Art Niu Sila

Contemporary Pacific art in New Zealand

CAROLINE VERCOE

Pacific visual art in New Zealand represents a burgeoning creative practice. It is characterised by a rich diversity of stylistic and cultural expression, reflecting not only the seven groups who form the main migration cohorts, but also the contrasting experiences of Island-born and New Zealand-born artists.[1] While migration from the Islands began in earnest in the 1950s, it was not until the 1980s that Pacific artists began to have any significant profile on the gallery scene. The mid 1990s have seen the emergence of a number of New Zealand-born Pacific artists, many of whom graduated from art schools, exhibiting regularly in dealer galleries. For many, their knowledge of the Islands is often largely derived from stories told to them by parents and grandparents, as they may not have spent any considerable time in the Islands of their heritage. Issues of cultural identity, then, can become a complex negotiation between a number of different countries and cultural backgrounds.

Artists who have experienced migration from the Islands first-hand have also articulated a sense of ambivalence. Fatu Feu`u, for instance, has said, 'Part of our survival is doing our art. And if we don't, then we are lost. We are lost in another country, without an identity';[2] and John Pule states, 'I am nearly everybody's "other"'.[3] It was not until 1994 that the first exhibition to exclusively feature Pacific Islands artists living in New Zealand toured nationally. *Bottled Ocean*, curated by Jim Vivieaere, featured the work of over twenty artists, both established and emerging. From the outset his scepticism regarding what he saw as a token project shaped the curatorial strategy.[4] 'The only reason we are here,' declared Vivieaere, 'is that we are Polynesian – not on our merits but because we're the "other".'[5] It is not surprising, then, that a diversity of creative expression has emerged, reflecting the complexity and challenges many Pacific artists face living in New Zealand.

This chapter illustrates the ways that works by artists of Pacific descent living in New Zealand reflect a diversity and complexity of cultural experience. It focuses particularly on the ways in which artists reference aspects of indigenous knowledge systems such as navigation, adornment, performance, and exchange within gallery contexts; also discussed are how stereotypes relating to Pacific cultures and conventions of display are altered via strategies of reworking representation. There is no attempt to provide an all-encompassing survey of all art works within this area; this would be impossible.

Certain artists have not been discussed here, but feature elsewhere in this book. Debates and discussions surrounding Pacific art practice have highlighted the challenge that many gallery-based artists face in negotiating a way through expectations to reconcile 'the traditional' with 'the contemporary'.[6] This experience can be as stifling as it is rewarding. 'Tradition' can connote a fixed or static state in which change is not encouraged and repetition is typical. This unfortunate reading can work to create boundaries and restrictive stereotypes for Pacific artists. The notion of continuum, that which is ongoing, allows for the possibility of fusing so-called binaries of traditional and contemporary, art and craft, past and present, forming a mutually dependent dynamic. A continuum context eschews polarising categories by presenting more fluid and protean points of departure. Pacific art practice in New Zealand essentially reflects the experience of migration in its most elastic

Fatu Feu`u, *Tautai Matagofie*, 1990.

sense, and navigation emerges as a richly laden metaphor, encapsulating the experience of leaving one's homeland and venturing to new places, of exploration and discovery, of cross-cultural encounter and return.

Fatu Feu`u

Navigational symbols and metaphors abound in the work of Fatu Feu`u, who migrated to New Zealand from Samoa as a young man in the mid 1960s. Exhibiting regularly from the early 1980s, Feu`u's body of work draws heavily on motifs found in a number of Polynesian art forms such as tapa and tatau. While many have commented on his work's aesthetic appeal, Feu`u maintains strongly that his art conveys symbolic visual narratives that transcend purely decorative readings of his works. In 1990, he was commissioned to paint a large mural for the Aotea Centre in Auckland. He chose to paint a narrative employing Polynesian symbols and motifs to depict the journey of Pacific Islands people to Aotearoa. Nicholas Thomas has described the work as 'a national narrative for New Zealand's Polynesians'.[7] Feu`u's vision of Pacific migration is an affirmative one. *Tautai Matagofie* (The Wonderful Navigator) (1990) celebrates the Tautai, or master navigator. He employs stylised motifs of the frigate bird as well as migratory schools of tuna fish, used as navigational aids by early Pacific voyagers. Feu`u locates his metaphoric journey firmly within Auckland's landscape by referencing Rangitoto and the Manukau Heads, key landmarks in the region.[8] The central panel features a grid structure with repeated motifs recalling siapo patterns. A prolific painter, Feu`u has drawn on motifs seen in *Tautai Matagofie* in a number of works including *Conserve for Tomorrow* (1992) and *Tama Ali`i* (1992).

Not much has been published regarding Feu`u's sculptural practice. Working in this medium since 1985, he has produced large-scale public works, often based on stylised forms referencing the monolithic Moai of Rapanui. Other carved works recall the female deity figure Kawe of Nukuoro in the Caroline Islands. These works, around four feet tall, are carved in wood with a smooth finish and are characterised by hollowed-out centres symbolising the soul-destroying effects of colonisation and missionisation on women in the Pacific. While Feu`u is perhaps best known for his bright paintings featuring frangipani and siapo-inspired designs, from 1995 he has developed his painting practice in new directions. Works such as *Memory Navigator* (1995) and *Law of the Father* (1994) feature new motifs – handprints, scales, and paddles. The artist's palette has also darkened considerably and he has increasingly incorporated text into his work – songs of the Mau movement, biblical passages from the Book of Psalms, as well as his own writing. He describes his new motifs along with the use of text as embodying guidance and advice, a continuation of concerns relating to issues of service, respect, and duty, key aspects of the Fa`a Samoa.'

