

21ST CENTURY SOUTH SEA
SAVAGERY: ROSANNA RAYMOND'S
SAVAGE K'LUB AT APT8



Speaking to notions of identity and geographic centres, renowned author Albert Wendt once said, 'I carry my centre with me.'¹ 'What I am beginning to learn now is that wherever I'm at, and wherever I'm writing in a particular time, becomes my centre. But at the back of my head is Samoa, always. I carry it with me everywhere I go.'²

Like Wendt, artist and author Rosanna Raymond has learned to activate her centre wherever she is, collapsing spatial divides through her understanding and employment of the Samoan *vā*, the dynamic space that relates and connects all things. *Vā* is central to both the orthography and ethos of Raymond's *SaVAge K'lub*. For Raymond and her fellow SaVAges, the *vā* is pregnant with the potential to engage with the past in the now. It is the *vā* which permits living dynamics to be performed and embodied, and allows all places and people to be creative and constructive centres. Significantly, the generative acts of art making and writing – or *tā* (the marking out of time) – contribute to the instantiation of this centre, bringing time and space, past-present-future, into glorious communion.

Drawing from and cleaving to the creative ancestral power of the *vā* has been critical for Raymond, whose career is wide-ranging both in terms of her practice and the places it has taken her. Born in Aotearoa-New Zealand of Samoan descent, she travels widely and almost constantly, and has recently re-established a home base in Auckland after more than a decade spent living in London. Lecturer, story-teller, champion of exhibitions, 'actiVAtions' and interventions in museum and gallery spaces worldwide, since 2010 she has convened the *SaVAge K'lub* in locations throughout the UK, Europe, Canada, America and Australasia. A safe-haven for experimentation, confrontation and fabrication, the *SaVAge K'lub* is for '21st Century South Sea SaVAgerY, influencing art and culture through the interfacing of time and space, deploying weavers of words, rare anecdotalists, myth makers, hip shakers, navigators, red faces, fabricators, activators, installators to institute the non-cannibalistic cognitive

consumption of the other.'³ Membership is fluid, inclusive, semi-automatic – if you have to ask, you're not a SaVAge.

The *SaVAge K'lub* is site-specific, but never location dependent. It has occupied museums, lounge-rooms, tea shops, subterranean wine vaults and Kurt Schwitters' Merz Barn (where Schwitter was inducted posthumously into the K'lub). It has a life force and energy almost beyond that of its creator, who professes a certain reluctance to formalise either membership or proceedings lest this energy be compromised. In Raymond's words, it is 'a space for the revision and creation of new *V*A-ried conversations, relationships, and artworks'.⁴ The power of such revisions and creations, she explains, is that they can take effect in diverse geographical and dialogical spaces, and be carried to different parts of the world by the bodies of the people involved. This, it seems, is the perfect premise for APT8, with its curatorial focus on how the body is employed in space to engage with broader social, political and cultural transformations.

The origins of the logistics and underlying concepts of the *SaVAge K'lub* arguably lie in Raymond's multiple collaborative exhibitions that juxtapose artists inside the museum (see *Pasifika Styles*⁵) with museums inside the artist (*ethKnowcentrix* <http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/exhibitions/2009eth/>). But the *K'lub* itself was established in 2010, during Raymond's residency at the Museum of Anthropology and Art (MOA) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Raymond had been exploring the museum's founding anthropological collection, donated by a man named Frank Burnett. With access to his personal diaries, she found he once gave the Canadian 'Savage Club' a talk about his adventures in the South Seas. Raymond was intrigued; her research began.

The first 'Savage Club', apparently named for Richard Savage (1697–1743), a free-spirited English poet, had been convened in London in 1857. Outposts flourished throughout Britain's Commonwealth: 'bohemian' gentlemen's spaces with 'Ladies' welcomed a few times a year. Though ostensibly founded to promote liberal arts such as their namesake's, many of the clubs also referenced Indigenous peoples in their ceremonies, regalia, private art collections and branding, and some continue to do so to the present day. Perhaps in memory of their hosting Oglala Lakota leader 'Red Shirt' in 1887 (as part of Buffalo Bill's *Wild West*), the

Left: Horomona Horo in Rosanna Raymond's *SaVAge K'lub* (2010 – ongoing) at the opening weekend of 'The 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art', Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. Photograph Joe Ruckli. Image courtesy of the artist and QAGOMA.

