

Awards-in-Focus



Kiriwina: watercolour and ink. Artefacts from the Trobriand Islands.



Display of Rebecca Jewell's work in the North Entrance, the British Museum (March-April 06).

Artist in Residence

Dr Lissant Bolton, the British Museum

Rebecca Jewell and the British Museum: an experimental residency

The British Museum holds a remarkable collection of objects from the western Pacific (also known as Melanesia), especially from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The collection dates from some of the earliest European exploration and settlement of this region, and includes marvellous and intriguing objects and aesthetic forms. In collaboration with Goldsmith's College, University of London, the British Museum is currently researching this collection in a project designed to reconnect the objects with their source communities. Rebecca Jewell's Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence grant has provided another valuable lens through which to study this collection.

Rebecca's artistic practice focuses on an exploration of the collections in storage and the processes involved in cataloguing objects. The items she examined are catalogued, numbered, and measured as a matter of routine, and for Rebecca this taxonomic programme creates a new aesthetic of its own: she has found inspiration in the method of labelling and the mode of presentation, as well as in the object itself. Rebecca was further interested in how the use of observational drawing by social anthropologists and museum curators has helped in the descriptions and analysis of objects over time. Her work investigated the relationship between the objects and the storage and documentation of the collection.

Two artists from the region, Samuel Luguna and Ralph Regenvanu joined the research project - known as the Melanesia Project - during the year for short periods, and Rebecca was able to work collaboratively with them, sharing in their perspective on the storage and display of objects so far from their original places. With Samuel Luguna, she exhibited work in a small display in the museum's North Entrance in March 2006. In this display they set their work against some of the objects they depicted, unnerving some curators by leaving storage labels on the objects in the display. With Ralph Regenvanu, she participated in a presentation to the Pacific Arts Association (Europe) conference in Cambridge in May 2006. Rebecca also collaborated in a presentation to British Museum staff with other Melanesia Project researchers about the artist-in-residence programme. During the year, Rebecca also had a residency at the Florence Trust, and exhibited some of her work there.

Rebecca's work has contributed significantly to the Melanesia Project, which, far from being a purely academic investigation of the collection, is also focussed on the significance of the collections to Melanesians today. Their interest – and sometimes disinterest – and the different uses to which they now put the collections are all part of the project. Rebecca's work reveals graphically some of the issues of dislocation and reinvestment that the academic project is considering through text. She will take this investigation a step further later in 2006 when she goes to Papua New Guinea to visit and work with Samuel Luguna.

Rebecca's experimental residency with the British Museum's Melanesia Project has proved immensely productive both in terms of the works of art themselves, and the ideas and engagement which she has brought to the project.