Filipe Tohi

Metaphors of navigation also feature in the work of Tongan artist Filipe Tohi, who migrated to New Zealand in 1978. Like Feu`u, his sculptural practice draws on Polynesian traditions of navigation. His work references vaka (canoe) forms and anchor motifs, drawing parallels between ancient and present-day migration. Tohi continues the ancient Tongan tradition of carving in stone. Works such as *Ha`amonga Mata A Maui* (1996) recall the monumental trilithons erected on the island of Tongatapu around AD 12, in tribute to the reigning Tu`i Tonga. *Vaka Journey from the Past* (1993), provides a conceptual account of ancient Polynesian journeying. The work consists of a monumental polished stone cut in half. The centre features an embedded line of smaller round stones. Its overall composition evokes the artist's belief that within every individual there exists an inner core, containing a continuum of cultural knowledge, protected from the changes and traumas of everyday living and the effects of migration:

> Stone is forever but, in time like everything else it changes. ... I work in stone because it keeps me thinking about the past. It makes me think about home, it connects me. The Tongans were great masons and their structures are probably some of the great wonders of the Pacific. The stone gives you a feeling of settlement, they give you foothold, like an anchor stone.[10]

Also central to Tohi's practice is the Polynesian lashing tradition, vital to many aspects of Pacific Islands life, prior to the introduction of nails into the Pacific. Elaborate architectural structures were secured with lashings of coconut sennit rope. Lashing was also crucial to the technology of sea-faring vessels: the tighter the binding of the sennit rope, the smoother the vessel would sail. *Otu Ua* features carved stone wound with coconut sennit rope to form designs based on lashing patterns. The artist has also employed anchor forms in a number of works, including *Fakakaukau* (1996) and

Filipe Tohi, *Vaka Journey from the Past*, 1993.

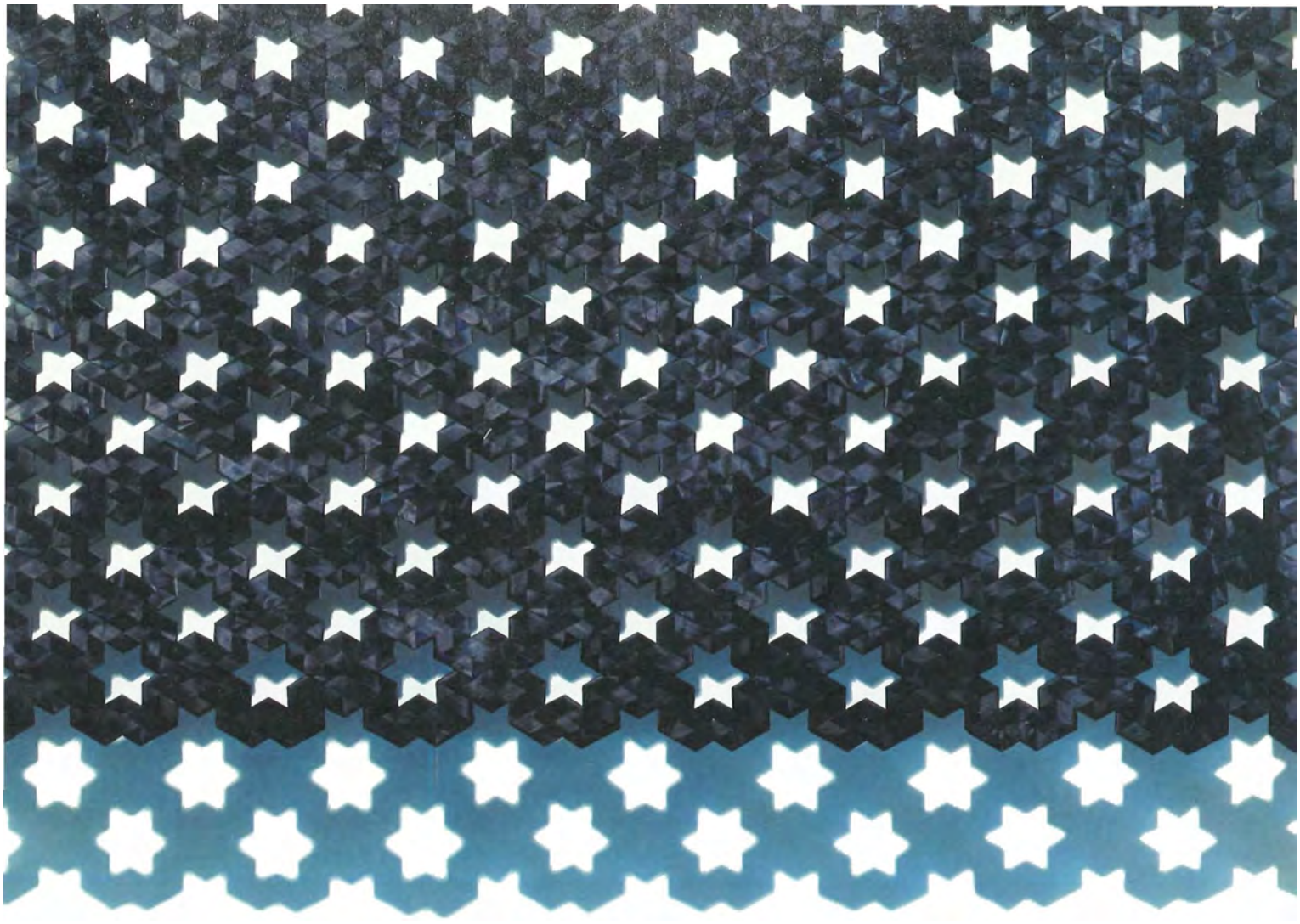
Taulani (1993). *Taula* (Anchor) (1997) takes the form of a stone anchor, which also features the profile of a face. It denotes solidity and strength, suggesting that wherever one may travel, one will remain anchored or connected to one's homeland.

