

**REVIEW OF IMMIGRATION
MUSEUM EXHIBIT, 'OUR BODIES,
OUR VOICES, OUR MINDS'**

'Our Bodies, Our Voices, Our Minds', the title for a group of exhibitions on display at Melbourne's Immigration Museum, features an array of tattoo works from a culturally diverse, international and local background. Which ran until the 5th of April, 2020, the exhibition features three styles of tattooing each running as individual series. 'Tatau: Marks of Polynesia' offers an educational experience, with photography of these works in tandem with prints of artists' views on the cultural tradition of *tatau*, from the Su'a Sulu'ape family, world renowned traditional hand tap *tatau* artists. A second series, 'Perseverance: Japanese Tattoo Tradition in a Modern World', features traditional Japanese *irezumi*, the Japanese word for tattoo (literally 'to insert ink'). The third series, 'Documenting the Body: Curated by Stanislava Pinchuk' features local artists in Melbourne, practitioners of various contemporary decorative tattoo styles.

The Polynesian *tatau* exhibition focuses on the cultural importance of this particular style of tattooing, where the process of tattooing is more than decorative. In the words of Su'a Sulu'ape Aisea Toetu'u, '*tatau* ties our people back to our responsibilities, history, heritage, and culture.' This

feeling is echoed in the words of Su'a Sulu'ape Peter: 'It's not just about being a tattooist, it's not just a tattoo. Whenever I talk about tattoo, I talk about my family; I talk about my life. It's a lifestyle and it's cultural. I would give my life for it.' It is clear in the photography of this exhibit that there is tradition rooted in this artwork. While a number of the images on display are portraits of these tattoos, they do not attempt to isolate the art from the human. Tattooing makes use of the human body as its canvas and it is in these images that this relationship between art and body is laid out. Furthermore, the images on display are not restricted to these solo portraits either. As you move through the exhibit you will find a couple, arms loosely linked together, smiling at each other, a man standing in the surf, hands covered in grains of sand. Perhaps most important, an image of the Su'a Sulu'ape family together, and below that, the next generation, their children. A reminder that even as the tradition of *tatau* shifts and moves, and the style changes with new artists and new generations, they maintain their meaning and value over time. As expressed by Su'a Sulu'ape Aisea Toetu'u, these *tatau* can also be resistance, that despite the impacts of colonization, '*tatau* also reminds us that we are not fully colonized'.

The next series in this exhibition moves from Polynesia to Japan and California, where the 'Perseverance:

Japanese Tattoo Tradition in a Modern World' exhibit focuses on traditional Japanese tattooing, featuring work from Japanese artists in Japan and practitioners in California. While *irezumi* can refer to a specific traditional style of Japanese tattooing, it is also an umbrella term for all tattoos. Stepping into the exhibit, visitors are first presented with an explanation of the various themes used in this traditional style, involving historical, mythological and natural flora/fauna elements. Each of these elements generally carries cultural weight. Some examples of components in traditional Japanese style tattoos includes the *Tengu*, mountain spirits characterized by long noses or beaks, red skin and wings, featuring in many traditional mythologies. *Kitsune*, while also the word for normal foxes, refers to a spirit fox, commonly known in mythology to be able to shape shift and while sometimes regarded as benevolent were also known to be tricksters. *Sakura*, cherry blossoms, are iconic throughout Japanese contemporary media and culture, featured in traditional art and woven into *kimono* and *yukata*. A national event in Japan is *hanami*, or flower viewing, most heavily associated with the beginning of spring where thousands of cherry-blossom trees bloom across the country and people spend their weekends picnicking under the falling blossoms. These flowers' beauty is often related to the literary theory of *mono no*

aware, which can be translated as an "awareness of things", which relates to the appreciation of transience. *Sakura* blossoms are emblematic of this idea, as their beauty is fleeting, blooming for up to two weeks before falling from the trees, their time made shorter by inclement weather. It is not that these flowers are especially more beautiful than others, but rather that their beauty is temporary and limited, with the season easily ended early by a strong storm which contributes to their iconic status.

The tattoos on display here show the full range of these different elements introduced and explained at the beginning of the exhibit, with works ranging from the most clearly traditional, using specific elements with heavy colour saturation and solid black linework, to more contemporary variations on the traditional Japanese tattoos, using similar iconic features and components of traditional Japanese tattooing with shifting styles of linework or illustration, and incorporating other iconic tattoo elements such as skulls. The work on display also makes an effort to highlight the contribution of female tattooists, as well as tattooed women, which is certainly needed in an art that is dominated by men. Throughout the exhibit, visitors are able to see the range of personal style that is worked into each tattoo, while every tattoo style, American Traditional, Japanese Traditional, Neo-Traditional,

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Watercolour, Polynesian all have distinctive attributes, each artist carries their own approach to these styles in their work, and the wide ranges of what each artist is capable of is on display in these exhibits.

This same range is the focus of the final series in the exhibit, 'Documenting the Body: Curated by Stanislava Pinchuk', featuring Melbourne-based artists' works ranging from contemporary minimalist tattoos in concert with jewellery by Stanislava Pinchuk and Zaiba Khan, to Paul Stillen's flora and fauna tattoo work. Each of these displays expresses the individuality and breadth within the scope of tattoo artistry. Melbourne itself is a city full of talented artists, and this exhibit only scratches the surface of the incredible work being done here by these artists. The exhibit as a whole shows the range of emotion these art works can evoke in not only visitors as viewers of these works, but also captures their subjects. From the traditions of the Su'a Sulu'ape family, to the open mouth laughter of a man sporting his Japanese traditional body suit, to the stories of immigration built into the works of Stanislava Pinchuk and her clients, tattoos themselves can evoke a range of emotion, feeling and importance. From personal stories to larger cultural and social traditions, the meaning making of tattoos is as varied as their artists and clients.

Reviewed by Patrick Murphy