homepage of the London Savage Club's website (savageclub.com) still depicts a warrior in a feathered war bonnet, preparing to blow a party whistle, while the Melbourne Savage Club refers to 'a wry double-entendre on the spirited nature of its founding members' (melbournesavageclub.com).⁶ In response to (and revision of) this twenty-first century club's continuation of notions of a savage 'Other', and more particularly to their exclusion of women, Raymond decided to form her very own *SaVAge K'lub*. At her invitation, the chief of the Musqueam people attended the first *K'lub* gathering, which marked the opening of the new MOA galleries in 2010, and gave a poignant speech on the notion of the savage and its implications for life in this century. Thus, Raymond's own *SaVAge K'lub* was launched.

In Queensland, the *SaVAge K'lub* is showcasing artistic and performative contributions from more than 20 artists (listed below), in conversation with priceless treasures from QAGOMA, Queensland Museum and Queensland University collections and numerous private collections. Throughout the duration of APT8 (to 10 April 2016) it is being actiVated by a series of performances and lectures. In this venue it's a literal clubhouse: a discrete gallery space adorned to excess, complete with a shoes-off policy for all visitors and a (QAGOMA supplied) noticeboard advising 'adult themes' at its doorway.

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The space itself is a riot of colour, texture, sound and moving image. Mats cover the floor; a chaise suggests photo opportunities and offers a platform from which to view multiple audio-visual works; and an outrigger canoe hangs from the ceiling. This suspended vessel alludes to voyaging and connections throughout the Pacific. It is a literal vessel for traversing the connective quality of the *vā*, which underpins Tongan writer Epeli Hau'ofa's famous proposition that we might view the vast Pacific region as a 'sea of islands'.⁷

Expanding on this idea, Samoan Albert Refiti has described the Pacific Ocean as 'the single most powerful architectural device in the evolution of Polynesian architecture and culture... Islands enabled the location of identity and the boundary of cultures... but the sea, with its changing currents facilitating migration and exchange, also meant that boundaries were often dissolved and redrawn. The ocean provided separation and connection, an in-between space where commonality and difference co-exist'.⁸ In other words: the *vā*.

Within the architectural device of the gallery, the *SaVAge K'lub* materialises this in-between space of coexistence. The SaVAge gallery, which occupies one wall is an excellent example. Portraits of contributing artists cluster around an oil painting from the late nineteenth century: Girolamo Nerli's *The Savage Chief* (1897). A peculiar portrait that appears to depict a

European masquerading as Māori, it was presented to the Auckland Savage Club in 1897, by its maker who was himself a Savage Club member. We might imagine it hanging in the clubrooms some years later, in 1925, when renowned Māori scholar, leader and statesman Sir Peter Buck, a life member of the New Zealand Savage Club, became the Auckland club's 'Rangitira' or chief. Grouped together, Nerli's 'Savage Chief' and the *SaVAge K'lub* portraits begin to explore the commonality and difference between the 'Brother Savages' of the Savage Clubs and the brother and sister SaVAges of Raymond's K'lub. In this space they seem able to co-exist. Likewise, Savage Club booklets share cabinet space with *taonga tuku iho* (treasures from the ancestors). It is tempting to read a similar inclusive tolerance (or might it be provocation?) in the Auckland Savage Club's 25th Anniversary function programme, which declared: 'Come one, come all, o'er land and sea; A splendid thing is savagery'.⁹

With an emphasis on the splendid SaVAge body and its accoutrements, Victorian vitrines within the K'lub recall the fit out of Savage Club rooms and contain garments and items of personal adornment, including a precious Māori cloak incorporating albino Kiwi feathers. Layers of richly patterned barkcloths tumble from the room's four corners, while Raymond's signature 'The Dusky ain't dead she's just diversified' backless barkcloth gown, worn by her *Back Hand Maiden*, clothes a mannequin. These are more than mere fabrics and frocks. The plants, birds and animals cultivated and carried within and between the Pacific sea of islands by Austronesian ancestors, and the migration and evolution of their cultural practices throughout the Pacific, still form the backbone of art practices today, particularly those associated with the body.