Ani O'Neill

New Zealand-born Cook Islands artist Ani O'Neill also reworks functional Polynesian art forms, notably weaving and tīvaevae (quilt making), into elaborate installation works. She has become well known for her blending of craft and fine art conventions, which are often also infused with personal narratives. O'Neill has made works that reference and celebrate Pacific women's experience. *My Mu`umu`u Mamas* (1995), a site-specific work, featured three mu`umu`us or 'Mother Hubbard' dresses, introduced by missionaries with a moral mandate to cover Polynesian bodies at the turn of the century. The title alludes to the artist's childhood memories, going to church and looking up at the Pacific Islands women in their mu`umu`u dresses. Earlier works – *Sample an Oyster* (1991), which references the quilt-making oyster stitch, and *Restless Tīvaevae* (1991) – were also inspired by childhood memories, learning stitching and embroidery skills from her grandmother and family friends.

Kua Marino Te Tai (The Sea Is Calm) (1994) and *Star By Night* (1993) pay tribute to the skill of Polynesian seafarers and their relationship with the natural environment. Drawing on the weaving techniques used to make church hats worn throughout the Islands by women on Sundays, O'Neill used shiny florist's ribbon to plait two monumental sculptural forms that feature hundreds of star shapes, one in black and the other in white. Displayed in a back-lit space, the works cast starry shadows throughout the space. *Star By Night* commemorates the importance of star formations and their use as navigational aids. The star, a design feature used in a range of Polynesian art forms, also refers to the star compass, used by navigators to ascertain the distance travelled and the position of

Ani O'Neill, *My Mu`umu`u Mamas*, 1995.



Ani O'Neill, *Star By Night*, 1993.

their course. *Star By Night* says the artist, 'is about our ancestors' dark, awe-inspiring journey to Aotearoa. The star shadows are intended to involve viewers in the work as they work alongside it.'[11] *Kua Marino Te Tai* (The Sea Is Calm) repeats the composition of *Star By Night*, but it is rendered in white, suggestive of the glistening sea. This work also alludes to Polynesian journeying, notably the importance of sea currents and the contrasts of dark and light resulting from different cloud patterns. Unlike Feu`u's paintings, which often incorporate a range of symbolic motifs, the simplicity of O'Neill's works evokes a more contemplative reading.

O'Neill has also made a number of works that rework adornment aesthetics to blend conventions of art and craft. She has on a number of occasions incorporated market days, complete with stalls, music and performance into her exhibitions and created large-scale installations inspired by humble domestic objects, such as woven place-mats and church hats. *Cottage Industry* (1997) features approximately thirty clashing acrylic wool 'paintings' inspired by circular woven place-mats, usually found on dinner tables or in tourist shops around the Pacific. Hung around the white walls of the gallery space, the bright colours of the works creating a striking contrast with the austere gallery setting, and their concentric circles of colour have evoked a range of critical responses. Lisa Taouma describes the works as 'citing the urban street culture of Polynesia as much as the Pop Art tradition of Claes Oldenburg or Jasper Johns in their target-like compositions.'[12]

In 2001, O'Neill was invited to participate in the Auckland Art Gallery's inaugural Triennial *Bright Paradise*. Her work *Buddy System* brings together a range of interests and concerns dating back to the early 1990s. Determined to break down conventions of display that work to distance audiences from art works, she created an interactive art work based around crochet skills. It involved visitors to the Triennial crocheting flowers, which were then hung on a wall to form a colourful floral grid. The

artist created a cosy domestic environment, complete with couches, cushions, and radio. She presented instructions for would-be collaborators in the form of writing, diagrams, and videos, demonstrating various crochet techniques. 'Buddies' were present to help and encourage people to participate by crocheting their own woollen flower. On completion, address information was taken and the flower was incorporated into the installation. When the exhibition concluded, each was sent to a friend or relative, nominated by the maker, thus disseminating the work back into the community. 'The work,' says O'Neill, 'is about sharing knowledge; it is also about gift giving, sharing your skills with others and hoping they can see the importance in continuing these craft traditions.'[13]

Graham Fletcher

Graham Fletcher has been exhibiting since 1997. His work similarly incorporates complex subtexts that belie their aesthetic appeal. His paintings blend formal patterns with narratives relating to colonial encounter and representation in the Pacific. Fletcher's 'Mistint' (1998) and 'Stigma' series (1999) are created through a layering of paint on to a thick base colour, to create visual effects evoking the grid-like and decorative forms of tapa and tīvaevae. Fletcher has an underlying agenda, however; he describes his painterly practice in terms of camouflage:

> I lure or attract the viewer to my work through my use of colour, through the tactility of my painterly surfaces and through the attraction of my graphic imagery, all of which is designed to disguise or veil the larger issues lying just below the surface. As a strategy, camouflage enables me to be misleading, evasive and ambivalent while at the same time declaring my full awareness as a Samoan artist that my work is embedded within a cultural context.[14]

Graham Fletcher, 'Stigma' Series, 1999.

