TONGA ‘I ONOPOONI: TONGA CONTEMPORARY
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TONGA CONTEMPORARY
CURATED BY NINA KINAHOI TONGA

PATAKA ART + MUSEUM

TAUTAI
Tonga ki'i pilioTe kuo fonu monu'ia
Tonga only a dot yet full of accolade

Nina Kinahoi Tonga

In 1953 Tonga’s beloved monarch the late Queen Salote attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and captured the hearts of millions of Britons. Noted for her grandeur and her towering height, it was her gesture during the coronation parade when she refused to draw the hood of her carriage to avoid the rain that won the adoration of the crowds. Her respectful gesture to remain undaunted by the weather gained her world acclaim placing the island kingdom of Tonga on the world map. For many Tongan people this historic moment is referred to poetically as fo‘i pilioTe translated literally as a dot or grammatical period alluding to the geographic size of Tonga on the world map. In the tradition of heliaki (to say one thing but mean another) the metaphor fo‘i pilioTe may literally suggest an emphasis on the geographical scale yet its deeper meaning speaks to the dynamic and outgoing nature of the island kingdom that far exceeds its physical size. Such a view of Tonga as reaching and existing beyond its physical borders is one of the overarching themes that bind the works in this exhibition. Untying the notion of Tonga from its geographical moorings acknowledges the ways in which Tonga exists for many as a kind of here, there and elsewhere. Since the late 1960s Tongans have emigrated to urban centres in Australia, the United States and New Zealand, creating large diasporic communities. Aotearoa, New Zealand is home to over 50,000 Tongans for whom 56 percent...
are New Zealand-born, a reality reflected amongst some of the artists in this exhibition who are second and third generation New Zealand-born Tongans. For Tongans living in New Zealand the links to Tonga are kept in many practical ways, some returning regularly to visit relatives whilst others send remittances and material goods to their families. Sustaining connections to Tonga may also include speaking the Tongan language within the home and adherence to Tongan cultural practices and institutions as part of their lives in Aotearoa, New Zealand. In addition to these cultural ties new connections to Tonga have been forged through sport, diasporic media and the ever pervasive nature of online networks. This exhibition embraces these myriad connections to Tonga as a real and imagined place.

Visually the works in this exhibition draw heavily from Tongan forms yet equally from contemporary New Zealand experience. The persistence of Tongan traditions in New Zealand is embodied in several works including the ngatu pepa by the Wellington-based collective 'Ilo Me’a Fo’ou and the ngatu tā’uli by Christchurch-based artist Kulimoe’anga Stone maka. Another artist working within and beyond tradition is senior artist Sopolemalama Filipe tohi whose collection of works unravels the ancient art of lalava (sennit lashing). For several artists in the exhibition Tongan traditions present fruitful points of departure. The installation by printmaker and painter Dagmar Dyck draws on the traditions of koloa (tangible and intangible wealth) and the structure of kiekie (woven waist garments) which she imbues with motifs inspired by her German and Tongan ancestry. Similarly painter Ahotai’iloa Toetu’u draws on kupesi (ngatu designs) as powerful symbols of reconnection and remembering. Through the use of kupesi his works create visual hofoho (genealogy) that maps intimate familial and geographical connections in Tonga. For painter Julian Hooper pattern and motif have enabled the imaginative reconstruction of genealogical figures in his regal portraits of Hungarian and Tongan aristocracy. Whilst several artists look to Tonga for source and inspiration, many artists in the exhibition are engaged in creating place-responsive works that conjure powerful images of New Zealand as a Pacific place. For these artists several common themes emerge, in particular the realities of migration and the ambivalent notions of home and belonging. The influence of the urban environment is powerfully captured in the cityscape of Glen Wolfgramm, whose dynamic and abstract paintings are influenced heavily by his immediate environment. Another focal point is the work of performance artist John Vea in his performance work staged at Piha beach. Driven by the need to record their own realities is the work of photographers Tertiary Rokasamantangi Klavenes and Emily Mafie’s who document the lives of the people around them. Klavenes’ intimate snapshots document the happenings around the family home, capturing the rituals that create the sense of home. By contrast the photographs of Emily Mafie’s offer insight into a world often shrouded from public view in her portraits of gang life.

