



Seeing the funny side

**Focusing on Cook Islands humour
in the experience of the religious pageant Nuku**

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An exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master in Art and
Design (MA&D)

2010
School of Art and Design

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements) nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jean E. Gragg". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank and acknowledge my primary supervisor Dale Fitchett for sharing her knowledge, her professionalism and rigorous support during the two years of the master's programme. Thank you also to Natalie Robertson and Simon Clark for the new insights into my work. With the support of these supervisors what, at times, seemed a daunting task became a series of new learning experiences that challenged my preset ways of working.

Special thanks to my husband David who supported and encouraged me throughout in word and deed.

Rhonda Bucheler's good humour and professionalism during the writing of this exegesis is very much appreciated for she laughed when I became too close to what I was doing to see the big picture.

I thank Teina Taulu for her willing and patient support in teaching me the basic skills of the computer and providing professional assistance in presenting this exegesis.

Tangi ke, tangi ke, Rod Dixon for being supportive and sharing his vast knowledge and written information on Nuku.

Meitaki maata to Jean Tekura Mason at the Takamoa Library. Her knowledge of what is available in the library was invaluable. Thanks also to Sally Voss.

Marjorie and Ron Crocombe I thank for their interesting discussions on Nuku and for sharing their books with me.

Thank you Judith Kunzle and Wendy Evans for helping with the editing of this exegesis.

Thank you to Kay George, Andrea Eimke and my fellow students in the Rarotonga pod "*ata wai walo*" for the support and commiserations throughout.

Tauariki Joseph and Ngarima George's insight into coconut frond weaving was much appreciated.

To all my sisters, especially Mariana and Bets who laugh with me every day, I thank you all for the laughter and discussions of why we laugh.

Abstract

Seeing the funny side:

Focusing on Cook Islands humour in the experience of the religious pageant Nuku.

This multi-media art project investigates the notion of Cook Islands humour, and subsequently place, through the context of the religious pageant Nuku. This pageant has been practiced annually in the Cook Islands for over one hundred and sixty years. While it is not a pageant based on humour, I suggest, through experience and research, that many of the characteristics of Cook Islands humour are revealed in Nuku. The aim of this project is not to recreate the narrative set out in the Nuku pageant but to use this event to explore ways to visually express the humour of the Cook Islands.

After researching and experimenting in two dimensional mediums, my emphasis changed to experimenting with three dimensional mediums, incorporating materials that have connotative meanings in Cook Islands society.

Introduction

My aim with this project is to investigate the importance of humour and place, namely the Cook Islands, through the context of Nuku, and to explore ways of representing this visually. The focus of the project is humour and laughter in the Cook Islands. Laughter in the Cook Islands is very close to the surface. There does not need to be an excuse to laugh; one can laugh spontaneously at absurdity or incongruity; with relief or recognition; or for the sheer joy of laughing. Humour in the Cook Islands rarely springs from malice or superiority but tends to be inclusive and equalising. Any subject can be the source, from every day incidents to serious subjects such as death, God, the *Orometua* (pastor), and good or bad habits.

I have chosen to explore Cook Islands humour through the context of the religious pageant, Nuku, because elements of Cook Islands humour are demonstrated in this event. Although Nuku is not primarily a humorous pageant, it often has incidents where humour is introduced to teach church doctrine as well as to keep the audience entertained. The research into Nuku has led me to suggest that humour in the Cook Islands has strong philosophical similarities to Zen humour. The humour of Nuku is playful rather than satirical and aggressive and yet the purpose, as in Zen teaching, is to raise spiritual awareness. Similarities can be seen in the humour of Nuku and the various levels of Zen humour.

After researching and experimenting in two dimensional mediums to express humour of the Cook Islands in Nuku, my emphasis changed to experimenting with three dimensional mediums, incorporating materials that have connotative meanings in Cook Islands society. I wanted to communicate my findings to an audience by using metaphor which, as Derrida said, is 'shaped by social, political, economic and cultural interpretations' (Rampley, 2005, p. 135).

The exegesis is arranged as follows:

Chapter 1: Looking through tinted glasses

This chapter briefly outlines my background as researcher and the particular experiences that have sparked my interest and prompted this research.

Chapter 2: The pageant of Nuku

To better understand the way Nuku functions, chapter two presents a historical background of the pageant from its early beginnings, both from a traditional and a Christian perspective. Insight is given into the way Nuku evolves and who takes part. The categories of

Nuku are described. This chapter also explains the connection between Zen humour and the humour of Nuku.

Chapter 3: Research methods

A brief description outlines the heuristic method employed in this research.

Chapter 4: Project development

This chapter outlines the chronological development of the project from two dimensional mediums through to collage, then to sculpture and photography as the focus of the project developed.

Chapter 5: The thesis exhibition

This chapter discusses the final thesis exhibition.

Conclusion

Bibliography

Chapter 1: Looking through tinted glasses

‘Just how one laughs is partially shaped by situation, culture, class, personality and gender’ (Mitchell, 1992, p. 5).

The perspective from which I view Nuku is coloured by my personal experiences and the way I see the Cook Islands. My family had the best of both worlds, Maori and *Papa’a* (Cook Islands term for foreigner). I was born to Elizabeth Marsters and Ronald Powell, an Englishman. Elizabeth was the only natural daughter of Ketia Repaio of Manihiki Island, in the Northern Cook Islands and Tearaia Marsters of Palmerston Island in the Southern Cook Islands. I have six siblings. Our eldest sister was born on Palmerston Island and six of us were born on Rarotonga. We lived in Tutakimoa, a village inhabited by Northern Islanders in the centre of Avarua on Rarotonga. Our Mama Ketia (maternal grandmother) lived with us and brought us up on Manihiki values and stories, in loving competition with our English father’s values. Many of the games we played were laughing games. One game, ‘*Timokemoke aka ra*’, required one to sit still and not move. The first one who giggled had to stand up and dance to the beat of Mama’s hands on the wood floor or her voice chanting a drum beat. Laughter and humour were an integral part of our childhood.

Each of the cultures in which I was brought up was very different. To demonstrate this, I have chosen food to make the distinction. Our Manihiki family sent us dried fish, and dried *korori parau*, (pearlshell oyster meat), salted *paua* (tridacna clams) and *uto* (young sprouted coconut). Our Palmerston family (old English and Cook Islands Maori) sent baked *uto*, *boson* bird packed in lard, and dried fish, turtle and turtle eggs. Our English family sent us chocolate at Christmas time and cards with pictures of snow in shining glitter. The Manihiki and Palmerston food could be eaten whenever we wanted. The food from the Northern Cook Islands was distributed to other members of our extended family so everyone could enjoy the special foods. The box of chocolates, however, was only opened after dinner and our siblings and parents could choose one, before the box was closed until the next night. We did not share the chocolates with anyone else. It is interesting to note that we did not give Northern food to people who were not familiar with it because it was frowned upon by the Southern group islanders because of its pungent smell. For me this was symbolic of different cultural norms.

You might say, what has this to do with humour in the Cook Islands? Humour, like food, appeals to different tastes and taste depends on environment and cultural practices. As Pierre Bourdieu says: “Taste unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others’ (as cited in Jahnke, 1999, p. 195). The Nuku pageant is a distinctively Cook Islands cultural experience. My interest in Nuku was kindled as a child, watching with my sisters, mother and grandmother. We were frightened, saddened, entertained and challenged by what we saw. However, I was always amused by the adaptation of Bible stories into a Cook Islands cultural context.

