



**A Migration of Artefacts  
in  
Words and Images**

Valerie Bence  
Rebecca Jewell

Whitney South Sea Expedition, 2014

*Lifting a brush, a burin, a pen or a stylus  
is like releasing a bite or lifting a claw*

Gary Snyder

Trained first as an anthropologist, then as an artist, Rebecca Jewell has always worked out of two very distinct, almost contradictory, traditions – that of the analytic classifier and recorder on the one hand and, on the other, the holistic maker of poetic visual images. In the past these have been held together seemingly effortlessly through her chosen language of birds; birds, as Jonathan Franzen has written of her art, as representing the Other, both beautiful and revered but also, because they can fly and are to be envied and therefore becoming objects to be trapped, killed and caged. Out of this, by meticulously printing images of birds on feathers and placing these in the places of their entrapment or usage – nets, cages or headdresses for example - she created a wonderfully rich array of objects, all of powerfully tender and evocative enchantment.

Now, in this new exhibition, she shifts her focus in a rather different though, in our current moment particularly, no less troubled direction, that of anthropological and natural history collecting. Focussing on the region that she has always been drawn to and travelled widely in – Oceania – Rebecca Jewell has been adapting her visual techniques to explore a subject which contains profound and innate historical and philosophical resonances and conflicts, both for her personally in her twin roles as artist and museologist, and also in a contemporary intellectual climate that is riven by conflicts between the dominance of scientific materialism and those inescapable intuitions of the fragile spiritual immanence that underlies it.

With its rich array of artefacts – among them a giant egg covered in printed feathers, carved ‘scrimshaw’ cuttlefish, stick charts inspired by those used in the Marshall Islands, decorated mist nets, a Captain Cook inspired bird-feathered cape and a feather-collaged photograph of the Whitney Expedition – the visual effect is unmistakably that of an 18<sup>th</sup> Century ‘cabinet of curiosities’. The British Museum, in its earliest 18<sup>th</sup> Century guise, must have contained similar mash-ups of natural history and the man-made, though the final effect here probably conveys the very opposite with its innate critique of the long-standing Western obsession with collecting and classifying, not to mention the disjunction between man and nature that accompanies it and now threatens our whole biosphere with imminent disaster. One piece here encapsulates this tersely and beautifully; entitled Floating Feathers, it shows a blown-up 1920s photograph of the 75 ton schooner France that was used as the base for the famed Whitney Expedition to the South Seas of 1921-32, (during the course of which some 40,000 or more bird, plant and anthropological objects were collected on behalf of the American Museum of Natural History), on to the sails of which Rebecca Jewell has printed feathered images of many of the birds that were collected on it. It works powerfully at so many levels – very simply the air that fills the sails also once

lifted those birds and, very poignantly, a huge proportion of those birds the expedition collected are now almost certainly extinct, in many instances as a consequence of Western-inspired economic development.

**Nicholas Usherwood, March 2016**  
**Features Editor, Galleries Magazine and writer**



Trapped, 2016

## **Valerie Bence**

After a career as a researcher, case-study writer and librarian, Valerie finished a doctorate in her mid-fifties and then moved from academic writing to creative writing. She has just completed an MA in Poetry at Manchester University's Writing School. Valerie works mainly with objects and art works, but writes 'ekphrastic' poems in its broadest sense, encompassing memory, place and time. Time is an especially powerful focus and she finds that writing on significant anniversaries or in real time brings another dimension to poetry, such as on the centenary of the outbreak of WW1, the sinking of the Titanic and Scott's journey to the Pole.

She recently finished a collection of poems on Rembrandt artworks and has just submitted a wider portfolio based on art, music, buildings and some British Museum objects for her MA. Her poems have been published in *Now then!*, *Bare Fiction*, *Manchester Buildings A-Z* and she has worked on poetry projects with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge. A Rembrandt poem is forthcoming in *Cambridge Notes: Special Edition on Ekphrasis* this Spring. Valerie lives and works in Bucks.