Beyond the vicarious connections to Tonga, the exhibition also follows the notion of the return journey to the homeland with works that offer glimpses of the Tongan landscape. The sequenced moving image works of Lucy Auakafolau explore the ocean as an extension of land that acts as a connective pathway to the past and places. Countering this imagery is the highly charged footage in the installation of Vea Mafie’s that documents the events and the first hand narratives of the 2006 Nuku’alofa riots. Employing the concept of the kava circle as a forum for dialogue, these works invite further discussion of the changing socio-economic and political landscape of post-riot Tonga. Translating these experiential experiences into lasting notions of place are the suite of photographs by Ane Tonga which document nifo koula or gold teeth, which are
acquired in Tonga as symbols of beauty and signatures of place. Collectively the works in this exhibition embody the experiences of Tongan people living in New Zealand whose connections (and disconnections) from afar continually enrich notions of Tonga. While it is easy to link the artists in this exhibition by their Tongan ancestry, a more powerful framing is to look at the diversity of the works that propose new notions of place and belonging. By adopting the outward-looking orientation of the metaphor fo’i pilote, this exhibition aims to highlight works that position Tonga within an ever-increasing, transnational global network. Each of the thirteen artists in this exhibition have made unique contributions to contemporary New Zealand art and through their connections to Tonga give emphasis to the phrase that entitles this essay, Tonga kiri pilote kuo ranu mono’a, Tonga only a dot yet full of accolade.

Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi
Dagmar Dyck
Glen Wolfram
Julian Hooper
Kulimoe’anga Stone Makara
‘Ilo me’a fo’ou
Ane Tonga
Ahotae’Iloa Toetu’u
John Vea
Lucy Aukafolau
Emily Mafile’o
Vea Mafile’o
Terry Koloamatangi Klavenes
Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi

Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi is the most senior Tongan artist in New Zealand. For over 30 years he has created works that have drawn on the depth and complexity of Tongan art forms. Born in Ngele’a Nuku’alofa, Tohi migrated to Auckland in 1978 and later settled in New Plymouth in 1980, a city that has been shaped by many of his sculptural works. Tohi works primarily in sculpture and has exhibited his work extensively including a number of international exhibitions in Europe, Japan and the United States of America. Tohi has also completed several commissions for which he has received a number of accolades including the gifting of the honorific Samoan title Sopolemalama (The bringer of light) from the Samoan head of State, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese.

Although highly revered for his wood and stone sculptures, it has been his pioneering research of the ancient Pacific art of lalava (coconut sennit lashing) that has defined his contemporary art practice. 1 Tohi’s research, which he terms lalavaology and lalavometry, unravels the complex patterns of lalava to reveal a hidden visual language based on the many line-space intersections of kafa. 2 For the last 15 years Tohi has created an extensive body of contemporary sculptures in stone, wood, string and aluminium that reveal new patterns and meanings from within the layers of kafa. A major highlight of Tonga ‘i Onopooni: Tonga Contemporary is the presentation of three works from Tohi including a selection of exquisite drawings, the towering aluminium sculpture Matanima (2008) and a collection of Haukulasi which are three-dimensional woven works in string and kafa. For Tohi the patterns of lalava are vessels of cultural knowledge and history that connect the past, present and future.

Dagmar Dyck

Dagmar Dyck is an Auckland-based artist and teacher and the first woman of Tongan descent to graduate from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland in 1995. Dyck works primarily in painting and printmaking and has created a large body of work that delves beneath the decorative surfaces of Tongan koloa (tangible and intangible heritage of textile and material wealth) to reveal her own unique hybrid iconography. Since 1983 she has exhibited her work extensively in New Zealand and internationally including Australia, China, Germany, New Caledonia, Norway, Samoa, Tonga and the United States of America.