Chapter 2: Nuku

2.1 The pageant of Nuku

Nuku:

n.1. A pageant, held annually in the Cook Islands to celebrate Gospel Day.

n. 2. A play based on a Bible story performed in the Nuku pageant.

(Buse and Taringa, 1995, p. 276)

Nuku is an annual pageant held on Gospel Day, October 26, by the Cook Islands Christian Church, to celebrate the arrival of Christianity in the Cook Islands in 1821. Each of the six *Ekalesia* or parishes on Rarotonga is required to perform a Nuku (a play) for the pageant Nuku¹. Each *Ekalesia* hosts the Nuku once every six years in Rarotonga in an anti-clockwise rotation around the island. In both the Northern and Southern Cook islands, villages host the Nuku in a similar rotation. It is an important community event as anyone in the village can participate.

Nuku is almost always held on the lawn in front of the *Orometua's* (Pastor's) home. The Nuku audiences are the participants of other Nuku, invited guests and visitors to the island. Nuku is discussed and performed in the Maori language². Nuku gathers the community together in an activity that involves the whole family and the people of the village in a fun-filled, cooperative learning activity. Nuku also teaches the moral doctrine of the church.

The performance of Nuku evolves through collective decision making and the inclusion and cooperation of people in the village. Songs and hymns are composed in consultation with individuals who have expertise in the various fields of music and dance. Actors volunteer for parts. There is no written script, which follows the Polynesian tradition of oral history and story telling. Each actor makes up his or her lines from the group discussion of the proposed story. During practice the lines evolve and are improved on, at the suggestion of other members of the cast, sometimes changing for clarity or to be more entertaining. There may also be improvisation in the final performance. Most costumes are home made so that the materials can be reused after the performance to make articles of clothing, cushion covers, curtains, and bed spreads. Flowers are an important part of costumes. Props are brought from home and larger stage sets are provided and transported to the Nuku venue by local businesses. Many of the costumes and props are made from materials gathered from the environment. When marching into the arena, the cast of several hundred may wear head *ei* (flower crowns) of gardenia or dried banana leaves.

¹ I use the term Nuku to describe both a single play and the collective of plays performed on October 26, annually.

² Mission schools taught in the Maori language until 1895 when an act of parliament forced the mission schools to begin teaching the English language. (Scott, 1991)

The categories of Nuku include the Bible dramas such as ‘Jonah and the Whale’, ‘The Vineyard of Naboth’, ‘The Writing on the Wall’ (Thorogood, 1960, p. 16) and the popular theme of the arrival of early missionaries on the different islands of the Cook Islands and the Pacific (Carr, 2007 a). These topics are often amusing when modern elements are incorporated into the Nuku. Frequently a popular Bible story is used to teach a lesson by adapting the story to illustrate today’s problems. Current events have been used to illustrate the theme of good against evil, as in the Nuku by Arorangi (9/11 Horror portrayed in pageant, 2003). A new theme introduced in 2007 asks the question: Where will the Church be in 50 years time? (Carr, 2007 b).

2.2 A theory of humour in Nuku

‘What may be considered funny or sad in one culture may not be viewed either wholly or partially as such in another. Similarly people in one culture may laugh at or feel ashamed of others following an incident considered funny or sad’ (Mahina, 2008, p. 39-40).

The humour of Nuku, while raising spiritual awareness, tends to be playful rather than aggressive and, as mentioned in the introduction, similarities can be seen in the humour of Nuku and the various levels of Zen humour. Zen does not classify humour through theory but uses examples to point out humour. I suggest that Cook Islands humour in Nuku is closely akin to the Zen philosophy that identifies the humour of Paradise, Paradise-lost and Paradise-regained. Hyers (1970, p. 5) says of Zen humour, “... there are three distinguishable levels on which the comic moves in relation to the sacred, three moments or moods which in mythological terms may be seen as corresponding to the laughter of Paradise, Paradise-lost and Paradise-regained.”

The laughter of Paradise can be compared with the spontaneity of laughter at incongruity and absurdity. The humour of Paradise-lost equates to lessons learned through recognition, relief and surprise. This may in turn lead to the humour of Paradise-regained which may be associated with the joy of laughing, wisdom, self knowledge and harmony. “It is this revelatory redemptive potentiality that is appropriated in Zen as both a pedagogical method and a psychological mechanism for attaining enlightenment and liberation” (Hyers, 1970, p. 4). Hyers also claims, ‘Laughter in Zen comes not from inner tension but inner harmony’ (1989, p. 274), which can be seen as being able to laugh at oneself from a position of understanding. Within Nuku, these various aspects of humour are reflected.

In the following discussion I will use examples from Nuku to demonstrate the various Zen levels. These levels do not exist in isolation to each other. At first glance one may laugh for one reason but on further looking, one may laugh for a different reason because of a new perception, and continue laughing because of the joy of insight.

Hyers discusses Paradise as a state of freedom, allowing one to laugh with the innocence of a child, with spontaneity and the naturalness, at incongruity and absurdity.

(Hyers, 1970). The Reverend Bernard Thorogood in his book, *Not Quite Paradise*, describes the Nuku, 'The Vineyard of Naboth', in a way that reflects the Zen spirit of Paradise: 'It is a stirring sight and a shattering sound when these hundreds of children and young people march into the arena, each group singing its own song as loudly as possible and as long as possible' (1960, p. 16). People parading into the arena, whether a large or small group, provoke a feeling of good will and kinship in the audience because there is always someone or something that ties one to the group: friends and family, people having a good time and people dressed as familiar Bible characters dancing Cook Islands style. One experiences a feeling of togetherness that allows the freedom, spontaneity and naturalness to laugh in the nature of the child.

Food is often used to humorous effect in Nuku, for example, when the villagers are asked to bring food to welcome guests. The expectation is that local foods should be brought, but to add humour, a carton of juice is stood up in a basket that has local foods. In another Nuku, performed in 2007, (Manaune, 2007) a missionary who arrived in Pukapuka in 1869 is held captive on the island. He calls for his belongings and a sandwich for lunch to be brought ashore. This is funny, firstly because sandwiches in the Cook Islands are a relatively new food and secondly, the use of the English words 'sandwich' and 'lunch' conjures up an incongruous image in the minds of atoll dwellers who don't have bread, let alone a sandwich for lunch.

I observed 'Paradise' humour also in the Nuku that enacted the arrival of missionaries who went to Aitutaki in 1821. They tried to convert the people of Vaipae to Christianity, but the chief was not about to accept the Living God until they had seized revenge for the warriors that they had lost in a recent battle with the neighbouring village. During the re-enactment of their deliberations, a cell phone rang and the missionary answered. He said in English to the Chief, as he handed the cell phone to him, 'Here, it's the lord on the line for you.' Everyone who saw this collapsed with laughter. The cell phone and the use of English both added an element of surprise and incongruity, given that the setting was 1821.

Hyers goes on to discuss Paradise-lost as a state of 'self assertion, of desiring and grasping, of separation and estrangement, of rational and moral discrimination' (Hyers, 1970, p. 5). The playfulness of the child is lost and the humour becomes more 'self conscious, more reflective, more serious, more mature' (Hyers, 1970, p. 5). It is the ability to see the serious side of a situation and also to see the opposite side. It is this duality that elicits the potential for humour.