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## **Rebecca Jewell**

Rebecca Jewell is Artist in Residence in the Oceania Department of the British Museum. She was recently Visiting Research Fellow in Print at London Metropolitan University (2006-2012) and she was invited in 2013 to do an art residency at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Jewell worked for five years on the Melanesia Art Project (2005-2010) at the British Museum and made a field trip to the Solomon Islands in 2009. Jewell lived in Papua New Guinea for a year (1982) and studied social anthropology at Cambridge University (1985). She gained a PhD in Natural History Illustration from the Royal College of Art (2004). Jewell has exhibited widely - in London, America, Singapore, Germany, Japan and Australia. Her work is held in the National collections of the Natural History Museum, the British Museum, the British Library, the National Trust (Chastleton House), the Linnean Society and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge. Jewell is a Fellow of the Linnean Society, and is a Brother of the Art Workers Guild. She is represented by the Rebecca Hossack Gallery and she lives and works in London.

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Appropriating A'a, 2016

## Shining a light in the back of a god

August 9th 1821 Ra'iatea

in the island chapel, remade after storms,  
they awaited the coming of the boat as if it were - an end  
when really A'a was just beginning his journey.

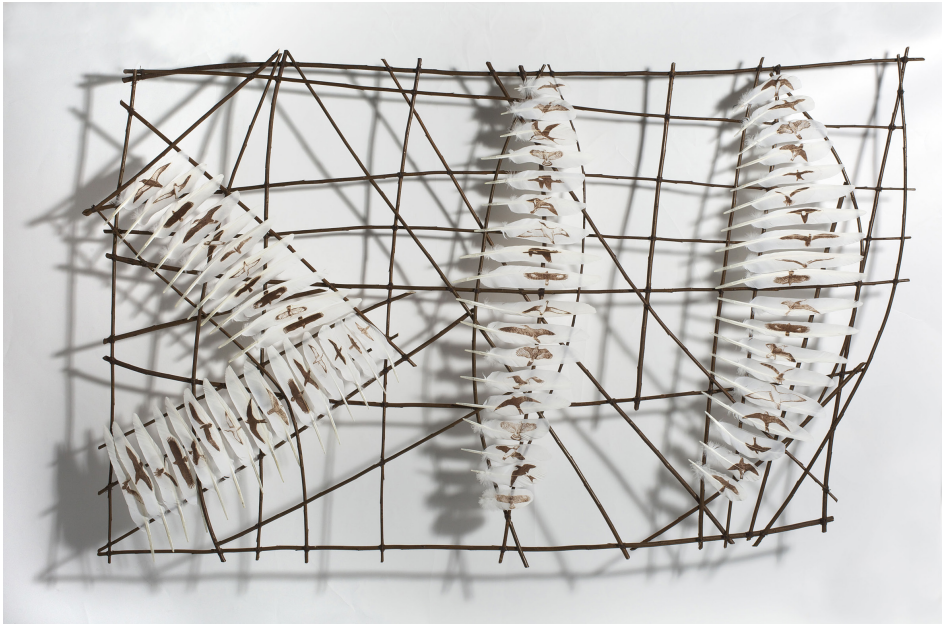
In the darkness, coconut shell lamps with candles  
of burning *tutui* nuts made *rebu arui* - night-day,  
that special charged time when rituals were most effective,  
thresholds stretched thinnest,  
ancestors and gods ready for interaction with the living.

Revd John Williams stood him in the pulpit,  
a surrendered deity; but he knew A'a was too beautiful to burn.  
All eyes were on the deep glow of his patina,  
a surface finished with ray skin rasps, rubbed with abrasive breadfruit leaves,  
burnished with the back of cowrie shells, swabbed with cloth soaked in coconut-oil  
he both reflected and absorbed power.

The good Revd opened the panel in the carefully contoured back.  
Twenty-four tiny god figures - swaddled in bark cloth - were disgorged  
to a susurration of approval, surprise or dismay from the congregation;  
false idols, proof of good works done or,  
had they been given to placate, distract from the most sacred  
undiscovered, contents.