As Chloe Colchester – who has worked with Raymond – explains, the Pacific 'was a region where the body provided the main locus of visual and material expression and of ritual-cum-political activity. A whole range of body arts, including diverse forms of clothing, wrappings and coverings – made from materials taken from trees, plants and birds' feathers, and embellished with mud, tree sap and soot – were involved. These diverse complexes of body art and clothing are believed to have developed from a common Austronesian cultural substrate, and many 'traits', such as the use of barkcloth, or paper body wraps (made from the felted inner bark of the paper mulberry tree) in ceremonial practice as well as in everyday dress can be traced back to a shared founding 'technology' of dress. Thus body art and clothing – together with the imagery that clothing produced, and as opposed to sculpture, monumental art, or painting – provided the fountainhead for the stylistic development of sacred art and religious-cum-political practice in the region as a whole'.¹⁰

But clothing and body art are not easily animated or activated without the body. Nor is a *SaVAge K'lub*. Prior to opening to the public, SaVAges from Aotearoa-New Zealand, alongside their K'lub members from Australia, had actiVated the K'lub room itself, to create the conditions conducive to a safe, inspiring and instructive experience for all concerned – ancestor artworks included.

On opening night, they enticed the crowds into attendance, calling

through cavernous gallery spaces, leading and shepherding people into the K'lub. Once inside, audiences were regaled with song, dance and spoken word: warm bodies welcoming, challenging and beguiling. SaVAge brothers and sisters spoke to their own artworks and art practice, and placed particular emphasis on the significance of bringing living bodies into contact with the treasures of their ancestors. Gently but passionately, they conveyed the importance of conservation of even the most prestigious and priceless of treasures *through* handling and reinvigoration by the descendants of their makers. Equally gently, when the clock struck the hour at which they had been told nudity could be tolerated, garments slid slowly from some shoulders, SaVAges were dressed and redressed both within and beyond the K'clubroom itself, and *Back Hand Maiden* embarked on a tour of the APT8 in its entirety. If this disrobing/re-robing caused any discomfort at a sponsor-attended gala opening, it might be tempered by the knowledge that earlier they had draped brightly coloured lengths of fabric known as *lavalava* around nude statues in the QAGOMA forecourts, perhaps causing regular gallery attendees to look again, more closely. Raymond and her SaVAges understand the power of both the clothed and unclothed body, and how either might be employed in space to provoke 'cognitive consumption'.

SaVAge K'lub at APT8 participants include: **Margaret Aull, Jess Holly Bates, Eric Bridgeman, Salvador Brown, Emine Burke, Precious Clark, Croc Coulter, Lisa Fa'alafi, Charlotte Graham, Mark James Hamilton, Katrina Igglesden, Jimmy Kouratoras, Numangatini MacKenzie, Ani O'Neill, Maryann Talia Pau, Tahiarrii Pariente, Aroha Rawson, Rosanna Raymond, Reina and Molana Sutton, David Siliga Setoga, Grace Taylor, Niwhai Tupaea, Suzanne and Rameka Tamaki and Jo Walsh.**

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Neill and Albert Wendt, 'Albert Wendt / Interviewed by Michael Neill,' in *In The Same Room*, eds. Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992: 111.
2. Ibid: 110.
3. Rosanna Raymond, (2015). *The SaVAge K'lub Inaugural High Tea Invitation*, Tautai Trust: <http://www.tautai.org/the-savage-klub-inaugural-high-tea/> (accessed 1 February 2016)
4. Rosanna Raymond, personal communication, January 2015.
5. Rosanna Raymond and Amiria Salmond (eds), *Pasifika Styles: Artists inside the Museum*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2008.
6. Dagmar Wernitznig, *Europe's Indians, Indians in Europe: European perceptions and appropriations of Native American cultures from Pocahontas to the present*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2007.
7. Epli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*. Edited by Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu and Epli Hau'ofa, Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993: 7.
8. Albert Refiti, 'Making Spaces: Polynesian architecture in Aotearoa New Zealand', in *pacific art niu sila: the Pacific dimension of contemporary New Zealand arts*. Edited by Sean Mallon and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira, Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2002: 209.
9. Auckland Savage Club Collection, Auckland War Memorial Museum, MS 90/76, Item 67. Cited in Leonard Bell, 'A very peculiar practice: investigating Girolamo Nerli's 'The Savage Chief' (1897)', *The Journal of New Zealand Art History* 26, 2005: 26-39.
10. Chloe Colchester, 'Intro' in *Clothing the Pacific*. Edited by Chloe Colchester, Oxford: Berg, 2003: 6.

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