An example of the humour of Paradise-lost can be found in the Arorangi *Ekalesia* 2003 Nuku, when they broke from the tradition of using a Bible story to illustrate "Good against Evil" (9/11 horror portrayed in pageant, 2003). They related all the evil events that were happening outside the Cook Islands and compared them with what we are doing here. The lyrics of the songs that they composed for the Nuku told of diseases that are prevalent in the world, such as AIDS, SARS, and the particular diseases of the Cook

Islands - diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. They highlighted the Israeli - Palestinian conflict and their fight over land which is an issue well understood here. The raw emotion from shock, disbelief, horror, fear, sorrow and anger was still being reported on television which was keeping the horror alive, almost two years after the event. This Nuku production, besides presenting the horror, also played on the opposite of horror: local people dressed as New York business people, rushing about in their city clothes, high heels sinking into the grass, people jumping from windows onto mattresses below. The local fire brigade was in full swing amongst a cacophony of sirens and screams, with children on roller-blades fleeing the scene. The representation of the event in the Cook Islands unwittingly became a source of humour. The visitors to the island were shocked, disgusted and walked away. The local audience laughed and enjoyed the Nuku. The event took on a totally different perspective and no longer belonged to the realm of horror because the Nuku had cleared the air of the raw emotion. The humour in this instance clearly demonstrates one of the functions of humour in Zen, that of reversing and collapsing categories, which in turn leads to an inclusiveness.

Hyers (1970) describes Paradise-regained as the revelatory level of the comic spirit. "Here humour becomes the freedom to play and to laugh which is contained within the freedom of enlightenment" (p. 5). Mitchell expresses it as,

... a pleasure in perceiving or remembering ambivalent disjuncture, an enjoyment of the sudden transformation from perplexity (or not knowing) to amused insight. The pleasure is in seeing our ordered world suddenly disordered - only for a fleeting instant, as with a witty remark, or for minutes or more by a farcical performance. Our laughter, itself physiologically conclusive and chaotic, is an audible metaphor for the cognitive disorder we are enjoying. As an unmediated response, humorous laughter is a time-out or out-of-time covering response for savouring the disruptive event until cognitive order and speech returns (1992, p. 26).

The humour of Paradise-regained can also be seen in the Nuku that adapted a Bible story to illustrate today's problems. The Nikao *Ekalesia* in their Nuku, (Kapi, 2008) changed the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to symbolize the moral doctrine of obedience. They used alcohol, rather than the apple of the original Bible story, to illustrate temptation and disobedience. The moral of the story was obedience which Eve had a problem with because of being *maromaroa*. *Maromaroa* means one is bored, melancholy, lonely, gloomy or discontented and needs a change of scenery. Boredom from staying at home *koi tita* (picking up leaves), *akiaki tiare* (picking flowers), and *pua kakau* (washing) day in and day out, can cause *maromaroa*. When Eve begs Adam to allow her to go and see what is happening outside the Garden of Eden, the audience recognises a very real desire to get out of this state of melancholy. The humour of this situation is in the familiarity of a condition that everyone suffers from at some point, and the recognition that it is happening in such a perfect place. The

Nuku continues with the devil, *Satani*, tempting her with alcohol while she is in the state of *tamataora* (entertainment and distraction) in order to get rid of *maromaroa* (melancholy). The laughter from this situation is the recognition of a familiar human affliction highlighting a common condition, i.e. ‘self knowledge, results from the understanding that an error has been committed, and this knowledge becomes a source of celebration through laughter’ (Mahina, 2008, p. 39).

Hyers goes on to point out that a ‘function of humour in Zen is that of embracing and uniting of opposites. There is a kind of humour which separates one thing from another and elevates one group over another--as is the case with racist and sexist and ethnic jokes. But the uses of humour in Zen have an opposite intention. Zen humour moves toward inclusiveness and nonduality’ (1989, p. 272). This inclusiveness and nonduality that results from humour in Nuku is evident in many of the examples discussed above. It is also evident in the use of costumes and props. For example, King Solomon wore a crown that a chief in the Cook Islands might wear, he wore clothes that a Cook Islands’ *ariki* (Chief/King) would wear and he sat on a ‘throne’ that is an everyday home-made chair. King Solomon was not a stranger from another place; he was a member of the local community and was embraced as a chief who would live in the village. By substituting the local equivalent for the real thing from a story, the humour becomes inclusive and everyone laughed. The stories that originated in a very different time and place have humour and relevance when transposed into the local setting. Rosaline Redwood discusses a further example from Nuku in the sixties.

One ambitious party depicted Jesus coming into Jerusalem, and since no ass was available, he was riding a shining new bicycle, [which was the popular mode of transport], jumping off now and then to ‘pause by the way side and heal the sick. I wondered if the audience was intended to rock in side splitting laughter at the antics of the actors, but the more they applauded the funnier the actors became (1966, p.163).

Participation is another aspect of humour in a Nuku; the audience is invited to join in and be part of the Nuku, to dance and show their appreciation by clapping or becoming part of the cast for a short time in the spirit of inclusiveness and spontaneity.

In summary, the chart below (refer Fig. 2.1 p.16) explains some of the connections I have identified between Zen humour and humour in Nuku.

Zen Humour and Nuku		
Levels and Functions	Characteristics	Implications
Paradise	Innocence (of a Child)	Spontaneity Incongruity Absurdity
Paradise-lost	Duality (seeing both sides) Rationality Learning (Adult-like)	Recognition Relief Interpretation
Paradise-regained	Unity Wisdom Enlightenment Self knowledge Harmony	Recognition Surprise Joy of Unity
Collapsing Categories		Non duality
Embracing opposites		Inclusiveness

Fig. 2.1 *Zen Humour*, Chart

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The methodology used in this project is heuristic in nature, focussing on discovery rather than proof. The heuristic process allows for the knowledge of experience and the process of finding existing knowledge to add to the discovery of new knowledge.

In this project I have used a heuristic process to find new ways to visually explore and experiment to re-create the humour and the sense of place that are characteristic of Nuku. An example of the heuristic approach in this project was the use of different materials using traditional Cook Islands weaving skills. By experimenting with different weaving techniques I explored a sense of Pacificness, demonstrated by the woven limbs of the figures. Although the focus here was on establishing place through the use of materials, the incongruity of the technique and the materials (i.e. woven arms and legs) suggested the comic, just as the incongruity of materials used in Nuku is a source of humour. The experimentation of ways to express the humour of Nuku occurs through the use of strategies such as incongruity, recognition, spontaneity and the joy of unity, (cooperation). The process developed through experimentation with two dimensional media and progressed to three dimensional media and natural materials, each stage progressing to the next, building on new discoveries.

Chapter 4: Project development

While this chapter outlines the chronological development of the project from two dimensional mediums through to collage then to sculpture and photography as the focus of the project developed, the following diagram offers an overview of the research project as a whole.

