

Book and Media Reviews

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Tiki Pop: America Imagines Its Own Polynesian Paradise. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France. 24 June–28 September 2014.

Tiki Pop: America Imagines Its Own Polynesian Paradise, by Sven Kirsten. Köln, Germany: Taschen and Muse, 2014. Bilingual edition. ISBN 978-3-8365-4851-9; 383 pages, photographs, illustrations, maps, notes. Cloth, US\$59.99.

The exhibit and book *Tiki Pop: America Imagines Its Own Polynesian Paradise* open up a sometimes troubling yet provocative exploration of a subject that is alternatively personal and pervasive in American popular culture, at least in certain periods and social milieu. As the subtitle makes clear, while these projects are ultimately not about the Pacific at all, but about America, the predicament for *Tiki Pop* is that America and the Pacific are not separate cultural spheres. And it is precisely the kind of tiki imagery displayed here that constitutes some of the elaborate cultural tissues that bind them together. To further complicate the picture, these projects emerge from the collaboration of a German-American author, Sven Kirsten, and the Musée du Quai Branly (Quai Branly), a French museum in the heart of Paris.

If book and exhibit reviews had titles, I'd call this one "Civilized Art in Primitive Places" as a kind of double homage to Sally Price, anthropologist, museum critic, and author of *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989) as well as *Paris Primitive* (2007), a study of the creation of the spectacular and elegant Quai Branly museum "in the

shadow of the Eiffel Tower." The latter is relevant here, as hosting the *Tiki Pop* exhibit and copublishing the book of the same title were very much projects of the Quai Branly. A consideration of the exhibit and book also raises the question of what these productions say about the Quai Branly museum as a still somewhat new cultural institution in the heart of global tourism.

The book is a coproduction of the Quai Branly and the powerful art house publisher Taschen, placing it and its exhibit in the high end of art collecting and commerce. In this respect, the project evokes the museum's own origin story as an institution born out of Jacques Chirac's presidential vision for consolidating the collections of the major French ethnology museums (Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie) into a monumental new museum that would finally honor indigenous art and artists in one of the world centers of art exhibition. While the Musée du Quai Branly was created with the professed intention of recognizing the artistic traditions of non-Western peoples, the process of establishing it divided the French museum, art, and anthropology communities over concerns that such an approach would not adequately address the social and political dimensions of the objects and histories on display. Where some saw the celebration of artistic achievements and universal aesthetic sensibilities, others saw a fetishization of the aesthetic that erases "context" and history, especially the colonial projects that created the collections in the first place.

More generous commentators noted that the Quai Branly museum is an institution of many parts, including two significant spaces for temporary exhibitions as well as the ability to host conferences and performances. Indeed, while the permanent exhibits seem largely frozen in a timeless space of objects and cultures without histories, the temporary exhibits, frequently involving guest curators, have often demonstrated the Quai Branly's ability to use its prestigious location and reputation to showcase indigenous art in contemporary contexts. Previous exhibits have focused on New Ireland, Polynesia, and, recently, Solomon Islands. Even though some curators have felt caged in by an institution that does little to actively engage contemporary indigenous communities, the museum has at times offered (post) colonial artists, curators, and authors significant opportunities to expand the publics for their work.

With these sorts of precedent it would seem that the *Tiki Pop* show was well placed in a museum space where both Polynesian heritage and kitsch culture (as in the 2009 exhibit *Tarzan!*) have been alternately celebrated for the museum-going public(s) of Paris. And yet, notably absent is any cross-referencing of the way the *Tiki Pop* show might actually connect with earlier Quai Branly exhibits such as *Polynésie: Arts et Divinités 1760–1860*, one of the most important exhibits of Polynesian art in recent years. *Tiki Pop* includes not even a glancing reference to the world of Polynesia outside the touristic. Many viewers of the exhibition or readers of the book would not think to ask about the Polynesia beyond the exoticized

commodity culture on display here. For this reader, however, approaching the show and book from my location in contemporary Hawai'i, those absences are a haunting specter that keeps spoiling the party.

