

Speech to Warwick Freeman, on the occasion of the opening of his exhibition in the Tropenmuseum (Royal Tropical Institute) in Amsterdam, 1 juni 2004.

First of all, on behalf of the board of the Françoise van den Bosch Foundation, I would like to congratulate Warwick Freeman with his exhibition.

It is so nice, Warwick, that you are here again in Amsterdam. Last year you were here, to receive the Françoise van den Bosch Award 2002. You had an exhibition at gallery Ra. It was in April 2003 and it already seems so long ago. In the year that passed since then, you have worked hard at this new exhibition and especially at your new book which has the intriguing title GIVEN.

It is an honour to us that your exhibition starts here in Amsterdam. It is the start of a world tour. After October the exhibition will travel to the Schmuck Museum in Pforzheim, Germany. Then it will travel to The Jam Factory in Adelaide, Australia. And only then, at the end of the tour, it will be seen in your own town, in Auckland, in the Auckland War Memorial Museum.

The exhibition of Warwick Freeman here at the Tropenmuseum, the Royal Tropical Institute, is quite unusual – at least for the museum. But the fact that it is here, has to do with the nature of the work. The jewellery of Warwick Freeman has its roots in the culture and nature of New Zealand. The Pacific culture inspired him to choose certain materials and patterns in his jewellery.

This fact, the fact that Warwick's work has so much to do with Maori culture, inspired the Françoise van den Bosch Foundation to apply to this museum to ask if they would be interested in an exhibition of his work. Isn't it a challenge, after all, for a museum with an anthropological collection, to show contemporary artefacts which are on the crossroads of cultures? Fortunately the museum was interested, although the curators admitted it was something new for them.

In fact, the request of the foundation inspired the museum to buy the new show cases which they were thinking about for some time. They are in use now for the first time, for this exhibition. And finally, the Françoise van den Bosch Prize and the prospect of this exhibition inspired Warwick Freeman to work out the plan that he had for some time, with the young art historian Damian Skinner, to make a book about his jewellery within the perspective of New Zealand's post colonial society

and the debate about cultural identity, cultural property and appropriation.

So, we could say that the Françoise van den Bosch Prize, which was the immediate cause for this exhibition, had a versatile effect. As the aim of the foundation is to stimulate the field of contemporary jewellery, we can be a little bit proud. Although, we have to be modest, because Warwick Freeman, Damian Skinner and the people in the museum had to make much more effort to realize this project, compared to the foundation which only had the initiating task.

The first book of Warwick Freeman, published in 1995, was called 'Owner's Manual'. The idea behind the book was the conceit that objects, like electronics, usually have a manual to facilitate the relationship between the owner and the product in daily life, including instructions for care. The book was pervaded with an intercultural awareness. In this book you may read, for instance, the story about the rose. Warwick Freeman once made a brooch of a black rose, made of oxidised silver. It was in 1990. A rose can be just a beautiful flower, but in the context of his work it has a deeper meaning. In a post colonial society like New Zealand even a rose can be a symbol of colonialism. In the book, the rose is called "the most foreign in this Southern Hemisphere." And also "the beautiful emblem of the intruders who stayed." This notion is very interesting and revealing to us. It confirms the difference between a nation like his, which exists of a population of conquerors and oppressed people, and a Western European nation like ours, from where colonialism and slavery started. In Holland colonialism is something from old times. It is the dark side of our 'Golden Age'. First it brought us prosperity and wealth, and it is just for the last decades that there is some kind of awareness of the negative consequences of our colonial history. Here in this museum you can see the artefacts that our forefathers brought home from their journeys in the West and the East – amazing objects dropped in from another world. Here you can also see how a museum of today tries to handle this problem, how it tries to create an understanding for different cultures and different traditions. The work of Warwick Freeman has this capacity of confronting us with the notion of cultural identity.

The question of identity is a serious matter. In the work of Warwick Freeman it is treated carefully, linking Maori patterns with European symbols, and New Zealand materials with old European jewellery traditions.

Symbols are an important part of his work. His exhibition at gallery Ra last year, was called 'Sentences'. In this exhibition each piece of jewellery had its own place and function. Each piece of jewellery was a symbol, all pieces together becoming a narrative. A narrative without a prescribed meaning, because symbols can be interpreted in many different ways – mind the rose.

Besides this, his use of natural materials is important. Warwick makes use of the materials that have been available to the craftsmen of the Pacific for thousands of years: all kinds of shells, mother of pearl, pebbles, ebony, and hardstones like greenstone and jade. Sometimes they act as ready-mades, like shells, or bone. And also he began copying the traces that worms made in stone. He copied it in pearl shell, in corian, in wood, perhaps also in other materials. Recent brooches show again his interest in the 'given' qualities of natural materials, for instance the structural qualities of lava stone. 'Given', the title of his new book, has to do with this notion of using given materials and given traditional patterns and symbols in his work. It is as if Warwick Freeman wants to express that he is not unique, that his works are no ego-documents, that they have a more general meaning.

Now the work of Warwick Freeman is here, in Amsterdam, exposed in the surroundings of an anthropological collection, which is based partly on the collection of the 19th century Colonial Museum.

The architect who did the design of the exhibition, choose a trendy pink and green as the basic colours for the display. They seem contradictory to the colours that prevail in the work of Warwick Freeman. There is nothing natural in these chemical colours. Still, they were found in one of Warwick Freeman's jewels – which you can also see in this exhibition. Actually in a piece of jewellery, that resembles native adornment in a very direct way. It is a neckpiece, made in the mid eighties, which consists of discs of shell, combined with discs of pink and green acrylic. The shells that he used were carefully chosen, mother of pearl shell, paua shell and tortoise shell. The discs are linked with fibre, just like native people could do. This neckpiece has a atmosphere of spontaneous naturalness. It could almost been made by a native craftsman. Therefore Freeman needed an element that was alien. He choose acrylic, and the industrial made nature of the acrylic is activated by the vivid pink and green.

It is interesting to see, that the designer of the exhibition used these colours in more or less the same way. Here, in the context of this

historical building they will act as a sign, as they do in the neckpiece of Warwick Freeman.

At the end of this speech, the Françoise van den Bosch Foundation would like to thank the Tropen Museum for giving Warwick Freeman the opportunity to show his jewellery, and for taking care of it so well, and we would like to thank Warwick for giving Amsterdam the honour of having the premiere of his show.

I hope you will all enjoy it.

Liesbeth den Besten 01/06/2004