Overview of Research Project

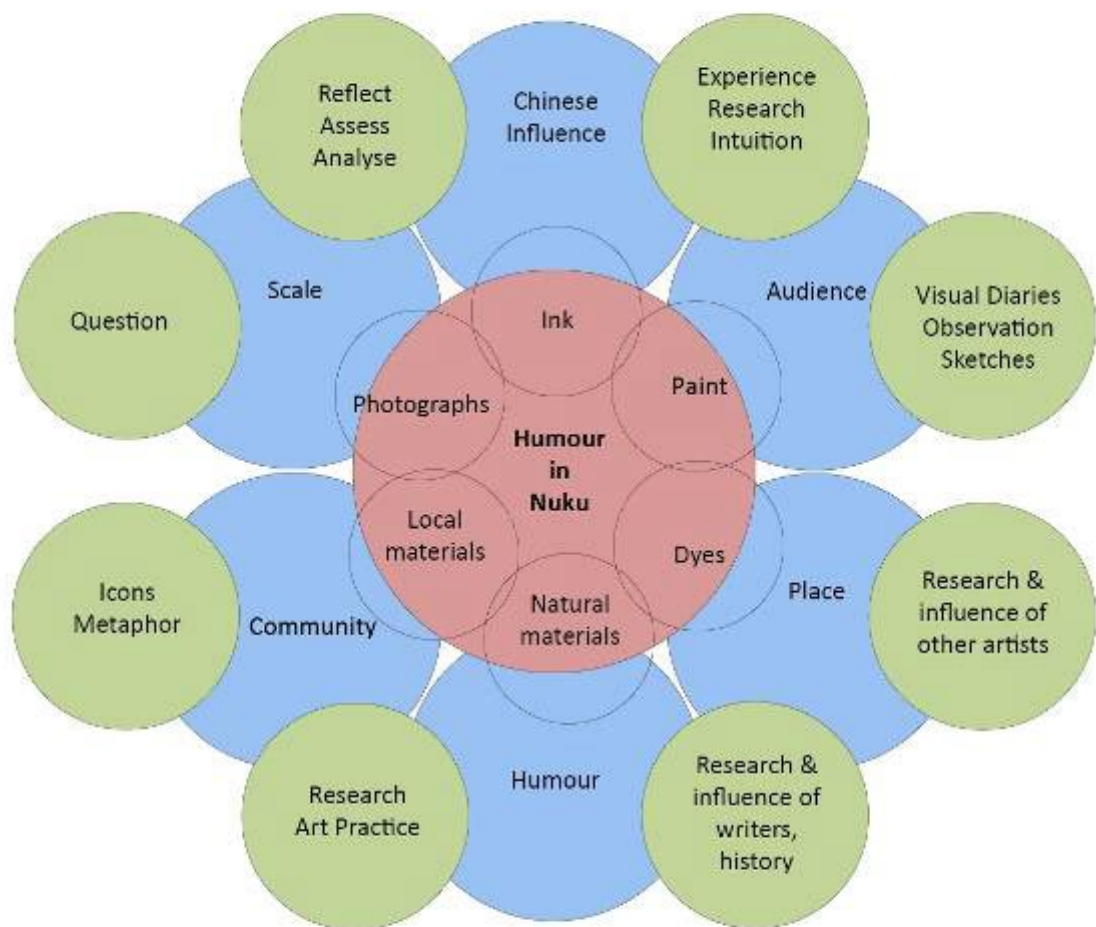


Fig.4.1
Strategies – Art Practice, Diagram

I began the project by painting the Nuku audience based on the predominance of sketches in my visual diaries collected over a number of years. Inspired by my observations of this audience, I explored ideas of a crowd by using black ink on paper (refer Fig. 4.2 – 4.7). I was influenced by the Chinese artists who used an aesthetic theory which, above all, emphasized the sentiments. Gu Kaizhi's views followed theories such as "likeness in spirit resides in unlikeness" and "a painting should be something between likeness and unlikeness" (Gu Kaizhi, c345-406, as cited in Hearn n.d.). They also disregarded the limitations of perspective, proportion and light and used a moving perspective without a focal point.



Fig. 4.2

Joan E. Gragg, March 2008, *Trials*.

Ink on paper using brush, 180 x 230 mm

I wanted to investigate how to show the audience of Nuku as a specifically Cook Islands audience in order to establish a sense of place in the work. The idea was to convey a loose rendition to suggest a relaxed, happy, haphazard crowd and express the feeling and ideas of community, family, church, humour and cooperation. Although these paintings did show the attitude of the audience, the loose haphazard crowd did not materialise until I assembled them in a collage (refer Fig. 4.8, p. 20).



Fig. 4.3

Joan E. Gragg,
May 2008,
Mama and
Mokopuna.

Ink on paper,
290 x 420 mm



Fig. 4.4

Joan E. Gragg,
May 2008,
Mum & baby.

Ink on paper,
290 x 420 mm



Fig. 4.5

Joan E. Gragg,
May 2008,
Tired mama.

Ink on paper,
420 x 290 mm



Fig. 4.6

Joan E. Gragg,
May 2008,
Ten year old.

Ink on paper,
420 x 300 mm



Fig 4.7

Joan E. Gragg,
May 2008,
Young man.

Ink on paper,
420 x 300 mm

As Stewart Hall says, ‘One soon discovers that meaning is not straightforward or transparent and does not survive intact the passage through representation. It is always putting off or ‘deferring’ its rendezvous with Absolute Truth’ (1977, p. 9). In exploring humour in the context of Nuku, I thought about who the viewers of my work would be: an audience in New Zealand or one in the Cook Islands. Because Nuku is a unique Cook Islands event and is performed in the Maori language, the connotations of place and language are based on cultural interpretations. Consequently assuming the viewer would recognise cultural icons, symbols and metaphors, I decided to make work primarily for a local audience. Therefore, the random assembly of the collage, in terms of size and scale and random placements, more closely reflected the inclusive and relaxed crowd that I had experienced at Nuku. I wanted to represent the whole village involvement in Nuku and to give the impression of many things happening at one time.



Fig. 4.8
Joan E. Gragg, July 2008, *The audience*.
Collage, Ink on paper, 800 x 1000 mm

My next experiments continued to explore village participation, but because the people of the audience of Nuku are also the players in Nuku, I wanted to explore the idea of the viewer sometimes feeling involved in the Nuku and at other times watching the Nuku. When I painted a particular Nuku, ‘Jonah and the Whale’, I moved from a more literal perspective, shifting from an audience point of view to being involved as an actor, showing the story from different points of view. For example, Fig. 4.9 shows an audience view of the whale, Fig. 4.10 is from the whale’s viewpoint while Fig. 4.11 is Jonah falling into the whale’s stomach.



Fig. 4.9
Joan E. Gragg,
June 2008,
*Jonah resisting
being swallowed*.
Ink on paper,
210 x 297 mm

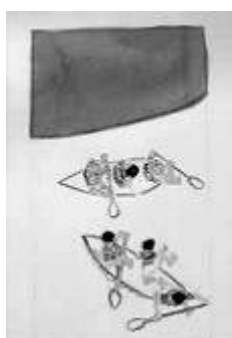


Fig. 4.10
Joan E. Gragg,
June 2008,
*The whale looks
down*.
Ink on paper,
210 x 297 mm



Fig. 4.11
Joan E. Gragg,
June 2008,
*Jonah falling into
Whale's stomach*.
Ink on paper,
210 x 297 mm

Instead of portraying one Nuku, as in 'Jonah and the Whale', I decided to paint the whole day of Nuku in one picture in keeping with the idea of Nuku being an island event (refer Fig 4.12). Tapes and DVD of Nuku, by Julie Taripo (2003), Cook Islands Television (2003) and Tangi Kapi (2008) were played to get further ideas I was exploring both place and humour. I tried to achieve this by painting known features of Rarotonga to establish place, for example the mountains (refer Fig.4.13) and the choral churches (refer Fig. 4.15), and to rely on humour to be read from the accumulation of drawings within the entire picture.