On page 14 of the *Tiki Pop* book, the reader encounters a drawing of some of the massive Hawaiian temple carvings that, like their Māori cousins, most inspired the generic “tiki” motifs that define the “primitive” in global art markets. In the 2008 *Polynésie* exhibit, the museum installed one of those very temple gods, peering out over the edge of the mezzanine. The presence of that Hawaiian deity, Kū (one of only three surviving sculpted figures, on loan from the British Museum) was enough to bring tears to the eyes of some visitors aware of its history—a history that would be recalled when it made a dramatic return to Hawai'i in a stunning reunion of all three surviving Kū at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu in 2010.

With the exception of the museum president's foreword to the book, the Quai Branly's silence on these kinds of connections is a reflection of its hands-off approach to temporary exhibitions, often installed as pre-packaged productions that constitute stand-alone events driven more by outside interests than by any logic or sensibilities of the host institution. In this case, the lack of reflective or critical commentary suggests that the museum, like the *Tiki Pop* project itself, has little to say about relations with the communities that produce, or have produced, the objects and images that inspired tiki culture and have since been continually refashioned for Western consumption.

These silences aside, the book and show have plenty to say about the social contexts of collecting and consumption of Polynesian motifs—mainly through commentary on “America” and its ways of imagining Polynesia. The book itself weighs in with 384 art-book-quality pages filled with colorful photos, images, and text. Although its visual presentation is that of a coffee-table book, its size, density, and weight give it the feel of an encyclopedic reference volume. On the one hand, the book and exhibit present themselves as tongue-in-cheek commentary on the essentially playful, kitschy, sexy style of tiki pop—as culture with a wink. Certainly that is the reading invited by the cover (and poster) showing a 1950s-era bathing beauty posing in the mouth of a massive tiki promoting Florida tourism. On the other hand, the scope of the volume, organized in thirty-six chapters spanning a history of Western renderings of Polynesia, from “Cook, Bougainville and the Early Explorers” (chapter 2) to a concluding section on the death and revival of tiki culture in the present, hints at a more serious intent.

Given this latter framing of a topic deserving of the interest of Paris museumgoers or art history readers, one might expect some reference to writings on Western appropriations of the “primitive.” One thinks of Marianna Torgovnik’s *Gone Primitive* (1990); Sally Price’s work cited above; or Adria Imada’s *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* (2012). *Tiki Pop*’s chapters on the influence of World War II, for example, call to mind such recent works as Sean Brawley and Chris Dixon’s

Hollywood’s South Seas and the Pacific War: Searching for Dorothy Lamour (2012) that have explored the influence of American troops flowing through the Pacific on the globalization of island motifs. *Tiki Pop*’s lack of interest in works that might identify connections to social worlds beyond the fun of faux representation replicates the same sort of rupture that occurred during the Quai Branly’s planning phase when efforts to make cultural scholarship more central to the mission of the museum were rebuffed by those who argued for a more purely aesthetic approach.

The objects and images here, often stunning in their originality and style, are for the most part minimally identified or interpreted in relation to their historical origins in the Pacific. The result is a certain amount of blurring and merging that decouples specific cultural tropes from their genealogies. Thus, “Tiki artists carved idols in the many different island styles, from Hawaiian ‘Ku’ figures to the Cook Islands fishermen gods. It was the United Nations of Polynesia!” (217). Native objects that pop up here and there are usually referenced in the past tense, for example, “the A-frame gables of the original Papua New Guinea tribal huts soared several stories high into the air and featured carved outriggers at their peaks—seamlessly falling in line with the modern look. These meeting houses were complex structures compared to the simple grass huts of other islands” (269).

It is safe to say that *Tiki Pop* worked better as an exhibit than as a book. Although museum books typically come with expectations for some

kind of historical or cultural analysis, the experiential orientation of the exhibit was better suited to the functions of tiki art in creating ambience, whether sensual, whimsical, or nostalgic. The exhibit's reproduction of miniature environments conveyed the power of tiki motifs to create fantasy worlds that could be inhabited by desiring subjects. Thus the exhibit even included a room in which museumgoers could experience the multisensory ambience of a "Trader Vic's" type of bar with thatched island decor and looping video playing 1950s vibraphone lounge music. The total environment (without the liquor) offered a glimpse of tiki as dreamlike experience with the power to naturalize the commingling of the exotic and erotic.

