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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Kauage's Visions: Art from Papua New Guinea by

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range of African artists working both within the continent and beyond, but this was an impressive, captivating exhibition. Whether some commentators appreciate it or not, the debate has been moved on.

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*Kauage's Visions: Art from Papua New Guinea*; at The Horniman Museum and Gardens, London, from 12 February to 30 June 2005.

This retrospective exhibition of the art of Mathias Kauage (1944–2003), one of Papua New Guinea's most famous contemporary artists, was originally put together by the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London, which has established a reputation for presenting non-western, notably Australian Aboriginal, art. It gathered together forty-seven works from the Rebecca Hossack collection, paintings and drawings ranging from Kauage's early creations, made in the late 1960s, to those of the late 1990s.

Born and raised in a village in Gembogl district, Chimbu Province, in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, Kauage moved to Port Moresby in the 1960s. The success of another leading Papua New Guinean artist, Akis from Tsembaga, and the encouragement of Georgina Beier, artist-founder of the 'Centre for New Guinea Cultures' (a forerunner of the National Arts School of Port Moresby) and champion of new talent, gave him the impetus to start to produce artworks himself. No catalogue of the exhibition was available, but the introductory panel, the labels, and websites about Kauage all agree in describing his style as 'lively', 'witty', full of 'exuberance' and 'vibrancy', characteristics associated with the personality of the painter himself.

When entering the exhibition, one was indeed struck by the power emanating from the artworks. The walls, originally prepared for another exhibition, were painted warm brown and deep green, against which Kauage's energetically coloured figures danced on their canvases. The comparatively low ceiling over the three parts of the gallery directed the visitor's vision towards the canvases, under a soft, subtle light. The arrangement also provided a proper space for seeing the larger works hanging on the surrounding walls. This in turn encouraged the appreciation of Kauage's works from a distance, softening the sometimes aggressive impact that busy compositions and pure contrasting colours may have on the unaccustomed eye. The three parts of the gallery were used to organize the work into three areas, more thematic than chronological: a series about the artist's meeting with the Queen, black-and-white and early drawings, and early works about the independence of Papua New Guinea.

Kauage employed birds, human figures, and modern forms of transport in his iconography. Human bodies, shapes, and faces act as decorative motifs, blurring the

distinction between narration and decoration. Colourful elements of body ornament resonate with other details, from bits of helicopters to details of tourist clothes, giving the pictures unity and rhythm. In the series of screenprints about Papua New Guinea's independence day (16 November 1975), Kauage used powerful colours and contrasts: greens on reds fluoresce to create a palpating picture, as the intricate motifs vibrate and dazzle the eye of the viewer.

The artist's themes evolved around themes of modern Papua New Guinean life, both rural and urban: modernity, religion, traditions, the relationships between the genders, the relationship between *waitman* ('white man') and *blekman* ('black man'), the fascination exerted by *olgeta samtink bilong waitman* ('all the things of the white men'—clothes, aeroplanes, helicopters, boats, and so on). Kauage used hierarchical size and one-space narration to collapse time into a recreated dimension that gives events a mythical aspect, in a subtle evocation of the artist's reflections and emotions.

The introductory panel—the only one of the exhibition—demonstrated how Kauage's journey fits the mythology of a village man whose talent and energy led him from being a cleaner in Port Moresby to the position of the most respected artist of his generation. Internationally renowned, he was eventually awarded the OBE and met the *nambawan meri* ('number one woman'), Queen Elizabeth II. Was it this success story that gave the exhibition its flavour? Or was it just that the labels and the introductory text insisted on this aspect of Kauage's production?

Here, from a museological point of view, one can see how the textual content of an exhibition is indeed an essential part of what it conveys visually. Kauage's personality is described as a 'volcano about to erupt'; he is an exuberant but extremely talented artist, at times shy or even impressionable. The label texts tended to put these characteristics in parallel with the talent and success of the artist, as if justifying it, equating the crudeness of his colours with the 'naïvety' of his personality. For example, in the painting depicting his meeting with the Queen, Kauage portrays himself standing in full *bilas* (costume), holding a cigarette in front of the royal nose. However, the label seems to refer to another artist, humbled, shy and silent, a position that resonates—even unintentionally—with his lack of formal education. The painting becomes, then, an almost cheeky 'made-up story', an a posteriori reconstruction, for Kauage's lack of panache... But is this all it is about? Distinction? Or encounter?

I would suggest, rather, that Kauage's visual power comes from a sort of *bricolage*, the mixing of parts of events, brought together in a mythical dimension, as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously explained. The painting of the meeting with the British monarch is about a mythical event, where the procreative powers of both—of the Queen and of the Artist—come together in a recreated space, like two ancestral figures. Again, the work is as much a representation as it is a comment on two different powers: the one of the leader and the one of the creator of images, facing and validating each other. Indeed, in my view, bricolage is the hallmark of Kauage's production. His themes—prostitution, public events, women, warriors—are brought

together in a space that mixes an urban world with Chimbu dresses, village life with modern concerns, social and political concerns with textual comments. Tok Pisin texts—written by Kauage himself, as parts of the artworks (unfortunately, poorly transcribed and translated on the labels)—mix discourses with images in a *piksa* (‘picture’) that poetically and subtly evokes, conceals, and reveals what is actually shown; like every image in New Guinean visual culture.

