

## From the collection



Décor often says a lot about people's social position, their taste, their interests and perhaps what they do for a living. The creator of the Peanuts cartoons, Charles Schultz, once exhorted people to dress up their living spaces: "Decorate your home", he said, "it gives the illusion that your life is more interesting than it really is." Painter Graham Fletcher has chosen to explore the connotations of the use of South Pacific elements in interior decoration for his recent Doctorate in Fine Arts, and the Lounge Room Tribalism series is the result.

Lounges are, by definition, places to sit and relax. The one pictured here has particularly hectic furnishings – floral chair covers, pink and purple occasional seats and curtains, a planter full of hungry tropical foliage – and seems to be heavily romancing the 1950s. A strategically placed typewriter and loaded bookshelves hint at an educated occupant, while the covered bird cage suggests some symbolism may be at play.

Alongwith the built-in "entertainment unit" featuring the accoutrements of modern living, a television and record turntable, there are four

elements forming the corners of a diamond at the centre of the composition. Up on the wall, three greenstone mere, retired from their previous occupation of clubbing prey or people to death, hang in an innocent triptych. To the left, positioned on the window-sill, a Melanesian bust of a warrior surveys the scene. Opposite him, another head, perhaps female, certainly non-European, directs our gaze to the foreground carving, tilted up on a tabletop so it can be more easily seen. The oblique angle of this feature repeats the geometry which links the four ethnographic artefacts in the room, four corners to a theme which is also reinforced by the darker colouration of the connected elements. What can these silent sentinels be giving witness to?

Graham Fletcher explains: "I have observed a number of private collections of similar tribal and 'primitive' art within a range of urban homes, from middle class villas to the general décor of student flats. Modern art, contemporary furniture and household items are interspersed with cultural objects and artefacts from the tapa cloth adorning a feature wall in the lounge to the carved Tangaroa in the bathroom. Pacific art is now popular in modern interior decoration and is used as an indicator of taste and social status as well as being an important element in new conceptions of New Zealand national identity...Within these dynamic spaces a sort of cross-cultural intermingling occurs between Western and non-Western cultures, suggesting complex relationships of assimilation, resistance and interdependence. I describe this domiciliary cultural eclecticism as 'lounge room tribalism'."

Fletcher goes on to explain that as an artist of mixed Samoan and European heritage, he reads this type of interior decoration as creating an "intercultural space". By being used to add an exotic element to the decorative schema of room, the Māori and Pacific Island artefacts are divorced from any meaningful context and are left looking a little lost and lonely.

Lounge Room Tribalism is on loan to City Gallery, Wellington for an exhibition devoted to Graham Fletcher's work until 31 July 2011.

Linda Tyler

*Graham Fletcher, Lounge Room Tribalism, 2010, oil on canvas, 1500 x 1200mm*