

Graham Fletcher

LOUNGE ROOM TRIBALISM

Trying to situate Graham Fletcher's "Lounge Room Tribalism" paintings (2009–) is no easy task. His idealized depictions of mid-century modern interiors, with lofty ceilings, lavish rugs and curvaceous wooden furniture, recall the idealism of the atomic age. However, though formal in their composition and detail, there is also something haunting and uneasy in these assemblages of yesteryear's designer accoutrements, consisting of entertainment units and shelved books integrated with ethnographic wall hangings and sculptures.

On view at the Mangere Arts Centre, "Lounge Room Tribalism" gathered 12 works from the series. In the paintings, there are occasional glimpses of recent habitation, such as glowing embers or an unsheathed LP, but otherwise the viewer is left alone to contemplate the imagery of the various rooms, confronted only by the staring eyes of carved tribal statues and masks, and an array of ritualistic implements. These artifacts seem to be victims of a decorator's whim, displaced from their original context or from a museum display. Yet their placement in these living spaces—which have been appropriated from Western architectural publications—gives the artifacts a strange authority, as if they control the room with their totemic power, and seemingly shifts the dynamic in their favor. The carvings also represent the local culture—with the exhibition venue being a Pacific cultural center catering to a large Polynesian population—and in such a context it is perhaps the retro-Western interior and Scandinavian furniture within the paintings that seem more foreign or "exotic."

Just prior to this exhibition, Fletcher showed "Situation Rooms" (2011) at Auckland's Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts. This series is a subset of "Lounge Room Tribalism" (2011), created during a residency in Vermont, USA, where he switched from his usual large canvases to painting on paper. "Situation Rooms" also demonstrated a shift to exterior scenes, where Modernist dwellings occupy the environment like spacecrafts, and carved figures peer through their windows like alien invaders or are stationed nearby like sentinels.

Fletcher's paintings revisit the 20th-century European interest in primitivism, with a nod to Picasso, but especially referencing the Surrealists' experiments using juxtaposition and chance to create subliminal connections between disparate materials set in hybrid spaces. In particular, Surrealism's founder, André Breton, accumulated thousands of items, including bric-a-brac, tribal objects, furniture and artworks, which he meticulously reorganized into new combinations as his collection grew. In the exhibition catalog for "Lounge Room Tribalism," Fletcher tells of encountering a portion of Breton's collection at the Centre Pompidou during a research trip to Paris,



and a formative earlier encounter with a similar collection in Auckland.

As an interesting counterpoint to Fletcher's exhibition (and shown at the same time as "Situation Rooms") Auckland's St. Paul St. Gallery hosted a show by German artist Clemens von Wedemeyer, which featured a mix of fictional and nonfictional works exploring Western attitudes toward primitivism and the fetishization of so-called exotic cultures. Through film, video and publication, von Wedemeyer presented critical responses to the alleged "discovery" by Western scientists of the Filipino Tasaday peoples in 1971, including a short film with a scenario set in the Modernist apartment of an anthropologist.

It is in this apartment's décor that von Wedemeyer's works most visibly intersect with Fletcher's—in which "primitive" artifacts mix with designer interiors to provide a cosmopolitan set piece that signifies the supposed cultivated tastes of a well-traveled intellectual. But whether or not these designer lounges have ever effectively "captured" and domesticated the power of the "other" is left in question, with the artifacts looking as dynamic as ever in each scene of Fletcher's paintings. Within this push and pull between containment, appropriation and liberation of traditions and customs, we must negotiate our own cultural space, to decide what is comfortable and what is not, and to question our assumptions of authenticity. It is on these fluid grounds that Fletcher has established a sustained inquiry, explored in his self-contained bodies of work, which promises to nourish his practice for some time to come.

ANDREW CLIFFORD