Whereas the book and exhibit celebrate the exotic throughout, the erotic arrives like an unannounced guest. It is as though readers (or viewers) already understand that the objectification and commodification of women's bodies is a signature element in tiki culture, of Western fantasies of Polynesia. The place of the sexualized young woman in tiki culture is summed up in the opening lines of chapter 15 ("The Hula Girl—Emissary of the Polynesian Paradise"): "While all this would have made a passable Polynesian paradise, without its Eve, the earthly Eden would have been incomplete. She was the personification of female beauty, the promise of unconditional love so yearned for by man since the Fall from Grace" (149). This curious biblical register is then fleshed out in image after image of bare-breasted bodies, grass skirts, and, specifically, "hula" dancers—the latter

making it clear that the native woman is not only sexually alluring but also intent on entertaining. All of this has, of course, been extensively critiqued in cultural and feminist studies, including deconstruction of the Polynesian "dusky maiden" by Sima Urale in her fictionalized documentary *Velvet Dreams* (1997) and in the pages of this journal by Marata Tamaira (2010). And yet there is no hint of these critiques here. Instead, the reader is treated to a collector's appreciation of the aesthetic of collecting these, with the original function noted in passing in captions such as "Turbo-charged island beauties rendered to suit the tastes of servicemen in Hawaii, where these drawings were sold" and "South Seas movies were made from a man's perspective" (150).

Reading through these sections of *Tiki Pop*, I started to imagine that it might have been written by Vilsoni Hereniko and Teresia Teaiwa's character Helmut in their play *Last Virgin in Paradise* (1993)—the aging European wandering the Pacific in pursuit of some delusional dream of primitive sensuality. Not only do we have a panoply of images of eroticized Polynesian (and white) women, but we might finally understand how Helmut might have seen the West: as repressed, in need of the aphrodisiac of Polynesian paradise. In one photo, six elderly middle-class Americans are seated with drinks at the Seven Seas nightclub in Hollywood, with black-velvet paintings of naked Polynesian women hung on the wall overhead (works by Edgar Leeteg, the "American Gauguin" who specialized in black velvet paintings of bare-breasted Polynesian women during the 1930s

and 40s). While a couple of the more elderly are trying to smile, the image, which could be read in a limitless number of ways, is captioned by the author as “Average Americans trying to loosen up” (152).

As already noted, the *Tiki Pop* book and exhibit are about America, not the Pacific. But Sven Kirsten’s America seems as dreamlike as the tiki Pacific. The book’s rendering of Hawai‘i illustrates this best. Chapter 21, titled “Hawaiian Statehood” (or, in the French title, “Hawai‘i becomes a state of America”) consists of about five hundred words of text and twenty-one images that summarize Hawai‘i’s political history with breathless simplicity. The strategic maneuvering of US military in the Pacific that led to the construction of a naval port at Pearl Harbor and the eventual overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893 becomes “America had fostered a fascination with Hawai‘i for quite some time, which culminated in Hawai‘i’s being admitted into the Union in 1959” (209). The story of Hawai‘i goes on to note that after it became part of America, tourism to Hawai‘i doubled and Hawaiiana permeated North American fantasies.

The treatment of Hawai‘i epitomizes the book’s lack of interest in colonial history, much less concern with the violence of colonization, militarization, and globalization that have systematically displaced Pacific peoples in precisely the regions most famous for “tiki” culture: Hawai‘i, Tahiti, and Micronesia. The reasons for such exclusions in an art collector’s book or an art collector’s museum are not difficult to find: such dark and

violent histories would surely dampen the party fervor that fuels the collector’s enthusiasm and animates the writing throughout the book. Some might argue that this book and exhibit are not the place for such complexity. But that objection is precisely the point. Art books and exhibits with minimal, aestheticized text work to systematically efface histories and politics, thereby naturalizing dominant narratives of incorporation, narratives reproduced in Hawai‘i’s tourist culture for over a century.