Throughout her practice Dyck has constantly drawn on symbols and patterns from Tongan textiles including ngatu (decorated bark cloth) and kie (woven mats) to explore personal narratives and experiences. Which side are you on? is a large-scale installation influenced by her recent research of Tongan artefacts held in Vienna, Austria. The installation is comprised of large and small discs inspired by kiekie, ornamental waist garments worn by Tongan women as formal dress. Each disc is imbued with patterns that evoke collective memories of her German-Tongan ancestry through the Wolfgramm family and more broadly the history of Germans in Tonga. In total there are eight main discs, a reference to the eight Wolfgramm brothers and cousins that settled in Vava’u. Reference to the thriving coconut oil trade that inspired her German ancestors to travel to Tonga and settle in Vava’u is symbolised by her imagery of copra and the brand of her great-grandfather’s family business, Wolfgramm Bros. Boat Builders. Other imagery includes links to her family roots in Pyritz Germany symbolised by the Pyritz coat of arms and the detail of a kiekie housed in the Vienna Ethnology Museum.
GLEN WOLFGRAMM

Glen Wolfgramm is an Auckland-based artist of Tongan and Irish descent. A self-taught painter, he has exhibited his work since 1998 in nine solo exhibitions and a raft of group exhibitions including the Biennale d’Art Contemporain in Noumea in 2000. His energetic paintings combine imagery of urban cityscapes overlaid with glimpses of patterns that evoke those found on traditional Pacific art forms such as weaving, tapa cloth or tattoo.

For Wolfgramm his works are immersed in his immediate environment evident in his large scale painting Islander (2013). Pared back to two colours, red and black, the composition is filled with movement in the layering of horizontal and vertical lines, intersecting diagonals, slashes and drips recalling the dynamic action paintings of American Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s or perhaps neo noir comics. Peering through the architectural layers are distinguishing features of the Auckland city skyline; high rise buildings and the iconic Sky tower as well as planes of Polynesian motif. In the work Hood X (2012) Wolfgramm applies the same painterly style to a readymade car bonnet salvaged from a local car wrecker. Using tones of black and white, the fractured horizontal and vertical lines create a sense of depth as if to mark out new spaces beyond the painting. Together the works in the exhibition offer endless possibilities yet many of the visual cues lead to a personal exploration of cultural identity and belonging.

Hood X, 2012
Acrylic and graphite on prepared car bonnet
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND OREXART

JULIAN HOOPER

Julian Hooper is of English, Hungarian and Tongan heritage and lives and works in Auckland. He is a graduate of Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland and RMIT University in Melbourne. Hooper has exhibited extensively in New Zealand and Australia since 1990 and has worked in major collections including Queensland Art Gallery, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, the University of Auckland and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Hooper’s pivotal 2007 series Liliu encapsulated his imaginative weaving of imagery through a series of figurative watercolour paintings that visually re-imagined his family history within the wider frame of colonialism in the Pacific. Drawing heavily from his in-depth research of Austro-Hungarian and Pacific history, Liliu offers a revisionist narrative of his ancestral history through multiple cultural references: Hungarian, Tongan, Fijian and Cook Island. Works for Tonga i Onepooni: Tonga Contemporary are taken from a body of work that departs from the narrative tradition of Liliu. The works Ofa’anga (2008), Queen (2008) and Tevolo (2011) are set in antique frames each with suggestive titles in Tongan and English that allude to ancestral figures that exist in whimsical and fantastical settings. Ofa’anga and Queen are constructed dreamlike portraits of regal women created through a mixture of abstract forms and pattern. The Tongan title Ofa’anga means beloved, evoking a possible entry point for a narrative of this unnamed woman. In contrast, the striking portrait Tevolo, a transliteration of the word devil, presents the image of Vlad the Impaler, the 15th century Count who inspired the novel Dracula, and who Hooper uses as a stand-in for his Transylvanian ancestor Count Gideon Vecsey.

Queen, 2008
Acrylic on board
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
Kulimoe’anga Stone Maka was born in Patangata, Tonga and immigrated to New Zealand in 1997. From 2005 Maka has lived in Christchurch and has regularly exhibited his work in solo and group exhibitions in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. Maka’s practice is deeply rooted in the traditions of Tongan art, in particular the art of ngatu (decorated barkcloth). A core part of his practice has been the incorporation of traditional techniques and methods of making. Recently Maka has experimented with faka’ahu a technique of smoking used in the decoration of ta’ovala faka’ahu (smoked mats).1 A highlight of Tonga ‘i Onopooni: Tonga Contemporary is the inclusion of one of Maka’s large-scale ngatu tā’uli (2010). Ngatu tā’uli (black tapa cloth) is considered the highest ranking bark cloth in Tonga and is traditionally made for Tongan royalty. Maka describes the black fields of ngatu tā’uli as heliaki (veiled meanings) alluding to the intangible meanings embedded within the cloth itself.2 In 2007 Maka travelled to Tonga where he conducted research into the labour intensive techniques and processes of making ngatu tā’uli which contributes to its chiefly status.3 In addition to painting on ngatu made by his mother and sisters, he has drawn on traditional techniques to create his own pigments from clay and other natural materials.4

