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## Influential but seldom seen, Vanuatu's art displays its power and potential in a thought-provoking Sydney show

By MICHAEL FITZGERALD

**F**OR A NATION WHOSE NAME MEANS "the country that stands up," it's ironic that the art of Vanuatu has been best known through a small seated figure in the Picasso Museum of Paris. Given to the Spanish painter by Matisse, the red-nosed, bug-eyed female effigy called *Nevimbumbao* was a mysterious muse to some of the great developments of 20th century modernism. The art of Vanuatu—the eastern Melanesian island group between the Solomons, New Caledonia and Fiji—occupies a similarly obscure place in the world. "It's very powerful, very spiritual," says Kirk Huffman, co-author of *Arts of Vanuatu* (Crawford House). "From the point of view of the Pacific, it's possibly the least known."

That's now changing. Like the towering, expressive-faced slit gongs that have become a national symbol since independence in



Anglo-French colonial rule (1906-1980), and nationhood. It's been a culture forged by upheavals both physical (earthquakes, cyclones, volcanic eruptions) and social: the introduction of western diseases and the so-called "blackbirding" period, when thousands of ni-Vanuatu were recruited to work on sugar plantations in New Caledonia and Australia, saw the population dwindle to about 40,000 in the late 1920s. "It's probably the world's most amazingly successful cultural survival story," says anthropologist Huffman, honorary curator of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre since 1991.

"New Traditions" documents this story with remarkable grace. So seductive are the decorative swirls of Michael Busai's felt-tipped pen drawing *Blackbirding*, 1998, that it takes the eye a moment to register the tragic stories of separated families lurking beneath the surface. There's a similarly gentle undertow to Joseph John's watercolor *War*, 1998, which refers to the period when over 500,000 Allied troops passed through Vanuatu during World War II. Here fish calmly gaze down on a reef of broken Western junk: life goes on with barely a ripple. "In Vanuatu, the really important stuff is behind the surface," says Huffman. For the onlooker, "you have to be able to break that barrier."

◀ ERIC NATUOIVI  
*Origins*, 1998

# TRADITION'S N

1980, Vanuatu's material culture is beginning to stand up and echo across the water. In 1997, an exhibition of exotic artefacts, many of them collected by the Swiss anthropologist Felix Speiser early last century, traveled to Basel's Museum der Kulturen and the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris. "The visitor is struck not only by the great diversity of styles, but also by the materials used, in which the whole jungle seems present," marveled one reviewer. "Human skulls on wooden frames are overmodeled with plant-fiber paste, all sorts of leaves are applied as well as spider webs, wood, bark, stone and coral."

But traditional Vanuatu culture, or *kastom*, refuses to be confined to a museum's glass cabinets. Showing off its surprising

twists is "New Traditions: Contemporary Art of Vanuatu," an exhibition organized by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre now visiting the Australian Museum in Sydney, and opened this week by Prime Minister Edward Nipake Natapei. Modest in scale, the show provides not only an artistic snapshot of one of the world's most diverse cultures (Vanuatu's 192,000 people are scattered across 83 islands and speak 113 languages), but a history lesson as well.

For the exhibition, 10 local artists were asked to reflect on 10 stages of their country's evolution, from settlement by Southeast Asian immigrants some 3,000 years ago to the arrival of European missionaries in 1839,

▶ RALPH REGENVANU  
*Development after Independence*, 1999



Displayed alongside these social narratives are the nuts and bolts of traditional Vanuatu life: the magenta-colored “money” mats of the women of Ambae, and the ritual objects still made to accompany men’s rank-taking ceremonies—circumcision boards and headdresses, some adorned with the cultivated crescent tusks of pigs, whose sacrifice is thought to bring their owner sanctity and life after death. As these objects attest, “traditions have kept going through upheaval,” says Australian Museum anthropologist and collection manager Leanne Brass.

And reinvention. While cultural copyright keeps the production of traditional items strictly monitored in the villages, for contemporary artists in the capital, Port Vila, “we have more freedom to do what we want,” says Sero Kuautonga, president of the Nawita Association of Contemporary Artists. Indeed, Eric Natuoivi’s surrealist stoneware refers to ancient Lapita pottery and the cult of the circle-tusked pig, but was considered modern enough to be exhibited at a recent Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Queensland. “It’s way out there, but the meaning is way back,” says “New Traditions” cocurator Ralph Regenvanu, director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.

Regenvanu’s own art is more conceptual and critical. With *Development after Independence (Vanuatu 1998)*, 1999, he took the national flag and substituted



photocopied 1,000-vatu notes for the usual pig’s tusk and *namele* leaves, “to counteract the feeling that we have to look to the west for everything that is best,” he says.

The exhibition also provided an opportunity for the Australian Museum to dust off some of its 6,000-strong Vanuatu collection, one of the world’s oldest and largest. Spotlit in the darkened recesses of the gallery, these objects make it easy to see why European modernists were drawn to them. With their tree-like rootedness, the slit gongs, or *tamtams*, have a primal power even when mute. The coral carvings collected

◀ **MALEKULA ISLAND**  
**Headdress, 1995**

footprints across the canvas, from a stylized *tamtam* on the left to blinding rays of the sun on the right. “I said to myself, if you want a better future, you’ve got to know your background,” says Kuautonga. “Only through it can you step forward with success.” With “New Traditions,” Vanuatu’s artists can stand up and take a bow. ■

STUART HUMPHREYS—NATURE FOCUS (X3)



# EW FACES

▶ **AMBRYM ISLAND**  
**Tamtams, 19th century**

by Captain Wolsch in 1884 are both delicate and deadly sharp—and as elegant as Brancusi sculptures. Fashioned from hollowed tree ferns, spotted with red and blue pigments and festooned with tusks, headdresses appear as otherworldly as space helmets. “A lot of these masks and headdresses were produced as much for the dead to see as for the living,” explains Huffman.

This deep connection to the ancestral world is what galvanizes Vanuatu *kastom*, old and new. “It’s all to do with respect,” says Huffman. “You respect your ancestors, you respect the land.” It’s what continues to inspire artist Kuautonga. In his Kandinsky-like *The Future*, 1998, the eye follows