Fig. 4.12

Joan E. Gragg, December 2008, *The Nuku*. Acrylic on black building paper, 1200 x 5000 mm



Fig. 4.13 Detail



Fig. 4.14 Detail



Fig. 4.15 Detail



Fig. 4.16 Detail

When these paintings were finished I concluded that neither ink and brush, nor the black and white medium satisfactorily represented an expression of Nuku. Although the lack of colour did concentrate the focus on the individual drawings, it did not evoke the festive pageantry of Nuku. In my assessment the medium lacked identification with the Cook Islands, and perhaps some colour would have more connection. The black ink had no cultural association with the Cook Islands. Morito had found the same drawback when trying to express the Japanese landscape in a European medium of oil paint. (Morito, 1927).

As Keith Moxley said:

While the notions of time and culture-sensitive epistemologies is enormous assistance in thinking and knowledge in an age of globalisation, we should never forget that the very tools we use to understand the clash of epistemological systems bears the imprint of the culture in which it was developed (as cited in Smith, 2008, p.178).

The use of colour features strongly in Cook Island culture and to add an element of colour I used local tourist brochures to make collages, repeating the technique of earlier work. The results led me to look for other mediums that had closer associations with the Cook Islands. I experimented with local dyes from the garden, turmeric and *nono*, and explored the use of stamps using coral, coconut husks and old pandanus fruit. These experiments did not produce satisfactory results because they mimicked a painting approach and I was looking for something else. It was the smell of *nono* and turmeric and the tactility of the materials that led me to rethink the idea of expressing place. I considered Ani O'Neill's work as commented on by Lisa Taouma:

O'Neill's refusal to adhere to the constraints of the traditional or aesthetically pleasing but sometimes soulless renditions of the Pacific have distinguished her as an artist who has used the notion of Pacific exotica, colour and 'spice', and rather than reject it has negotiated the terms of its usage (as cited in McAloon, 2009, p. 389).

Consequently, I decided to change my focus by exploring natural materials because they are used in the daily lives of people in the Cook Islands and in Nuku. This meant a change from a two to a three dimensional approach. Examples of these in Nuku are in Fig 4.14 where palm fronds are used metaphorically to represent a canoe.

As Thorogood (1960) wrote, 'Adaptation and ingenuity are tested. A man needs a beard - get the grey trailing moss off the old coconut trunks; David's soldiers need helmets - use the traditional Cook Island helmet of coconut husk: Joshua's men need trumpets - use the Polynesia trumpet, the conch shell' (p. 16).

I gathered materials such as palm fronds, seeds and leaves to make three dimensional figures representing the audience and actors in Nuku. Palm fronds, especially coconut fronds, are used extensively in the Cook Islands for decoration, for thatching, for weaving into containers for carrying produce, hats, mats and toys, to name some of many uses. Flowers are worn for adornment and plants are still widely used for medicine. I was reminded that, 'the methodology of using different media says more than the physical picture and evokes a deeper understanding of the philosophical position of the artist and his environment' (Tsunetomo, 1960, p. 16).



Fig. 4.17

Joan E. Gragg, April - May 2009, *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*.

Palm fronds, coconut, soft coral, banana leaf seed pods and leaves,

Each figure 500 x 380 x 200 mm

Levi–Strauss observed:

‘In the case of what he called bricolage, the process of creating something is not a matter of the calculated choice and use of whatever materials are technically best - adapted to a clearly predetermined purpose, but rather it involves a “dialogue with the materials and means of execution” (as cited in Chandler, 2009, p. 5).



Fig. 4.18

Nuku Pageant Pictorial, (November 1, 2003) Cook Islands News, p. 9.



Fig. 4.19
Joan E. Gragg, April 2009,
The wise men.
Cycad seed pods banana
leaves, grey moss soft coral,
170 x 170 x 190 mm



Fig. 4.20
Joan E. Gragg, April
2009,
The Pastor and Mrs.
Natural materials,
450 x 480 x 370 mm



Fig. 4.21
Joan E. Gragg, April 2009,
A Soldier.
Natural materials,
450 x 480 x 370 mm

The use of these natural materials, in response to my observations and research (for example Fig. 4.17 p. 23) meant that I had found a medium that expressed the Cook Islands and humour through metaphor. The levels of humour of recognition, spontaneity and possibly joy could be present in the figures. However, the figures from the natural materials (refer Fig. 4.17 p. 23, Fig. 4.19, Fig. 4.20, and Fig. 4.21) unfortunately deteriorated quickly, losing their original texture and colour. Interestingly, this paralleled the practice of discarding the natural material costumes and props of Nuku as soon as they had served their purpose, which in turn reflects traditional pre-Christian practice. Lamont wrote of coconut fronds being used on ceremonial occasions in Penrhyn before the influence of Christianity in the late eighteen sixties.

A youth, having cut three small branches from a young coconut tree, platted the leaves of each into something resembling the form of a man, and handed them to an old chief... '... [Lamont described how at the ceremony,] 'He, [The chief] lifted the leafy god and struck him violently against the stone before him, repeating the same with all three. The idols having done their part in the ceremony, were unceremoniously thrown asides amongst a heap of rubbish ... The three cocoa nuts [sic] that had played such an important part in the whole proceedings were now produced and after some more ceremonies, were broken...' (Lamont, 1867, p. 122-123).

Because of the temporary and ephemeral nature of the natural materials there was a need to consider the feasibility of using these materials in the end-of-project exhibition. One solution was to use Ani O'Neill's idea and to call on others in the community to work collaboratively which is also a predominate feature of Nuku preparations (Robins,

2005). Another solution at this stage of the project was to trial a combination of natural and more permanent materials which meant I could retain some control to continue exploring Cook Islands humour in Nuku.

Using natural and more permanent material, I also experimented with gesture and body language to create an impression of a relaxed atmosphere (refer Fig. 4.22 p. 25). By giving the illusion of the body weight, sitting figures appeared comfortable in their chairs. Wire inserted into the hollow pandanus limbs allowed them to be bent into gestural positions. The use of coke bottle chairs was based on the idea of bricolage or making do with available materials. Grouping the figures was an attempt to capture a sense of the VIP audience, dressed in their Sunday best. The incongruous materials were a source of humour. The clothing also evoked humour through recognition, including *rito* hats (coconut fibre), flower *ei* (garlands), Sunday clothes and oversized jandals. My concern with these audience figures was to present intimate moments and elicit the humour of recognition and inclusiveness.



Fig. 4.22

Joan E. Gragg, May 2009, *VIP audience figures*. Natural materials and fabric, 260 x 210 x 130mm

I then chose to further experiment with the characters from the story of 'Jonah and the Whale' which I had previously used (refer Fig. 4.9 – 4.11 p. 20) to again explore humour. But this time I used imported clay in combination with local materials. The availability of modelling clay made it possible to make more realistic hands, bare broad feet, and facial expression, exaggerating the features to express Cook Islandness in order to further elicit laughter through recognition. The incongruity of imported materials combined with local materials was used to explore gesture and place (refer Fig. 4.23 p.26).