Ngatu Tā’uli, 2010
Traditional ngatu tā’uli (blackened tapa cloth), natural dyes
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Ngatu Tā’uli, 2010
Traditional ngatu tā’uli (blackened tapa cloth), natural dyes
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
‘ILO ME’A FO‘OU

‘Ilo Me’a Fo‘ou were a Wellington-based kautaha koka‘anga (women’s barkcloth-making collective). There were 18 women in the collective, who were a range of ages, from the Wellington area except for one member who commuted from Auckland. The collective was established in 1995 in response to the growing need for women in Lower Hutt to meet cultural obligations in the gifting and exchange of ngatu at all life celebration events. Due to the inability to obtain the plant-based materials in New Zealand, the collective began to experiment with synthetic materials such as Vilene to create a new type of cloth referred to as ngatu pepa (ngatu made with paper). The large scale ngatu pepa (2007) uses commercial pigments such as red brick paint and ironmonger’s paint to replicate the colour palette of ngatu. Despite the synthetic materials, the application of patterns and motif adhered to the traditional methods of rubbing and highlighting using raised kupesi (design board tablets). For women in this group the local production of ngatu pepa was immensely practical and allowed for the continued production of ngatu within their new urban setting. Although now defunct, group member Sokopeti Sina commented in retrospect that for many women the production of ngatu ‘connected them back to their home in Tonga’.

Ngatu Pepa, 2007
Vilene, red brick paint, black ironmonger’s paint
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Ane Tonga

Ane Tonga is an Auckland-based artist and curator. She is a graduate of Elam School of Fine Arts and has recently completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Museums and Cultural Heritage at the University of Auckland. In 2012 she was the recipient of the Blumhardt Curatorial Internship at the Dowse Art Museum where she curated the exhibition Everyone Talks to Everyone (2013) and later was the guest curator for Hit Me With Your Best Shot (The Remix) at City Gallery Wellington (2013).

Much of Tonga’s artistic practice examines intersubjective and collective experiences of place and cultural value. Seta (2012), Hoha’a (2013), and Nifo Loi (2013) are images taken from her ongoing photographic series Grills which examines nifo koula, a popular form of Tongan body adornment. Nifo Koula is a transliteration of the term ‘gold teeth’ a form of dental prosthesis where gold covers are placed over existing teeth. Originally gold was used for restorative dentistry as its malleability and durability made it an ideal material. Prior to the introduction of mercury amalgam and silver, crowns and inlays were often fashioned from gold. The lustrous quality of gold also heightened its aesthetic quality and it is often used for cosmetic dentistry. It is the latter use of gold prostheses that has been adopted as a form of traditional body adornment in Tonga. For many recipients gold is sourced from heirlooms such as wedding rings that infuse gold teeth with layers of meaning and memory. The process of recycling is a metaphorical process where values, memories and genealogies are refashioned into new forms of body adornment.

Ahota’E’iloa Toetu’u

Ahota’E’iloa Toetu’u is a Tongan-born artist and teacher who lives and works in Auckland. He currently holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the University of Auckland and is the senior art teacher at Sir Edmund Hillary Collegiate. Toetu’u works in the medium of painting and has exhibited his works in several solo and group exhibitions in Auckland and two group exhibitions held in Tonga. Toetu’u is heavily inspired by ngatu as a medium that records the space and time of particular events and histories. Many of his recent works pair kupesi (ngatu designs) with contemporary icons to create new conversations between the past and present.