In his eagerness to show and tell,  
unwrapping gods in haste from their precious cloths,  
the single red feather from a lorikeet's breast -  
*(a cosmological currency already imbued with power)*  
perhaps fell un-noticed, catching on a splinter of sandalwood  
in the resting place of longbones;  
or was this furtive feather placed, to wait almost two centuries more  
until your hand, there at that moment  
switched on the torch...

November 10th 2015



Navigation Chart, 2016



## Watching two old people swim

I have an ache to take a slow walk into water,  
with a man loved a lifetime long.

There would be the barest brush of arm on shoulder,  
to reassure as cold creeps up bones, older now.

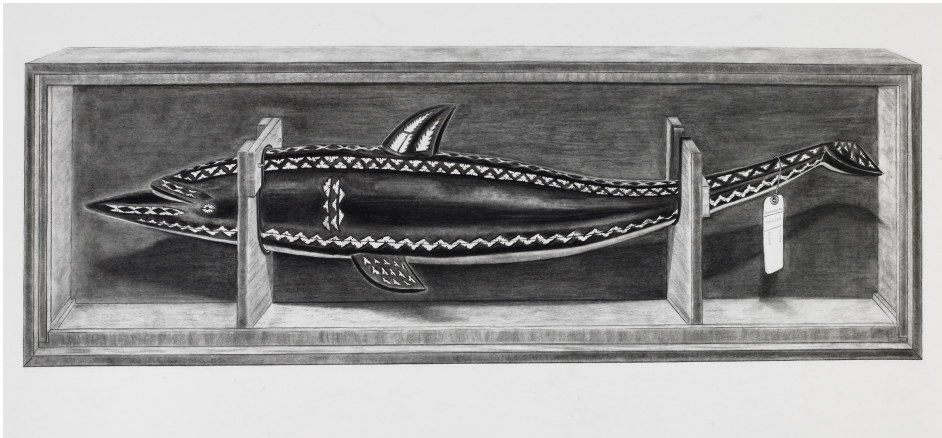
He would know things, be a reader of maps and the sea,  
have a head for direction, be able to sniff the air  
tell a squall from approaching thunder;  
we would walk the sunken lanes, he would know  
a badger's crossing-point, have a voice for reading,  
a hand for holding and know the way.

When he was gone, I would stand staring out to sea  
like a whaler's wife. But now, in this fantasy

we stand knee deep, then thigh high in water  
fingers touching. We swim, knowing each other's pace

without looking, then emerge into sun, a slight breeze  
cooling drops on thin skin. He comes towards me,

with a yellow towel.....



Dolphin, 2006

## Tatu - to puncture, to mark, to strike

### THEN

like this jagged shark-tooth pattern made zigzag  
with a shark's tooth or chisel, soon enough the time comes  
for '*striking the black*'; much preparation is needed

to keep the tuhuna supplied with inky pigment  
in the tattoo house; *build a special fire pit to collect soot  
from burned candlenuts, mix with coconut milk or gall*

*of shellfish, caught at night for the deepest black.*  
He lines up tools on tapa cloth, imbued with his personal  
deities to limit pain and transfer mana\* in the marks;

flat instruments for straight lines, fine-work  
or infill, gradual curved combs for cloud circles or wrapping  
marks. Each tuhuna has a preferred comb material;

serrated teeth, tortoiseshell, ray-spikes,  
lemon thorns, bird or human bone; best of all is wing-bone  
of albatross or elbow of frigate bird.

Sharp pointed teeth are cut in the comb's edge  
for tapping into skin to free the blood. An apprentice outlines  
chosen marks in charcoal or coloured earth.

So it begins. With the biting comb  
and a piece of tapa to wipe as he works, he dips  
the comb quickly into ink and with each

swift tap of the mallet chants - *It is struck,  
it is struck, We tap yes, We tap you a little yes?*  
A painful rhythm, one hundred times a minute

\* *mana* - a person's, place or object's supernatural force

for weeks; months before skin, covered  
in scarification and blinking cicatrix shows the beauty  
of the marks. This is powerful work

calling on ancestors for courage, to make each  
session long, the days rest between are called the days of blood.  
Some will die.