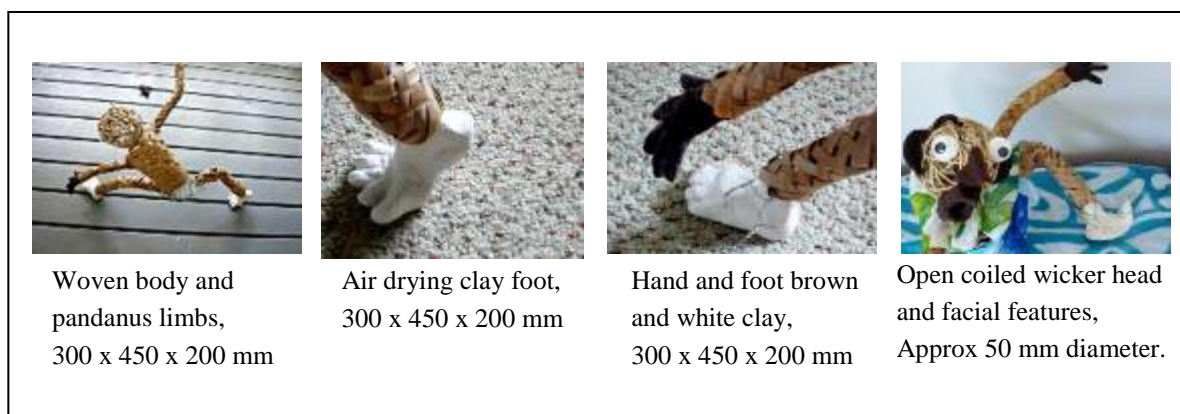


Fig. 4.23

Joan E. Gragg, June 2009, *Detail- Materials of Jonah's limbs demonstrating use of imported clay and local materials.* Natural materials, clay and fabric



Fig. 4.24

Joan E. Gragg, June 2009, *Jonah in the Whale's mouth.* Cane, wire netting clay, pandanus, styrofoam, 130 x 110 x 110 mm



Fig 4.25

Joan E. Gragg, June 2009, *Jonah in the Whale's mouth.* Cane, wire netting, clay, pandanus, styrofoam, 130 x 110 x 110 mm

I used wire netting (a commonly used temporary fencing material in Rarotonga) for the whale's mouth, to convey the idea of being caged and trapped, reflecting Jonah's

predicament. Scraps of TAV's locally printed fabric were used to dress Jonah in Rarotongan designer clothes. This process of improvisation is an integral part of the creation of a Nuku performance. The materials were chosen because they do not require more than hands or hand tools to manipulate, as advocated by Ani O'Neill, reflecting the low-tech approach to making Nuku costumes and props that contribute to the humour.



Fig. 4.26

Joan E. Gragg, July 2009, *Jonah in the Whale's mouth*.

Natural materials, clay and fabric,

130 x 110 x 110 mm

To intensify the idea of producing humour through exaggerated fear, the wire netting was covered with black fabric. However, the photograph, taken as a record of the work, appeared more frightening than humorous. The angle from which the photograph was taken further changed the perspective and altered the perception for the viewer.

'Denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it was photographed' (Friske as cited in Chandler, 2009, p. 1). The connotation of powerlessness evolved from the composition of the photograph further activating a mythical level of Jonah disappearing into the unknown.

To further explore the possibility of the photograph as a final art work, I investigated the idea of a background for the figure of Jonah. I chose to metaphorically use the woven palm frond to represent the whale's stomach. The ridges of the weaving suggested the texture of the stomach lining. The connotations of this type of weaving for making food baskets ironically imply the stomach as a food basket and also evoked connotations of place by using the palm frond (refer Fig.4.27 p.28).



Fig. 4.27

Joan E. Gragg, July 2009, *Making whale's stomach*, Photographs



Fig. 4.28

Joan E. Gragg, July 2009, *Jonah's Struggle*. Palm fronds and acrylic paint, 2500 x 1200 mm.



Fig. 4.29

Joan E. Gragg, July 2009, *Jonah's Struggle 2*. Acrylic paint on cardboard, 2500 x 1200 mm

When the palm frond mat (Fig. 4.28) was separated from the cardboard that protected the floor, (Fig. 4.29) the inadvertent registration of paint signified the rhetorical nature of Jonah's struggle more clearly than the painting on the mat. I discarded the mat and used the cardboard instead, attaching Jonah directly to this (refer Fig.4.30 and 4.31).



Fig. 4.30

Joan E. Gragg, July 2009, *Jonah's struggle*. Mixed media, 2500 x 1200



Fig 4.31

Joan E. Gragg, July 2009, *Jonah's struggle*. Mixed media, 2500 x 1200

The resulting photographs demonstrate the differing perspectives. The close-up high view-point (refer Fig.4.30 p.28) emphasizes Jonah's terror, whereas the long distance shot with Jonah splayed against the wall and reduced in size provokes a more humorous response (refer Fig. 4.31 p.28). Because of the success of the photograph of Jonah in showing emotion and humour I further explored the idea of using photographs in the final exhibition. I analysed why the photographs were successful and discovered that in the photograph, the viewer's position is ultimately controlled by the camera position (refer Fig. 4.32).



This figure creates an atmosphere by being close up and the size of the figure is large in the frame. Light can create a sense of space.



A small figure in a large space creates a sense of loneliness and fragility. The photograph does not indicate the size of the figure unless there is a known comparison in the photograph.



The partial cropping of the figure creates curiosity and invites questions to be asked as to what is happening outside the picture frame.



The figure moving diagonally across the picture frame creates movement.



Looking down onto a group of figures gives a sense of being on top, in control.



By taking a close-up photograph of an incomplete figure, it is possible to suggest that a whole figure exists.

Fig. 4.32

Joan E. Gragg, July 2009, *Photographic experiments and analysis*. Photographs

I experimented with the placement of figures within the picture frame and also learned that some figures photographed more successfully than others. With these experiments I learned a lot about compositional techniques in photography. However, more importantly I learnt about the quality and the design of the figures themselves. This new information led me back to my earlier decision to work with the figures themselves in the exhibition as opposed to the photographs, as the figures can express humour and place through gesture, placement and the chosen materials.

As Kate Love said, 'I think sculpture happens in that space, between the object and the person who is looking at it' (Butt, 2005, p. 157). When looking at sculpture, the viewer can choose the position from which the sculpture is viewed. The perspective and chosen space between the person and the sculpture is where the interpretation takes place.

Another reason why I decided to show the figures as sculptures and not as photographs is that some of the materials used are fresh and ephemeral, symbolic of daily life in the tropics, of Cook Islanders and the fragrances of the materials are very much a feature of Nuku and communicate place. While the ephemeral nature of the materials has been a consideration previously in the project, the Nuku is itself an ephemeral event. Also, photography would limit the perspective the figures are seen from, whereas the sculptures will be placed so that they can be seen from a variety of different view-points and distances reflecting the nature of the Nuku pageant experience.

Chapter 5: The thesis exhibition

The thesis exhibition was held on the mezzanine floor to the rear of the main gallery of the National Museum in the Geoffrey Henry Culture Centre in Marairenga, Rarotonga.