Migrating North (2008) demonstrates Toetu’u’s extension of kupesi as signatures of place, continuing the tradition of Tongan women in the late 19th century who began to include naturalistic imagery within their kupesi repertoire. Imagery such as bats and matanga (historic places) emerged as symbols that expressed chiefly and village identity. In the same fashion Toetu’u draws on the provenance of the kupesi Tokelau Feletoa to create a visual hohoko (genealogy) that maps his familial and geographical connections to his grandfather’s village of Falevai in Vava’u. Alongside this motif is the kupesi of two aristocratic eagles that allude to the relationship of parent and child. Both kupesi become powerful symbols of reconnection and remembering.
John Vea is an Auckland-based artist working with sculpture, video and performance. Vea completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts at Auckland University of Technology in 2009, where he is now enrolled in a Postgraduate Diploma of Art and Design. Vea has exhibited and presented performances in a number of exhibitions including his recent solo exhibition Homage to Hoi Polloi (2013) at Papakura Art Gallery.

Many of Vea’s works explore the tropes of migration and gentrification within the Australasian landscape by enacting everyday narratives collected from his interactions with people of his local community and further abroad. Vea likens his process of collecting narratives to that of a journalist, allowing him to develop personal connections and an emic sensibility that informs his work. In the video installation Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa, and Tonga Vea stages a performance where he enacts the building of a cinderblock wall on the water’s edge of West Auckland’s Piha Beach. As the waves crash against him, they topple several cinderblocks at a time forcing Vea to continually rebuild his wall. The duration of the performance emphasises his persistence alluding to the struggles and the ongoing rebuilding efforts in Tonga and Samoa following the September 2009 Tsunami.

Lucy Aukafolau is an emerging artist of Tongan and European descent. She recently completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) at Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. Based in Auckland, she has exhibited her work as part of the annual Tautai Tertiary Exhibition at St Paul Street Gallery. Her practice is concerned with the theory of psychogeography and its relationship to the physical actions of navigation, travel and negotiation of space that reveal new territories and experiences.

Invisible Territories (2013) is a three channel sequenced video installation comprised of footage taken during Aukafolau’s first trip to Tonga with her father and uncle to their homeland in ‘O’ua Ha’apai. Adopting the role of an observer, her participation in the journey is guided not by personal way-finding intentions but rather attempts to situate and orient her experience of place within her father and uncle’s collective memory of ‘O’ua. Throughout the installation there are glimpses of boat journeys at different times of the day capturing the activity at sea, the offload of goods and the boarding and disembarking of ferry passengers. The flurry of activity at sea brings to life the importance of the ocean as a means of travel and communication, evoking the prophetic visions of the late ‘Epeli Hauofa and his notion of a ‘Sea of Islands’ where Pacific islands are connected rather than separated by the sea.
Emily Mafile'o is an Auckland-based photographer of European, Scottish and Tongan heritage. Mafile'o has exhibited her photography in a number of exhibitions and projects including the second Auckland Triennial Public/Private-Tuamatanui/Tumataiti (2004). Her photography is largely influenced by her immediate surroundings and the familial ties that bind her to suburban Auckland and her ancestral homeland of Tonga.

Mafile'o has dedicated much of her photographic practice to the documentation of Tongan people living in Aotearoa. Many of her photographs capture aspects of daily life and are driven by her interest in contemporary Tongan identity and the blurring lines of what it means to be Tongan. These thematic concerns are evident in her suite of three photographs Killer (2013), Knife (2013) and White Door (2013). Adopting an intimate verité style, her photographs delve into the often shrouded world of gang life. The subject of her photographs is a former Tongan acquaintance who has long been involved in gangs, pushing the boundaries of contemporary Tongan experience. Moving past the deviancy that often renders gang members as invisible, Mafile'o attempts to capture the liberal freedom of her subject in layered portraits that detail gang insignia, moments of contemplation and suggestions of violence.

