

## TRADITIONAL, OR IS IT?

Too often, 'traditional' craft forms are understood as established and static. Instead, such practices through time and circumstance have seen constant alteration and deviation, absorbing diverse influences from artists' surroundings and experiences. Shifts in 'traditional' craft forms are ever pronounced in contemporary production, with artists freely utilising access to external stimuli, while becoming increasingly comfortable with processing and incorporating lived experiences from the past and the present in their work.

The Queensland Art Gallery's fifth *Asia-Pacific Triennial* showcases the work of several craft practitioners who have significantly extended their chosen art forms. The work of paper-cutting artist Liu Jieqiong, from the Peoples' Republic of China, and the South Pacific women weavers and embroiderers included in the Pacific Textiles Project demonstrate working practices that have contemporary currency and, at the same time, remain mindful of and rooted in specific cultural and aesthetic expression. Although well known and understood within their respective cultural realms, these artists' works stand outside the canon of acknowledged contemporary global art production. Their inclusion in this Triennial provokes essential re-examination of what we, particularly given our position within the Asia Pacific region, appreciate and embrace as contemporary art.

Liu Jieqiong, included in the Triennial as a participant in the Long March Project, is similar to many other rural women in China in that she learnt the art of paper-cutting as a child from her mother. Paper-cuts are largely considered a rural craft in China, with ubiquitous, small-scale paper-cuts used as decorations for celebratory and auspicious occasions. Although Liu Jieqiong's work is distinctive, she is one of an increasing number of regional artists in China who make use of the paper-cutting medium as a means of personal, innovative expression. As explained in the Triennial catalogue by the founding curator of

the Long March Project, Lu Jie, paper-cuttings are the 'most abundant in regional specialities, most thoroughly imbued with the power of individuality, as well as the most subjective "image", and the most rooted aesthetic expression'.<sup>1</sup> While Liu Jieqiong's twelve-panelled paper-cut work, *Story of the Red Army*, 2004, draws on the technique and style of her province of Shaanxi – seen in each panel's lack of a single-point perspective, and the use of some particular motifs – it moves far beyond the usual. Her characteristic, large-scale work involves innovative representations and motifs, and provides a historical narrative of Communism in her country.

The textiles created by the women weavers and embroiderers in the Pacific Textiles Project also combine community distinctiveness and imaginative renderings that present unique personal interpretations. The artists in the Pacific Textiles Projects are drawn from Island Nations across the South Pacific, and are represented by a diverse array of quilts and mats. What binds this selection is the representation of narratives that retell and pay tribute to historical events of the Pacific.

These histories are conveyed through a variety of media and techniques, often with more than one technique in the single work. Woven pandanus mats, for example, may have overlaid embroidered feature panels and/or appliqué motifs or crocheted borders. The incorporation of colonially-introduced handicrafts with pre-colonial Polynesian fibre techniques; the varied use of imported material such as dyed wool and fabric; together with the absorption of post-colonial, predominantly Christian, motifs, are now viewed by many as 'traditional' craft practices of the Pacific. These Pacific objects are an excellent example of tradition 'continually invented and assimilated in an ongoing process of hybridity', as Homi Bhabha writes in his seminal *Location of Culture*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Pacific Textiles Project and the paper-cuts of Liu Jieqiong should be seen as poignant examples of this: not only do they question our understanding of tradition, but they present new and important forms of contemporary expression. ■■■

[www.asiapacifictriennial.com](http://www.asiapacifictriennial.com)

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1. Lu Jie, quoted in Abigail Fitzgibbons, 'Creativity and Tradition: Contemporary folk art', in Lynne Seear and Suhanya Raffel (eds), *The 5th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery Publishing, Brisbane, 2006, p. 122.  
2. Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, New York, 1994, p. 172.



< Inset: Artist unidentified (Samoa), *Fala su'i*, c.1980–85, mat: woven *laufala* (pandanus) and commercial wool. Purchased 2005. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery. Photo: courtesy Queensland Art Gallery

> Inset: Laupule Poutasi (Samoa), Tusi Luafutu (Samoa/Australia), *Fala su'i*, c.1984, reworked 2004, mat: woven *laufala* (pandanus) and commercial wool. Purchased 2004. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery. Photo: courtesy Queensland Art Gallery

Main image: Liu Jieqiong (China), *Story of the Red Army* (detail), edition of six, 2004, papercut. Purchased 2006. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery. Photo: courtesy Queensland Art Gallery