Fletcher's 'Quarantine' series (2000) features dense, seemingly random designs painted in black and white over tapa-covered canvases. Each work in the series – including *Conjunctivitis* and *Mycobacterium Tuberculosis* – is named after European viral diseases introduced into the Pacific. 'Upon entering the gallery space,' he says, 'the viewer was metaphorically exposed to contamination and found themselves in the position of Pacific peoples whose wellbeing was endangered through exposure to virulent European diseases.' The following year he produced *Bad Medicine* (2001), a series featuring brightly coloured paintings, again on tapa-covered canvases. These reference possible cures for the diseases, which (Fletcher maintains) were all preventable in the first place. Fletcher describes the works, which include *Ampicillin*, used to treat meningitis and gonorrhoea, and *Disulfiram*, used to treat chemical addictions, as 'diseased surfaces'.[15] They allude to ongoing health issues facing Pacific peoples, who remain marginalised economically and socially, and therefore are vulnerable to disease and infection.

Graham Fletcher, *Conjunctivitis*, 'Quarantine' Series, 2000.

Jim Vivieaere

Cook Islands artist Jim Vivieaere has produced a significant body of work that draws attention to the polemics not only of the category 'Pacific art', but also mainstream expectations of what it should look like. Vivieaere has been making art since the 1970s, primarily in the mediums of painting and collage. His compositions often sought to rework and reassemble conventions of pictorial representation, using ephemeral objects of personal significance to the artist. *Red Landscape* (1983), for instance, is a collage featuring pieces of tapa cloth and red material. Despite its title, no explicit landscape forms emerge. From the early 1990s, Vivieaere has developed his practice to encompass curatorial concerns. His work has become increasingly site-specific and installation-based. It is characterised by a conceptual layering that interrogates notions of display and representation. *Inventory of an Urban Polynesian* (1996), inspired by Christian Boltanski's *Inventory of a Man from Barcelona*, comprises three glass cabinets containing historical objects such as a Rarotongan hula skirt borrowed from the Auckland Museum juxtaposed with fashion items. Vivieaere enhanced his 'fake museum atmosphere'[16] with Italian lighting systems and labels which, rather than providing contextual information about the objects on display, were receipts from the boutiques that he had borrowed various objects from. This parodic reworking of the conventions of museum display resonates throughout Vivieaere's oeuvre. *Two Sky Rockets (One for Adornment)* (1994), a site-specific work installed at the National Museum in Wellington, featured two 40-gallon drums suspended in the Pacific Hall over a glass cabinet containing a sacred Hawaiian feathered cloak gifted to Cook in the late eighteenth century. The artist's intervention provided a stark contrast to the objects on display, evoking issues of inequity in relation to cultural encounter and exchange, and drawing attention to colonial and nuclear interests in the Pacific, which rarely feature in museum contexts.

Vivieaere's installation *Spell* (1999) plays on popular signifiers of a tropical Pacific. The artist lined the gallery floor with rows of potted beech trees. On one wall a large C in sea-blue was featured, and around the corner of the wall 'see' was spray-painted in graffiti style. Two of the windows of the space featured images of a baby, the artist's grandson along with Chinese calligraphic lettering spelling the word 'sun'; and against another wall were three shiny, framed photographs of an arm and hand at various angles – swaying palms. Vivieaere's mastery of juxtaposing word and image conjures up a wealth of meanings and illusions. His signifiers of the beach, sun, and swaying palms playfully question viewers' construction of the Pacific through stereotype, and his resistance and interrogation of conventions relating to 'Pacific art' encourage a critical dialogue that counters simplistic reading of Pacific creative expression.

Michel Tuffery

Michel Tuffery is an artist very interested in extending his practice outside of gallery spaces. A number of his works have incorporated local Pacific communities in elaborate multimedia performance art works. Exhibiting since 1988, Tuffery's work in painting and printmaking became well known for their graphic blending of Polynesian symbol and motif. Issues of identity have long been central to his art-making. An early exhibition entitled *Fa`a Palagi, Fa`a Samoa* (1988) reflected an exploration of his multicultural heritage. Of Samoan, Rarotongan, and Tahitian descent, Tuffery often references elements of Pacific Islands life including animal and marine forms and migration. For Tuffery, the motifs employed convey personal narratives; the turtle, lizard, and fish become symbols of journey, observation, and migration. These interests were reflected in an exhibition in 1997, where he released a series of works inspired by carved upeti design boards used to decorate Samoan siapo (tapa cloth).