## NOW

*If I were there I would have lima (the band tattoo)  
for the honour to serve kava juice -  
but I am here*

*with you in this clean room, opting out of numbing cream,  
alcohol rubbed on my arm, cut stencil applied.*

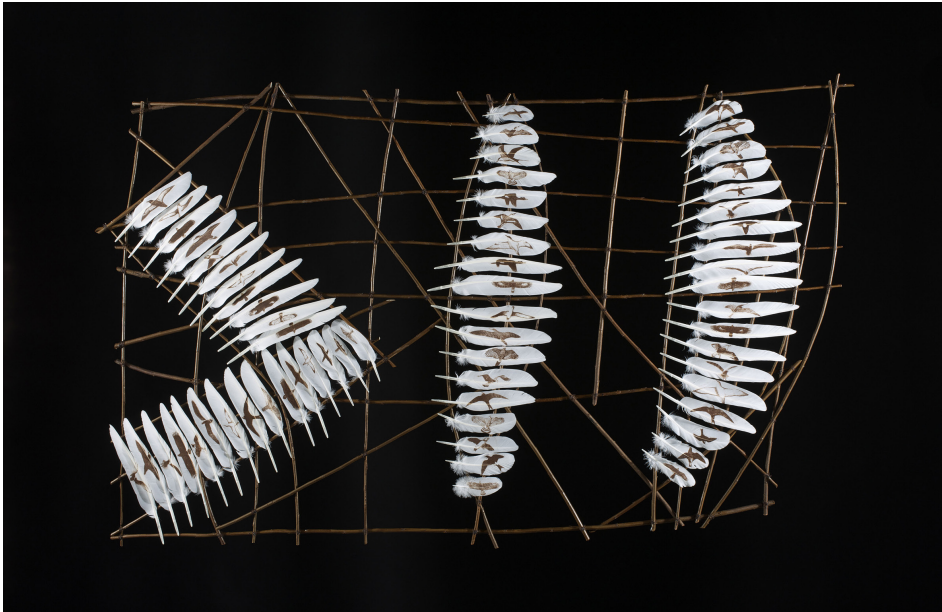
*The machine begins its work buzzing like a thousand bees,  
its steady current drives sterile needles in and out of my skin  
dermis deep, to fix the image.*

*As for ink, you say the best is from Japan  
it could be Kuro Sumi or Dragon's Blood.*

*It is done.*

*I leave, with a man's face on my arm  
wrapped in cling film.....*

*It is an intoxication, a quiet curation*



Navigation Chart, 2016



Oceanic Egg, 2016

## Gazing at Ithaca

1

On Mondays and Fridays we would travel back to Egypt, Greece and Rome  
to Mesopotamia's cradle of civilisation,  
wander the fertile crescent fields of early wheat  
and reeds grown for papyrus  
or sink into inking-in Greek columns, imbibing their subtle differences;

Ionic, Doric, Corinthian,  
you never know when that will come in handy.....  
all this in books, so it must be true.

I scuff my unfashionable shoes  
while swinging on a chair and hide myself in Babylon  
looking for the Hanging Gardens.

I once spent a whole holiday, arms on the edge of a pool  
gazing at Ithaca  
only to discover on the last day  
that it was on the other side of the island  
and couldn't be seen at all.  
And now I know the Hanging Gardens weren't built in Babylon  
but in Ninevah

2

Marco Polo first named it Elephant Bird,  
*'which feedeth its young on elephants'* held fast in gigantic talons,  
Sinbad first thought it a cloud, come over the sun.....called it Roc.  
But the only possibility could not fly, was no hunter of elephants,  
was a vegetarian, thick-necked bird  
robust, cumbersome like a feathered tank  
living one hundred years or more.  
So, while no creature could lay this wondrous egg  
it would be no surprise if one by one  
this speckled mix of ready-mapped feathers  
would take to the sky  
like hummingbirds from their glass dome  
and fly.....