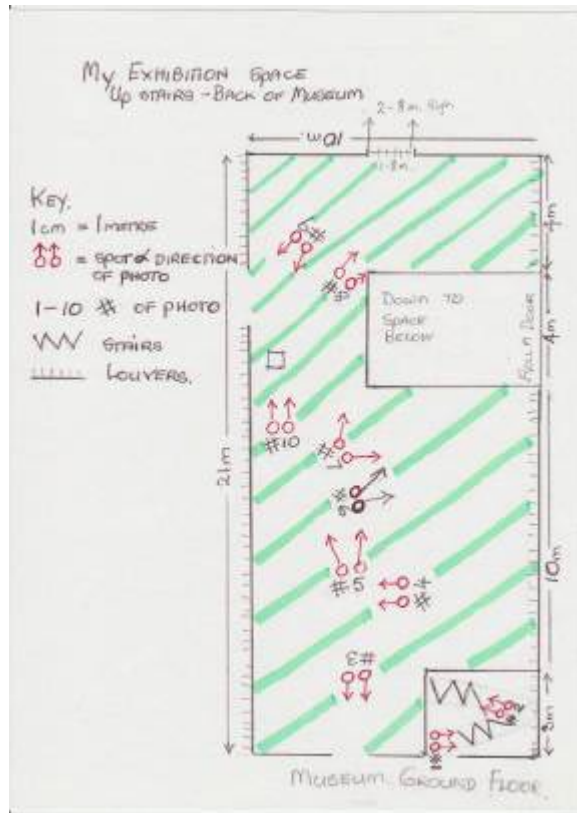


Fig. 5.1
Plan of Exhibition
venue

Fig. 5.2

Images of venue prior to installation set up. Images as numbered in Fig. 5.1



#1 Ground floor
leading to exhibition
space.



#2 Stairs to
mezzanine.



#3 Top of stairs
Looking east.



#4 Looking south at
louvers and eaves.



#5 Looking west.
Blue room divider
covers the west
window.



#6 Looking
north includes
room dividers
and louvers
windows.



#7 looking down
to the space
below.



#8 Larger window
faces west smaller
faces north.



#9 Looking south
showing excess
show case and
yellow colour
under the eaves.



#10 Example of
plinth.

The main reasons for choosing this space was firstly it is a large and airy room surrounded by tall tress which evoked the idea of the outdoor space of Nuku. Secondly, the elevation of the room had connotations of a stage as one looked out from the window and down into the garden. Also in order to attract an audience of local people who would not normally go to a ‘dealer’ art gallery exhibition, I felt that the museum and cultural centre would feel more familiar and comfortable.

The selected area is not normally an exhibition space but is used to store artefacts, museum show cases and extra plinths. Workshops are also conducted in the space and this created disadvantages as everything except the chairs had to remain in the space. The space was broken up by an area four by six metres where there was no floor but rather a hole that looked down into the floor below (refer Fig. 5.2 # 7 p. 31). The lino on the floor was broken in parts. However, the high ceilings were an advantage of the space because cross ventilation from open louvers allowed for cooler breezes to blow through the space in February when the temperatures soar and there is no air conditioning.

The space revealed two main areas to be considered for the installation. There was a larger area 13 x 10 metres as one entered the room and a smaller area 4 x 10 metres at the rear with a 4 x 4 metres walk space between (refer Fig. 5.3). The smaller area 4 x 10 metres and the walkway between the spaces where the light was strongest, was chosen to install the work, and the larger area was used as a reception area for the exhibition opening.



Fig. 5.3
Exhibition venue looking west
from the top of the stairs.

It was not possible to remove the 2 x 5 metre carved panel next to the west window at the back of the room or the fire hose in the walkway area between the two spaces. The carved panel was covered with fabric the same colour as the walls and the fire hose in the walkway area was covered with a coconut frond weaving. The bright yellow colour reflecting from under the eaves of the buildings roof and the strong horizontal lines from the louver windows were a distraction (refer Fig. 5.2 #4, #5, #8, #9, p. 31). In

addition, the light from the large louver window on the western wall plus the side louvers flooded the area with bright harsh light (refer Fig. 5.2 # 6, #8, p. 31). To minimise the visual lines of the windows, diffuse the light from the side louvers and to screen the yellow colour from the eaves, these louvers were covered with fabric the same colour as the walls, leaving the large west window to emit the strongest light.

The large 13 x 10 metre space was cleared of all the artefacts and display units and these were stored in the area at the top of the stairs behind the large red and blue room dividers. They were unattractive and overpowering and as these were the first things seen as the viewer arrived in the space, this presented a challenge. In the spirit of improvisation the room dividers were decorated with woven fresh, green coconut fronds. Green coconut fronds used in this manner is common practice in the Cook Islands to screen an area temporarily. Coconut fronds are also used to indicate a special occasion and welcome to invited guests. The green fronds also introduced a new dimension of scent which is also part of Nuku when flowers and greenery are part of costumes and props. This decoration became dominant and caused the viewer to pause and slow down as they arrived at the top of the stairs before the installation was recognised and they were drawn across the room towards it.



Fig. 5.4
Entrance into exhibition venue at the top of the stairs, showing green coconut fronds covering room dividers.

The installation comprised a number of tableaux highlighting aspects of Nuku by way of the obvious and the familiar e.g. dress, hats, jandals, dogs, bikes; and the use of incongruous materials such as hair, seeds for bike seats, wire, coral; the human gesture and the joy of intimate moments. Mitiaro mats, *moenga pae* (Pandanus mats with colourful patterned borders) were strategically placed to help demarcate the area of the installation as well as to cover the rough spots of the floor. A variety of different sized plinths were chosen to elevate the work as if on a stage, and to give prominence to the individual tableaux. In addition, each tableau was mounted on boards covered in brightly coloured fabric that complemented the colour on the mats and reflected the colourful nature of Nuku. The incongruity of the plinths as a formal museum display,

being used to present the informal intent of Nuku aimed to create an atmosphere of fun and humour. Three sizes of plinths were used: 40 cm, 60cm and 120cm tall. The lowest plinths were placed at the entrance of the walkway beginning with the tableaux of the performers in procession with the idea that these would draw the viewer into the space to explore further. The medium sized plinths presented the smaller groups who were part of the performance e.g. the Band and the King and Queen (refer Fig. 5.11 p. 38). The tallest plinths presented the VIP audience who were formally dressed in their Sunday best (refer Fig. 5.12- 5.14, p. 39-41) and those who were waiting their turn to perform (refer Fig. 5.15- 5.16, p. 42). They also showed members of the crowds either coming to the Nuku or leaving to go home (refer Fig. 5.17, 5.18, p. 43-44).

In the installation, the plinths were arranged to allow the viewer space to freely walk around the tableaux to view the figures from different angles and distances, as one might view the performance of Nuku. It also allowed the viewer to get close and scrutinise the materials used in the construction of the figures and see from different vantage points the gesture and attitude of the figures.



Fig. 5.5
The thesis exhibition. Detail.
Placement of mats and plinths.

The aim of the installation was to reveal humour through Nuku and the challenge was to create an atmosphere where the viewer might experience the fun of Nuku. The aim was to emphasise aspects of humour that one might recognise as a feature of Cook Islands humour. It was not the intention to recreate the pageant of Nuku but to use the event to visually express the ephemeral nature of humour through the expression of spontaneity, incongruity, absurdity, recognition, relief, surprise and the joy of unity.



Fig. 5.6
The thesis exhibition. Detail.
Placement of mats and plinths.

Although I achieved much of what I set out to do there still remains the question of how an audience from another culture in a different environment would perceive this work. How much of Cook Islands humour is transferred through this medium, through the technique of making and the materials? The aim on this project was to engage with a local audience so this question is still to be explored.



Fig. 5.7

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Procession tableau implying a biblical scene, with a Cook Islands interpretation, including dogs. Woven fronds, ice-cream container lids, coral, fabric and wire.