In 1994 Tuffery began developing a series of bulls, culminating in *Pisupo Lua Afe (Corned Beef 2000)*' (1994), a hyper-scale sculptural bull made from corned beef (pisupo) tins. The work, he says, 'was about the impact of global trade on Pacific Island cultures. It was also about the way an imported commodity – corned beef – has become such a key part of Polynesian customs like feasting'.[17] *Pisupo Lua Afe* expresses the artist's environmental and social concerns regarding the increased dependency of Pacific Islanders on processed, tinned food and the impact of non-biodegradable materials on Island environs. Tuffery has expanded this project into a number of multi-media performance art works involving local Pacific Islands communities. *Povi Tau Vaga (The Challenge)* (1994), which took place in Wellington; *O le Vasa Loloto Ma le Laloa*, in Christchurch; and *Povi Lua Noumea* and *Faga Ofe E`a`* (1999), produced in collaboration with Wallis and Futuna artist Patrice Kaikilekofe in New Caledonia, all featured performance components. They recreated the drama and tension of Pacific performance and utilised mechanised animals (fish, turtles, crabs, and bulls made from tinned food

Jim Vivieaere, *Spell*, 1999.

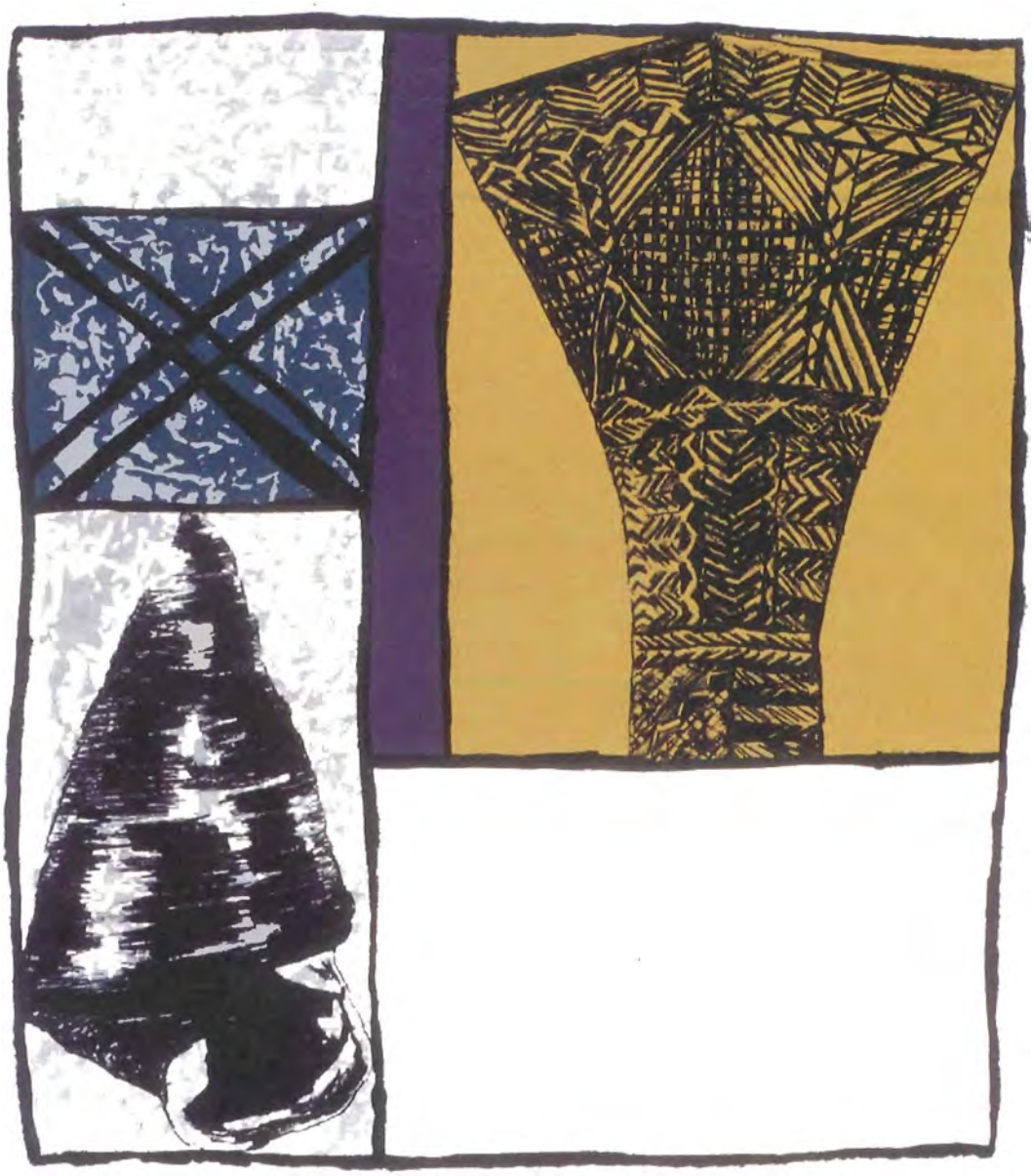
Queensland Art Gallery, *Povi Tau Vaga* performance artwork, apt 3, 1998. *Photograph: courtesy of the artist.*

cans), live performers, and explosive firecrackers (faga ofe). Faga ofe, now common in Samoa, were introduced by Chinese indentured labour at the turn of the century. Their incorporation into Tuffery's works was inspired by stories the artist had been told by relatives.[18] He describes these works in terms of a challenge:

> I'd like to think that we could actually have more opportunity to show how we've changed as people and evolved ... like urban Pacific Islanders. You know there's some of us who do live in cities but we've adapted in a different way and taken on different attitudes and then you've got the ones who were born in the Islands and they've got their own attitudes. ... Sometimes they actually clash. And this is what this whole performance piece is about, it's like the clashing of two cultures.[19]

Dagmar Dyck

Dagmar Dyck, who works in painting and printmaking mediums, draws on recognisable Polynesian imagery. Her graphic style juxtaposes objects such as headrests, ceremonial combs, and kava bowls with bands of colour and stark cross forms. In 1996 she created a series of prints uniformly entitled 'Plate' followed by a roman numeral. The composition recalls eighteenth-century early European illustrations of Pacific objects produced by artists such as Webber and Banks. Her 'Plate' series, however, is significantly uncluttered, in contrast to her eighteenth-century referents. The use of colour bands and cross forms allows each object its own presence and for the artist takes on personal significance. Dyck describes cross forms in her works as referencing Polynesian tapa-cloth designs as well as the German modernist painter Mondrian, alluding to her Tongan and German heritage. Rather than imaging her objects in purely decorative terms, she invests them with symbolism evoking notions of community, history, and ancestry.



Dagmar Dyck, 'Plate' Series, 1996.

John Pule

A number of artists exploring Pacific migrant experiences choose to contrast initial expectations with the reality of life in New Zealand. John Pule has described his practice as attempting to 'recreate the knowledge lost in migration'.[20] Pule, born in Niue, arrived in New Zealand at a young age, to grow up experiencing the challenges and difficulties facing many Pacific migrants. Much of his early work dating from the 1980s deals with political and social issues relating to the oppression of minority groups. His paintings dealt with nuclear testing in Micronesia and the controversial Springbok tour in New Zealand in 1981. From the early 1990s, Pule's subject matter became more personalised. Hiapo (Niuean tapa) designs, Lapita grid structures, and Polynesian mythological narratives also formed artistic points of departure:

John Pule, *Asepili Moe Tuagafale* (The Heart and Foundation of the House), 1993.

> Images on tapa are a language very much about documentation and communication. … [Tapa] is almost writing anyway, it is a pictorial language, where flatly outlined motifs are juxtaposed in a manner that could be interpreted as text. … My paintings have the same pictographic quality of tapa, I share the same relaxed grammar if you like, as well the conceptual flexibility.[21]

Characteristically Pule reworks and adapts Pacific motifs to create poetic narratives that often reference geographic locations in Niue of significance to him, such as *Akau Fekakai Ne Tupu I Pia* (The Tree at Pia) (1993). Other works – for example, *Momoko* (1994) and *Asepili Moe Tuagafale* (The Heart and Foundation of the House) (1993) – allude to the effects of colonisation, particularly missionisation in Niue. They comprise a personal cartography, a mapping of the artist's life and

experiences. He speaks of his artistic process in terms of journey and discovery, but his journeying is often internalised, his stories evidence of a personal exploration. Pule describes what he calls the architecture of tapa design:

> I had a collection of tapa from around the islands and I looked closely at them and noticed their 'architecture'. When you look down on to the tapa, the patterns look like a plan of a village, or a plan of tracks going down to the ocean. ... I stretched the canvas, bought some paint – burnt umber, like the colours used on tapa – then I became an architect. I started remembering the roads and pathways and houses in the village I come from, and the rooms of our house, and I put all that down, and did images, birds, a lot of personal symbols, and now and then a triangle.[22]

Pule has also combined writing with his visual practice.[23] 'The Death of a God' (2001), a suite of 18 drawings, tells the story of Limaua, a Niuean deity whose ritualised death was re-enacted in 1924 for the American anthropologist Edwin Loeb. Limaua was then gifted by Loeb to the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, to be eventually destroyed by museum's staff in 1937.[24] The drawings feature intricate sketches of plant life, figures in canoes, the anthropologist's camera equipment, ships, creatures, and churches, juxtaposed with passages of a narrative text describing the events leading to Limaua's demise. They evoke complex issues relating to memory and re-enactment, the breakdown of indigenous religious belief systems and the assimilation of Christianity.

Andy Leleisi`uao

New Zealand-born Samoan artist Andy Leleisi`uao's work also emerges as a telling and insightful contrast to the colour, festivities, and general brightness that characterises popular media representations of Pacific Island cultures. His paintings often capture experiences of hopelessness, despair, and anger in relation to the experience of Pacific blue-collar workers destined to toil in factories and other menial jobs. Rather than drawing on the designs and motifs of tapa cloth or tatau, he has chosen to develop his own artistic vernacular. In works such as *I am Present* (1995) and *Pressured* (1996) brown figures wear blue factory overalls as opposed to lavalava and lei, and nooses and gift-wrap bows adorn their heads. Leleisi`uao highlights what is often taboo within communities – domestic violence, suicide, and church corruption – and brings it to the fore in his work. 'Pressured' depicts a young Polynesian figure hanging from a woven pandanus noose, representing cultural traditions, and a family photograph, referring to the family not as a bastion of support and encouragement, but as a symbol of discipline, unrealistic expectations, and pressure.