Floating Feathers, 2016



## Mirage

Whenever I see a sailing ship I cannot help but hear  
the music of Khachaturian  
as the Onedin line's *Charlotte Rhodes* hove's into view.  
It was a Sunday staple, week after week - watching James fall in love with Anne.  
Waiting for the inevitable heartbreak  
I would iron each crease from three small school uniforms,  
hang them with love in the airing cupboard  
so they would be warm to the touch on cold mornings.

Imagine it was us standing naked on the beach.  
Ships and small boats coming closer and closer to all you have ever known.  
They came like magicians, holding hats with rabbits in  
and might just as well have descended from the sky  
on wings of red and yellow feathers, or be a mirage  
a bending of the light. When they leave, you stand in enlightened clothes,  
your souls captured on glass plates  
stored in the holds of ships



Cape of Voyages, 2016

## Arrival

*John and Mary Williams LMS Missionaries. Sailed to the South Seas on board the Harriet 1816-17*

1

It starts by not sailing on a Thursday or Friday

or the first Monday in April or the second in August,

Saturdays or Sundays were preferred, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> being especially auspicious.

Don't step on board left foot first, wear green or carry a black bag

don't have red hair, be cross-eyed, clap

or whistle unless you are the youngest on board or the ship's cook;

best not to be a woman, unless you're naked

or about to give birth.

Never throw stones into the sea, leave a bowl or bucket

upside-down, have flowers on board or cut hair or toenails

once a ship has sailed. Sailors should sleep only on their backs.

Never let a bell ring - unless a watch bell or it will ring for death.

It's useful to have a loved one's hair knitted into your sock,

to ensure your return to dry land, but don't let them wave you goodbye...

Don't join a ship whose name ends in 'a', change a ship's name

after launch or stick a knife in a mast -

unless you are becalmed as it will summon-up the wind.

Never say *thirteen*, say *twelve plus one*; if there is a death on board

the sailmaker should stitch the body in sailcloth with thirteen stitches,

the last one through the nose, to make sure they are dead

and don't follow the ship.

Never say '*goodbye*' 'drown' or '*pig*' - especially not '*pig*'

(use Gruff, Little Fella or Mr Dennis) but it is fine to say pig if you have one tattooed upon a knee

*pig on knee, safety at sea;*

In the galley, never cross knives on the table, stir tea with a knife or fork

or pass salt directly to another person - *pass the salt, pass sorrow*

never borrow a spoon, always eat fish from head to tail.

Egg shells must be broken into tiny pieces, to stop witches getting in.

Pray for an albatross or dolphin to show the way to land,

never harm them, they carry the spirits of dead sailors.

A year she lived like this, newly married Mary  
amongst such men who wore gold in their ears  
to improve their eyesight or to pay Davy Jones if drowned at sea;  
men who would never reach through the rungs of a ladder  
to handle a flag – which would break the Holy Trinity...

A year to get there. If the world had been flat  
they would surely have gone over the edge -  
more dangerous then, they say  
than becoming astronaut, blasting off the earth.  
She would return without him, leaving seven babies behind.

A year's journey before she stood in dimity  
and cotton lawn quite unfit for climate,  
a little behind her husband in the small boat.  
Soon she would have to disembark, blinded by the blue,  
step on land as if she knew what she was doing.

Removing her too dainty shoes, she took his hand  
jumped delicately onto bone dry sand.  
They had God in their luggage;  
but she may have had in her pocket the feather of a wren  
killed on New Year's Day, for safe passage



Ship's Compass, 2016



Collage, 2016

## Work on Display

This publication accompanies two displays of Jewell's artwork and Bence's poetry. They will be running concurrently in the West Foyer of the Clore Centre at the British Museum (5-31 April 2016) and at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 28 Charlotte Street, London (7-30 April 2016).

## Acknowledgements

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