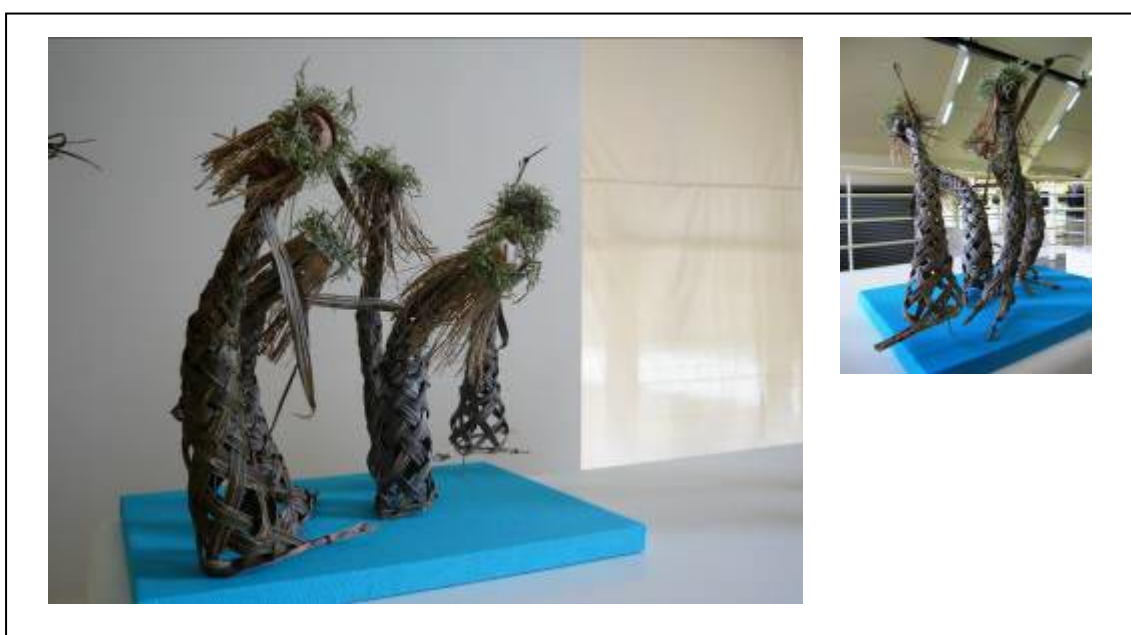


Fig. 5.8

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Individual tableau, Dancers in the procession. Palm fronds, moss from coconut trees, pandanus and wire. Tableau approx 250 x 250 x 350 mm



Fig. 5.9

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Women in procession. Woven palm fronds, coconut fibre, seeds, sea weed, coral. Tableau approx 250 x 250 x 350 mm



Fig. 5.10

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. The Band in procession with trumpet drum and ukulele. Palm frond, coke can, shell, cotton buds, coral, old sock material, screws, seeds, shell, ice cream carton plastic, fabric, electrical wire. Tableau approx. 250 x 250 x 350 mm



Fig. 5.11

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. King and Queen. Palm frond, fabric, wine bottle screw top, coloured chocolate wrappers, yoghurt carton, old jandal found on the beach, casuarina needles, coral. Tableau approx. 250 x 250 x 350 mm



Fig. 5.12

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. VIP audience in Sunday best. Woven pandanus, fresh flowers, plastic bottles, coconut fibre, ice-cream carton, seeds, sea weed, fabric, wire. Tableau approx. 230 x 600 x 600 mm



Fig. 5.13

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. VIP audience in Sunday best. Plastic bottle, seed pod, casuarina needles, coral, woven pandanus, fresh flowers, cotton fabric, rubber, nail polish.

Tableau approx. 200 x 600 x 600 mm



Fig. 5.14
 Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. VIP audience in Sunday best.
 Coconut fibre, plastic bottles, pandanus, fresh flowers, electrical wire, coral.
 Tableau approx. 230 x 600 x 600 mm.



Fig. 5.15

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Audience waiting for their turn to perform. Woven pandanus, coconut fibre, wire, seeds, fabric, sea weed. Tableau approx. 230 x 600 x 600 mm



Fig. 5.16

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Audience waiting for their turn to perform. Woven pandanus, fabric, coconut fibre, coral seeds, coral, nail polish, wire dog. Tableau approx. 200 x 600 x 600 mm



Fig. 5.17
Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Coming to the Nuku or leaving to go home. Clay, moss, designer clothes, woven pandanus. Tableau approx. 230 x 600 x 600 mm



Fig. 5.18

Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Coming to the Nuku or leaving to go home. Woven pandanus, electrical wire, construction tie wires, blue strapping, garden watering system tubing, tin foil, seeds, can pull tab, ice-cream carton plastic, sand washed roots. Tableau approx. 230 x 600 x 600 mm

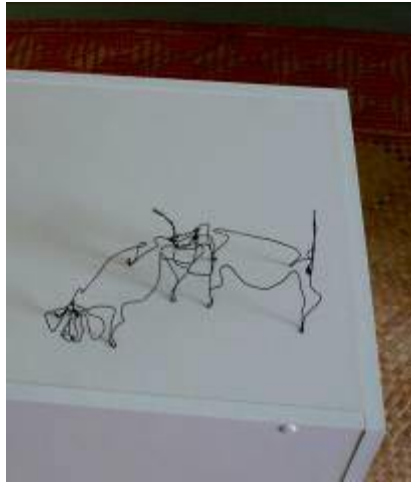


Fig. 5.19
Joan E. Gragg, February 2010, Installation detail. Wire dogs



Fig. 5.20
Exhibition viewer engaging with procession tableau.



Fig 5.21
Exhibition viewer engaging with a
tableau.



Fig 5.22
Exhibition visitors.
The child recognised the babies in the
tableau.

Conclusion

Keith Moxley said, “we should never forget that the very tools we use to understand the clash of epistemological systems bear the imprint of the culture in which it was developed” (Smith, 2008, p. 178).

The aim of this project was to investigate the importance of humour and place, through the context of the 160 year old Cook Islands religious pageant Nuku, and to visually explore ways of representing aspects of this. The research process helped me to understand how Cook Islands humour is a product of Cook Islands history, location and culture. It has also complemented my experience and led me to understand how in the Cook Islands, the ability to see the funny side has proven to be a successful way to adapt to cultural changes and new influences. I have come to the conclusion that the Nuku pageant clearly reflects Cook Islands humour and evokes a sense of place that is distinctively the Cook Islands. The Nuku pageant, in reflecting the various levels of Zen humour, also mirrors aspects of Cook Islands history and development. Metaphorically, Paradise can be seen as pre-Christian Cook Islands; Paradise-lost represents the introduction of Christianity into traditional culture bringing about a sense of duality and disjunction; Paradise-regained is the state in which there is cohesion and unity through an acceptance and merging of the two cultures, to create a distinctive modern Cook Islands culture.

The Nuku pageant itself is both a narrative of that progression and a microcosm of Cook Islands culture. Exploring aspects of humour and place through Nuku has made me increasingly aware that the Cook Islands is a multi-cultural society and becoming more so every year. The integration of two traditions, recognition of the consequent incongruities and an acceptance of these incongruities is a distinctive feature of the Cook Islands today. The freedom to laugh comes from the understanding of this duality. By recognising the differences and similarities, there is always an opportunity to laugh and celebrate with understanding.

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