In 2000, Leleisi`uao took up an artist's residency at the Macmillan Brown Centre of Pacific Studies. Here he produced his 'Polynesian Grotesques' lithograph series, based around actual and imaginary seraph figures. The works are a stylistic contrast with his more confrontational paintings. They are smaller in scale and contain no explicit polemics. They do, however, continue to underline his interests in bringing to the fore often disturbing and taboo issues. One work in the series, entitled *Puppeteer*, features a carnivalesque figure dangling the figures of a small girl and boy. The work deals with the tug-of-war plight of children, when adults' conflicts impact on them emotionally. It takes the point of view of the children, highlighting their powerlessness and vulnerability. Leleisi`uao has also expressed concerns relating to the pressures placed on Pacific young people, who are often encouraged to articulate their creative expression in motif forms that may not have relevance to their everyday experiences. 'We've missed out,' he says. 'One to two generations have missed out on visually documenting what's been going on. We're not expressing what we have to deal with. We're not expressing what's going on. We often lack the courage and self-determination to say what needs to be said.'[25]

Andy Leleisi`uao, *Pressured*, 1996.

Lily Laita

While many Pacific artists employ recognisably Pacific motifs and designs to convey their creative narratives, others choose to encode their works in a less explicit way. Lily Laita works are characterised by a painterly and gestural approach, using oil stick and paint. They often feature striking contrasts between light and dark, giving them a sense of depth and tactility. In the late 1980s, she

Lily Laita, *Pari`aka*, 1989.

worked predominantly with oil stick and acrylic on black builder's paper. The economy of her materials enabled her to work on a large scale. It also allowed her to develop her practice in innovative and experimental ways:

> I did a lot of out of it things. I painted on boards that were suspended from the ceiling. I banged and smashed them, and caught them on the way back. The process was quite physical. It was becoming more of a conversation.[26]

Many of Laita's works relate to personal experiences. *Pari`aka* (1989), a large work on builder's paper incorporating image and text, was inspired by a trip to Parihaka. The work acknowledges Māori pacifist struggles there led by Te Whiti and Tohu in the late nineteenth century, as well as the efforts of the pacifist Mau movement in Western Samoa led by Tamasese. Essentially, this work deals with gifting and reciprocation and it highlights a little-known connection between the two places. On a visit to Parihaka, the artist noticed Samoan woven mats and coconut bags on display. It emerged that Tamasese had been incarcerated at Mount Eden prison and, during this period, Māori from Parihaka, recognising him as a pacifist leader, journeyed there to support him. In gratitude, Tamasese's Samoan supporters gave the people of Parihaka gifts. In the centre of the work, a figure with outstretched arms made of white feathers, a symbol of Te Whiti, reaches towards the words 'Mau' and 'Te Whiti' and 'Tohu'. Above looms a mountain-like form alluding to Mount Taranaki, to the left is a figure representing Laita's great-grandfather who was a member of the Mau movement. While 'Pari`aka' acknowledges the importance of two Polynesian pacifist leaders, it also has personal significance for Laita who has both Samoan and Māori ancestry. The central figure represents the artist; her outstretched arms make reference not only to two Pacific anti-colonial pacifist movements, but also to connections between them.

From 1999, Laita began working in oils. She describes the move to oils as allowing her to develop formal concerns relating to depth and luminosity, which she achieves by thinly layering her paint. This contrasts her earlier use of acrylic on builder's paper, which emphasised qualities of surface and texture. As with her earlier works, she continues to juxtapose dark and light colours and has developed her exploration relating to language, knowledge, and representation. Image and text, incorporating Māori, Samoan, and English languages, continue to feature in her work, and it has become more figurative. While some paintings such as *Fa`a Malosi* (1997) and *Relevance of Knowledge* (1997) evoke contemplative and affirmative readings, others like *Pepelo Leaga* (False Evil) (2000) and *Va i Ta* (2000)

Lily Laita, *Va i Ta*, 2000.

invite viewers to explore notions of a third space or space between. Laita's works emerge as both abstract and evocative. They often do not allow explicit or didactic responses, nor can their underlying narratives be grasped at a glance. She describes her paintings as 'platforms of thought',[27] part of an intuitive practice that blends formal explorations, often involving a layering process, with an exploration of values crucial to Pacific cultures such as service, ceremony, and respect.

John Ioane

John Ioane's work, too, is highly evocative. His large-scale sculptural works in wood are distinguished by a delicateness of form, which he achieves by finely working the wood with power tools and then sanding them down and coating them in varnishes and patinas. Many have an organic feel, suggestive of seed or pod shapes and plant forms. Ioane finds symbolism in the natural forms that he evokes in his installations. *Penina: The Fourth Window* (1995), an installation in which music and other sounds were an essential part, took place in a darkened space and featured light projections onto white sand and carved rocks:

> It was a personal voyage through life. The river rocks represented my heritage, the constant element in myself. The images, the light I projected through the water onto the rocks were my perception of my world, of me. The sounds of conch shells, water, birds, whale-like noises, and the digital soundscape insulated the installation – it was very spiritual.[28]