Vea Mafile'o is of Tongan, English and Scottish descent and currently works in film and television. She completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts and a Graduate Diploma of Fine Arts from the University of Auckland and has exhibited her work since 1998. Mafile'o works primarily in moving image and installation and has participated in a number of group exhibitions including Date Line: Contemporary Art of the Pacific at Govett Brewster Art Gallery in 2008. A major influence in her work has been her close ties to her Tongan family and her return visits to Tonga where she captures the majority of her raw footage. Who Will Douse the Kingdom? (2007) is part of an installation that comprises Digital Kava Circles, a group of monitors that adopt the circular format of kava circles, which are traditional cultural domains for dialogue. As a Tongan woman Mafile'o's creation of a digital kava circle advocates for inclusive and open dialogue of current events in Tonga as traditionally women and young men are excluded from the traditional forum of kava circles. Who Will Douse the Kingdom documents the events and first-hand narratives of the Nuku’alofa riots in November 2006. Made up of previously confiscated footage, the powerful imagery captures the transitions of the riot, from the protestors gathering peacefully to the violence, looting and fires that damaged over half the local business district. A series of interviews form the narrative of her installation, each interviewee offering insights into the nature of life and politics in Tonga.
TERRY KOLAOAMATANGI
KLAVENES

Terry Koloamatangi Klavenes is a multimedia artist and photographer of Tongan and Norwegian descent. Although he was born in Tonga, he was raised in South Auckland where he currently resides. Klavenes is well known for his public art works including murals and sculptural works around Manukau, Auckland. He completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the Manukau Institute of Technology and following his acclaimed solo exhibition at Fresh Gallery Otara in 2007, Hybrids and Hafekaisi, he won the Martin Hayes Contemporary Pacific Art Award. His photographic series Blood’s Thicker than Mud (2010) was included in Urban Campaing, an exhibition curated by Reuben Friend, for the Deane Gallery, City Gallery Wellington in 2010. In the series Blood’s Thicker than Mud (2010) Klavenes compiles intimate snapshots in and around his family home. Each of the photographs explores the notion of home as a sense of belonging for the deane gallery, city gallery Wellington in 2010.

Kulimoe’anga Stone Maka

Glen Wbildmanns
1 Artist Biography (Veuzeak, Auckland).
2 Leonando Benard, Ilo Me’a Fo’ou: Glen Wbildmanns Come Home Again (Auckland) Art New Zealand, Number 68, Winter 2011, 44.

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Julian Hooper
## List of Works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Courtesy of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sopolemalamu Filipe Tohi</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Aluminium</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haukulasi</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cardboard, kafa (sennit), kulasi (wool)</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagmar Dyck</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Acrylic and screen print on wood</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen Wolfgramm</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Acrylic and graphite on prepared car bonnet</td>
<td>the artist and orexart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islander</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Indian ink and acrylic on unstretched canvas</td>
<td>the artist and orexart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keleka</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Acrylic on board</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ofa’anga</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Acrylic on board</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Acrylic on board</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibusele</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Mixed media</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood’s Thicker than Mud</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Series of 35mm &amp; 120mm photographs</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngatu Tā’uli</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Traditional ngatu tā’uli (blackened tapa cloth), natural dyes</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napa Tū'au</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Traditional napa tū'au (blackened tapa cloth), natural dyes</td>
<td>the artist</td>
</tr>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>the artist</td>
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</tbody>
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Lucy Akauafolau
1. Lucy Akauafolau. Artist biography.

Emily Mulvovic
1. Personal communication with the artist.

Vea Mafile’o
1. Vea Mafile’o. Artist biography.
Ahota’i/Ena Teoto’u
Migrating North, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of Auckland Council

Ane Tonga
Seta, 2012
Hoko’a, 2013
Kifo’i, 2013
Photographic prints
Courtesy of the Artist

Emily Mafile’o
Killer, 2013
Knife, 2013
White Door, 2013
Photographic prints
Courtesy of the Artist

Vea Mafile’o
Who Will Douse the Kingdom?, 2007
Video installation documenting the 2006 Riots in Nuku’alofa
Courtesy of the Artist

Lucy Aukafolau
Invisible Territories, 2013
Video installation
Courtesy of the Artist

John Vea
Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga, 2013
Video projection on cinderblocks
Courtesy of the Artist

‘Ilo Me’a Fe’enu
Ngatu Pepa, 2007
Vinyl, red brick paint, black ironmonger’s paint
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongariro

‘Ilo Me’a Fo’ou
Ngatu Pepa, 2007
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