

## *Kiko Moana*

*Oceania* at the Royal Academy, London

Robin Richmond, September 27, 2018



**A.** *Tene Waitere*, Ta Moko panel. 1896-99, New Zealand. Carved panel, wood, shell, paint.

**B.** God image, probably Ku the God of War. Late 18th century, Hawaiian Islands. Fibre frame, human hair, pearl shell, seeds, dog teeth, feathers, 81 x 39 cm.

**C.** Lisa Reihana. *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]*, 2015-17 (detail from video installation)

Sixty thousand years ago, early human beings made the first migratory journeys in the southern Pacific Ocean. They came in small vessels across the water from what we now call South Asia to what we now know as Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, New Guinea and the vast scattering of islands of the Pacific archipelago otherwise known as Oceania. Oceania as a concept seems appropriate because the ocean is the crucial element in this very human story and water is the theme of this show from the moment you enter. Oceania covers more than a third of the earth's surface.

The crossing of *Kiko Moana* or blue water is immediately invoked by a billowing tapestry of contemporary blue textile that descends from the polite and pristine ceilings of the first room of this show. It is like a giant wave that invites you to drown in these treacherous Pacific waters and emphasises that the voyage across water is a common theme of these intrepid and immensely creative seafaring peoples whose complex cultures are not merely Polynesian, or Micronesian, Tahitian, Aboriginal, Maori or Hawaiian, but oceanic in both the geographic and psychological sense. One understands that the crossing of water – in departure and return – is an excellent metaphor for both determining time and for the laying down of memory.

I confess that I am so shamefully Eurocentric that this show has been a total revelation to me. As a well-behaved young feminist, I studied the nature versus nurture debate in Margaret Meade's controversial *Coming of Age in Samoa* which (mis?) analyses adolescent sexuality on that Pacific island. As a young artist I read the ethnographer/anthropologist Malinowski's studies on reciprocity and exchange in the Trobriand islands and on Papua New Guinea. And I always blamed Gauguin for importing syphilis to the Marquesas islands. But I know now that I know nothing about this part of the world and its art. I have never seen anything like this before.

This show is so lovingly and respectfully curated that it seems appropriate that there have been dance ceremonies and rituals enacted in front of the objects and some of the objects have small offerings in front of them – not something one sees very often in museums. And this aspect is very humbling and thought provoking. With over 200 artefacts on display set in jewel-like cabinets in deep blue galleries – full fathom five – one feels deeply submerged both in a different culture and in the ocean itself. There is so much to see. Objects collected by Captain Cook in the 18th century; vast wooden sculptures; the best video installation I have ever seen; intricate drawings; elaborate carvings; ornaments; clothes; boats; canoes; gods; masks; floor coverings; carved paddles; shrines; quilts; banners; shields; jewellery; photographs; designs and ceremonial costumes. And so much more.

The very best thing one can say about an exhibition is that it changes the way one thinks about the world. It seems to me that Oceania is as much a state of mind as a place, and it is a state of mind that is invigorating, illuminating and that terrible word – inspiring. This show has *Mana*, a word that is found in 29 living Oceanic languages. It is a sacred, effective, numinous, and powerful force.

*I know  
I am in the flow  
Of something greater than myself.*

From *Mana* by the Māori poet Karol Mitla