Ioane's installation *Fale Sa* (1999) also constituted a multi-media environment. 'Fale Sa' means sacred place or church. The artist reworks this concept into a more personalised narrative alluding to an individual's spiritual and emotional journey. The Fale Sa or sacred place becomes a space within. The

installation comprised two discrete spaces – a narrow darkened corridor lined with hundreds of carved wooden cowrie shells. Light filtered through the space and an audio track featuring looped sounds of the ocean and percussive drumming played. At the end of the corridor was a doorway opening into a large room in which three monumental carved forms stood. The room was lit with white light enhanced by a strobing effect that filtered light shadows around the room, highlighting the bright/dark contrast. Piles of cut shell surrounded each of the sculptures, their forms echoing sea life, coral forms, and shellfish. References to the ocean and natural forms are implicit in these works. They reflect an intuitive and emotional response. While many Pacific artists describe their practice in terms of a journey, Ioane prefers the word 'magic' to define his and to locate his creative expression in a more imaginative and spiritual realm:

> At the end of the day 'ART' is beside the point for me, but it's the only thing I know to manifest my conversations with. For me Magic transcends human fiction: culture, language, religion, gender issues, science, etc. … even spirituality as we know it. Before I was born I was magic. The moment I was born I lost touch with magic, this I attribute to human conditioning … you know ego, culture … and all that! The performance part of my installation is part of the equation to the whole, trying to create a space for magic to occur.[29]

As a body of work, contemporary Pacific art practice reflects a complex and often ambivalent range of expression that illustrates a diversity of cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. While many artists employ recognisably Pacific visual forms, others evoke more implicit forms of expression that explore issues of place, belonging, and identity. The process and experience of migration can create a longing for an idealised homeland along with a desire to locate oneself in new homes. Diasporic expression

John Ioane, *Fale Sa* (detail), 1999.

often vacillates between representing homelands in terms of nostalgia and sentiment and as sites of distance and uncertainty. Artistic representation changes as the emerging voices of new generations attempt to reconcile their parents' and grandparents' stories with their urban lifestyles.

Notes

1 The seven groups that comprise the majority Pacific demographic in New Zealand are Samoa (by far outnumbering the other groups), Tonga, Cook Islands, Fiji, Tokelau, Niue, and Tuvalu.
2 Feu`u quoted in Sean Mallon and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira, *Speaking in Colour: Conversations with Artists of Pacific Islands Heritage*, Wellington: Te Papa Press, 1997, p. 25.
3 John Pule quoted in Mark Kirby, 'In Between' in *Probe 1* (2001): 28–33.
4 Nicholas Thomas describes a range of curatorial strategies employed by Vivieaere to subvert and re-work conventions of gallery display in 'From Exhibit to Exhibitionism: Recent Polynesian Presentations of "Otherness"', *Journal of the Contemporary Pacific*. 8 (1996): 319–48.
5 Vivieaere quoted in Thomas, 1996, pp. 344–5.
6 See Albert Wendt, 'Contemporary Artists in Oceania: Trying to Stay Alive in Paradise as an Artist' in *Art and Artists of Oceania*, Sydney Moko Mead and Bernie Kernot (eds), Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1983, pp. 198–209; Karen Stevenson, 'Negotiating "Tradition": The Art of Lily Laita and Ani O'Neill', *Art Asia Pacific* 18 (1998): 68–73; Caroline Vercoe, 'Navigating Pacific Art', *Art Asia Pacific 22* (1999): 34–5.
7 Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, p. 263.
8 Polynesian navigators commit to memory intricate and extensive systems of reference that enable them to conduct successful voyages. This knowledge is often combined with a reading of patterns and conditions in the natural environment – the flight of migratory birds, the movement of schools of fish, the position of star groups on the horizon, the contrast of light and darkness left by cloud formations on the water, and the direction of ocean currents.
9 In conversation with the author, August, 2001.
10 See Pacific Artspace website: www.pacific_artspace.com/artists/filipe/filipe.htm.
11 Ani O'Neill quoted in *Dream Collectors: One Hundred Years of Art in New Zealand*, Wellington: Te Papa Press, 1998, p. 82.
12 Lisa Taouma. *Ani O'Neill: Cottage Industry*. Wellington: City Gallery, 1997.
13 In conversation with the author, May, 2001.
14 Graham Fletcher. Unpublished artist's statement, July, 2001.
15 Ibid.
16 Vivieaere quoted in Mallon and Pereira, 1997, p. 139.
17 Tuffery quoted in Mallon and Pereira, 1997, p. 121.
18 See Caroline Vercoe, 'Objects to Be-hold: Exploring the Interface Between Performance, Craft and Art' in *Object*. 2 (1999): 66–9.
19 See Artok Pacific Arts Online: www.abc.net.au/arts/artok/visual/default.html
20 Pule quoted in Karen Stevenson, 'Culture and Identity: Contemporary Pacific Artists in New Zealand', *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History* 17 (1996): 65.
21 Pule quoted in Mark Kirby. 'In Between' in *Probe* 1 (2001): 29–30.
22 Pule quoted in Mallon and Pereira, 1997, pp. 91–2.
23 Pule has published a number of literary works including *The Bond of Time: An Epic Love Poem* (1985); *The Shark That Ate the Sun* (1992) and *Burn My Head to Heaven* (1998).
24 *The Death of a God* was originally presented as a poetry performance by Pule at a Pacific History Association conference in Hilo, Hawai`i, in 1995.
25 In conversation with the author, March, 2001.
26 Laita quoted in Mallon and Pereira, 1997, p. 52.
27 In conversation with the author, August, 2001.
28 Ioane quoted in Mallon and Pereira, 1997, p. 42.
29 E-mail to author, 27 August 2001.