Rather than pointing towards a power coming from an uneducated and uncontaminated vision, I would draw the public’s attention toward Kauage’s strong visual education, in which—as Andrew Strathern, Marilyn Strathern, Michael O’Hanlon, and others have shown us—the decoding of visual culture and personal adornments is an intimate part of social life, a sign of knowledge and power. This education gives Kauage’s visions a cultural background that tempers the resonance with naïve painting or art brut that the labels and text-panels implied. If Kauage’s power does come from his lack of formal education, as the exhibition texts implied, it must be distanced more clearly from the image of the village, simple, humble artist. As Hugh Stevenson has explained, the term ‘naïve’ refers only to the formal features of an art style, not necessarily to how the artists see things (see ‘The Naïve Group of Artists’, in *Luk Luk Gen! Look Again! Contemporary Art from Papua New Guinea*, edited by Susan Cochrane Simons and Hugh Stevenson (Townsville, 1990)). And as Kauage’s formal style does not dwell solely on the lack of a formal western artistic education, so his visions are also contemporary not solely because they use the western medium of canvas. He was indeed a *contemporary* artist because his works materialize, visually and thematically, the strange encounters—in Port Moresby and in the villages—that make up the context of contemporary life in the developing country of Papua New Guinea. Kauage was an educated modern and contemporary artist—indeed originally free from *traditional* western ideas of paintings—but far from naïve about the world he was living in, a world where western pop music can be heard in villages in the bush, and ceremonial exchanges are performed in Port Moresby settlements.

As readers of this journal may well recall from Rowan Julie Brown’s review in a previous issue (*JME*, no. 16 (2004), pp. 169–72), a previous version of this exhibition was mounted at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery in 2003. In that exhibition, the ethnographic context of Kauage’s art was stressed. At the Hayward, the scarcity of supporting texts anchored the exhibition in the ‘art’ side of the old museological dualism ‘art versus ethnography’. Indeed, it appeared here to have reached a point where the preference for visual impact over contextual information encouraged the public to fall into the trap of associating Kauage’s life-story and art with a supposed naïvety, an uncontrolled and free-from-convention creative power. It flirted with the creation of a modern version of the noble savage, the noble artist. My feelings about this were confirmed when I overheard a couple of visitors associating the drawings with those of children, and commenting on the simple style of the artist.

In fact, the sparse textual content of the exhibition directs the visitor’s attention towards making an equation between the vivacity of Kauage’s style and the ‘volcano

about to erupt', the 'shy' and 'exuberant' personality, the lack of education and the freedom from academism. In contrast, I believe that the vibrancy, energy, and wittiness of Kauage's visions came from the contrasts and encounters in everyday Papuan New Guinean life, expressed by the colours in his *pikas* of independence day, by the mythical meeting between the artist in Gembogl dress and the Queen of England, and by the collusion between image and Tok Pisin texts. In my view, then, the presentation of Kauage's work at the Horniman failed on this count through missing the purpose of Kauage's art and misdirecting the attention of the public. This leads to my final question. What if it was *us* who were *uneducated* in the visual poetry of the visual arts of Papua New Guinea?

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*Native American Art: Irish American Trade—The Stonyhurst Mullanphy Collection*; at the Ulster American Folkpark, Omagh, from 1 July to 22 October 2004; at the Ulster Museum, Belfast, from 28 October 2004 to 30 March 2005; at the Fermanagh County Museum, Enniskillen Castle, from 14 April to 26 May 2005.

The Stonyhurst Mullanphy collection consists of seventy-six Native North American objects. On loan to the British Museum from Stonyhurst College from 1977, they were purchased by the museum in 2003 with funding provided by, amongst others, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Art Collections Fund. Many artefacts in the collection were acquired in the nineteenth century by the Jesuit missionaries of Stonyhurst College, but some of the most significant items were bought to Stonyhurst in 1825 by Bryan Mullanphy, a sixteen-year-old Irish-American schoolboy. The exhibition toured Northern Ireland as part of the British Museum's 'Partnership UK' scheme. The exhibition was accompanied by a booklet of the same title, by Jonathan King, and there is also a dedicated website at < <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/stonyhurst/page2/introduction.htm> >.

*Native American Art: Irish American Trade* displayed a number of key objects collected at the time of the expansion of the United States into the Indian territories west of the Mississippi from 1775 to 1825. It focused on the history of this period, highlighting the trade between the indigenous populations and the incoming settlers. Later objects, some made as souvenirs, relate to the reservation period, and some contemporary material was included to illustrate today's powwow revival. Other items from the collection are on rotating display in the North American gallery at the British Museum.

My review relates to the installation of the exhibition at the Ulster Museum, Belfast. The exhibition's free-standing cases were set against the walls of a small temporary exhibition space, next to the antiquities gallery, accessible through an entrance at each end of the room. The thematic information panels were large and