Any attempt to simultaneously open ten thematically cohesive exhibitions amidst a day-long festival showcase of theatre, dance and song, requires talent, ambition and enthusiasm. Throw in an outdoor Pacific arts and craft market, and food stalls redolent with the olfactory delights of hangi (Maori ground oven), and you also have a recipe for success. Some 4000 people visited Sydney’s Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre on Saturday 24 September to experience Niu Warrior.

I was one of many who caught the train to Casula, in Liverpool city in south-west Sydney, after being assured that I wouldn’t be able to miss the Arts Centre from the station’s platform. The centre itself is, indeed, unmistakable; the only landmark anywhere near the station, it occupies a former powerstation built in the 1950s – industrial, purposeful and monumental. With a multi-storied atrium, catwalk access to upper level spaces, a 326-seat theatre, exposed concrete walls and hefty metal pillars, it is a striking community venue for culturally diverse art and performance. Casula Powerhouse has been home to arts and visiting artists since 1994, and its most recent Pacific art project, Body Pacifica, was awarded a 2011 IMAGiNe (Inspiring Museums And Galleries in Excellence) Award.

The rationale behind Niu Warrior, according to Powerhouse Director Kiersten Fishburn, is that Pacific peoples are ‘fighting for cultural recognition and community wellbeing’, wielding the weaponry of art, sport and social commitment. It treads in the footsteps of its award-winning predecessor in more ways than one. Like Body Pacifica, it includes objects from the Australian Museum’s Pacific Collection, exhibited alongside recent works by contemporary Pacific artists, archival photography, and photography by local teenagers. It also features, rather prominently, stylised photographs of some of the best known Pacific players in the NRL (National Rugby League), but where Body Pacifica had them donning traditional body adornment jewellery, Niu Warrior – Mana Pasifika clad them instead in the ‘traditional warrior dress’ of their homelands.

Was I the only viewer who struggled a little with these portraits by Frank Puletua and Ethan Mann, with their fantastical backdrops, flames and skulls, hanging in an upstairs gallery overlooking the central hall? They are certainly arresting in their celebration of male beauty, but if I have one complaint to lay against much contemporary Pacific art it is the continued reworking of the ‘noble savage’ and ‘dusky maiden’ stereotypes, which seems in danger of further romanticising, exoticising and ingraining that which it purports to be subverting.

The NRL portraits are installed in the Turbine Hall Gallery, which leads into the Turbine Hall South and its exhibition of 30 kikiki (Samoan cricket) bats from the local Sydney Samoan Methodist congregation. Made in the style of old war clubs, each bat on display is different, with brightly coloured cord-wrapped...
handles, and sculpted and painted planes. Together they made a striking display that spoke more eloquently of the contemporary warrior in sport than the aforementioned glossy portraits.

Adjoining the kilikiti bats, Inner City Aboriginal Kids brought young faces to the fore, in a compelling exhibition of captured moments. The subtlety of expressions offered to one’s peers, and frozen on film, rooted this exhibition firmly in the kids’ daily reality, and offered intimacy and personality. These were juxtaposed with Travis Grace’s photographic tribute to Su’a Suluape Petelo, revered as one of Samoa’s finest traditional tattooists. Grace’s images offered a glimpse into a personal rite of passage, and sacred space. The documentary style continued with the Mau-Samoa Independence Movement photographs, leading into the Niu Tube Project, and a chance for exhibition attendees to record their own ideas about their contemporary warrior existence. Part of the education and community engagement program, this exhibit was monopolised by Internet savvy children on opening day.

Downstairs, Greg Semu explored the noble warrior through photography (sound familiar?) in the Marsden Gallery, alongside a selection of Brooke Andrew’s works from Penrith Regional Galleries’ Hope and Peace exhibition. This was the least successful hanging, with the two bodies of work feeling quite incompatible, especially when confined in the smallest Powerhouse gallery. Across the hall, Pasifik: The Art of War showed ten Pacific war objects selected from the Australian Museum’s Pacific Collection, accompanied by contemporary works by Tevita Havae and Dion Horstmans. Housed in the Hopper Gallery, the tools of warfare and their modern counterparts were utterly compelling, especially Havae’s killer culture (2011) – petrie dish breast plates of blood agar and bacteria. Visceral yet oddly beautiful, they anchored the rest of this gallery’s exhibits brilliantly.

Finally, the Switch Gallery was occupied by Giles Peterson’s evolving collection-based exhibition of works from the Pacific Rim, called (here) Niu Pasifik Warriors. Fifty works spanning photography, sculpture, fashion, adornment, video installations, graffiti, tāvau, painting and drawing, tied together the threads of all the other exhibitions, acting as a lynchpin for understanding and appreciation. In this gallery the voices of young and old, ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’, and established and emerging artists were clearly enunciated. This exhibition with its rich assemblage of ‘Warriors’ ensured that the overall impression of Niu Warrior was somehow more than just the sum of its parts.

As a whole, then, Niu Warrior delivers on the promise made by Fishburn in the extensive catalogue to present a program of exhibitions that are both sophisticated and warm. The support of the local Pacific community was greatly in evidence on opening day, and has no doubt been bolstered by the ongoing program of artist’s talks, workshops, musical events and theatre. And despite...
my own irritation – and perhaps, let’s be honest, titillation – at the ongoing production of stylised and scantily-clad ‘noble savages’, the diversity of ‘contemporary warriors’ was acknowledged and represented to great effect. In Creative Producer Leo Tanoi’s words, ‘the new cultural warriors are stars in the night sky, leaders and people of vision – the navigators for longevity.’

Niu Warrior is showing at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney, 24 September to 4 December 2011. www.casulapowerhouse.com

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OPPOSITE PAGE: (clockwise from top left) 1/ Judy Holding, Dry Landscape, rusted corten steel; 2/ Charles Robb, Pluviant, 1, acrylic resin, gypsum; 3/ Stephen Bird, Bowers, clay, pigment, glaze; 4/ Janene HARMAN, Encompass, recycled milk bottles, sticks, river stones; 5/ Philip Spelman, same up same down, painted steel.

All works are among the 37 finalists (from 263 entries) in the 2011 Deakin University Contemporary Small Sculpture Award. Stephen Bird’s Bowers ( pictured) won the overall prize (worth $10K) as judged by John Cunningham (Director, Warmunool Art Gallery), Kelly Gellatly (Curator, National Gallery of Victoria), and Leanne Willis (Manager, Art Collection and Galleries Deakin University). The finalist exhibition shows at Deakin University Art Gallery, Burwood (VIC), 2 Nov to 10 Dec 2011. www.deakin.edu.au/arts-management

Images courtesy the artists. Photography by Simon Peter Fox.