Tiki Pop the book is not, however, without an interest in cultural politics. When political history does creep in, the problems of cultural destruction and loss pertain not to the destruction of indigenous art, language, and culture, but to the threat to the survival of tiki culture. Thus, at the end of the book, the author describes the ominous period of “tiki devolution” (343) during the 1960s and 1970s in which “postwar baby boomers” rejected dominant values of their parents and discarded an interest in fetishizing primitive art motifs. This period of revolution and devolution is rendered in a series of snapshots of 1960s and 1970s America, antiwar and countercultural. The students at the time may have felt they were going into the streets to stop the war in Vietnam, but in this volume, the reference to that revolution is followed by the worry that “commercialism had begun to corrupt the very core of the Tiki Pop concept: the fantasy of a paradise in its pristine state, uncontaminated by civilization” (343–344).

For tiki discourse, like the Quai Branly’s larger sense of mission, where

is there room for critique, for interrogating the mystifying practices of popular culture that collude with the “culture-cidal” forces of empire? Despite the absence of an index, the book has encyclopedic value likely to be appreciated by those who come with specific interests in particular historical periods or locales. So, for example, one studying Hawai‘i tourism or with a specific interest in the Polynesian Cultural Center will find historic images of some value (216–217). For anyone who might approach this project as anything other than a convenient collection of archival images, the content can only blur into vague notions of twentieth-century Pacific “exotic.” These images and objects are of interest precisely because they are so well identified with period fashions in decoration, architecture, art, and film. But the scope and diversity of material included in *Tiki Pop* suggest that there may be no way to bound such a category beyond some kind of generic primitivity. These projects suggest that “tiki” functions more as an empty signifier than a distinctive style that might in fact be mapped geographically or historically. Lacking a whisper of critical reflection on such topics, the *Tiki Pop* book and exhibit leave us with parody without purpose, a shell of white male fantasy now colored with the anxious recognition that perhaps the good old days may be gone.

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Conjurer la guerre: Violence et pouvoir à Houailou (Nouvelle-Calédonie), by Michel Naepels. Paris: Édition de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2013. ISBN 978-2-7132-2376-1, 287 pages, maps, tables, photographs, notes, bibliography, notes. Paper, □23.00.

Drawing on Michel Foucault, Michel Naepels opens his stimulating work with the question: “Does war have any value as an analytical tool for power relationships?” (11). Naepels’s ambitious anthropology uses violence as a principle to decipher the complex web of social interdependencies in the commune of Houailou, New Caledonia, with sensitivity to the minute mechanisms at play within societies. In an engaged examination of archival materials and testimonies, Naepels seeks new means to reintroduce an anthropological politics “at the center of the field of empirical science” (12).

Naepels’s keen awareness of the Kanaks’ ambivalence regarding social and political relations is underscored by the book’s title, *Conjurer la guerre*, which carries a dual meaning in French, suggesting both the control and harnessing of violence through sovereignty and chieftaincy, and the preparation of war in secrecy following the veiled lives of frondeurs (political rebels) and dissenters. These two strategies lead Naepels to the study of martial customs, to the use of physical violence throughout the nineteenth century until the 2000s, and to the social modalities that aggregate and structure collective experiences and actions such as elders’ council and political parties. The author deliber-

by Kirsten, Sven. ISBN: 9783836548519. Edition: N/A. Free 2-day shipping. Buy Tiki Pop : America Imagines Its Own Polynesian Paradise at Walmart.com.Â This book is the culmination of the extensive research of Sven Kirsten, urban archaeologist, Tiki sage, and author of earlier TASCHEN books, The Book of Tiki and Tiki Modern, which first recovered the figure of Tiki from obscurity. In his widely lauded graphic style, Kirsten places venerable ancient godheads next to their Polynesian pop counterparts, movie posters next to matchboxes, comic strips next to Robinson Crusoe illustrations. The result is at once a visual feast, a piece of cultural history, and a tribute to a very particular vision of paradise. Specifications. Publisher.