction of public art works.

The resolution we reached is to repair and reinstall her despite any damage that may be done; committing to providing creation in the face of destruction. In the hope that the statement we make by not giving up will one day speak volumes.

Tiffany Singh