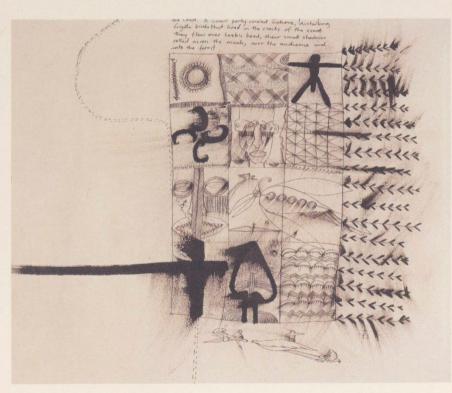


People get ready



John Pule *Death of a God* (detail) oil stick and india ink on paper 768 x 568mm

John Pule was born in the village of Liku, Niue in 1962 and emigrated to Auckland in 1964. Self-taught as an artist, he has become renowned as a painter, printmaker, drawer, novelist, and poet.

The three large-scale works here, date from the last five years, and all indicate Pule's key themes: to celebrate how texts and symbols join together in order to create a new language of meanings, to search for identity within a variety of Pacific places and over many different moments in time, to explore a personal geography as being defined by intense human relationships, and to recognise our world's future as always being lived with plants and other animals. By using such personal narratives, Pule visually connects with the huge significance that words have always had for the people of the Pacific. His pictographs are like a potent sequence of film stills which can project the shapes of memory, dreams and intuition.

The hiapo (barkcloth) paintings were made by unknown Niuean women at end of the nineteenth century. They each affirm the heritage of Niuean art and the support that such art has given to John Pule's own creative journey.

Ron Brownson
Curator

Pulenoa: without consent

John Pule's paintings - among the most exciting expressions of contemporary Polynesian art and culture - owe much to the hiapo, the painted barkcloths made on Niue during the nineteenth century. Yet his art involves something much more than a reinvention of hiapo painting. In any case, hiapo themselves are clearly heterogeneous: the hiapo from Te Papa (catalogue 19869) features horizontal rows of diamond-like shapes resembling the carving of Niue canoe hulls; the hiapo from the Auckland Museum (catalogue Fe008655) is structured by grids and botanical images. What they share is optical energy: the Te Papa example, in particular, seems to pulse, each diamond like a breathing organ, the pattern of breathing expanding toward the lower left, the pattern about to explode into another kind of space.

Yet this is no exercise in op-art, a hundred years ahead of its time. Hiapo are not just formal experiments, but are also inscribed with the names of people and places, and their makers' use of Christian script marks a particular moment in Niuean and Oceanic history.

Pule's paintings, like the hiapo, are energetic but visually various. Some are highly structured, arranged in and around grids and bars; others are open and pictorial. Much of the excitement of these paintings derives from basic ambiguities in the kind of space they depict which is sometimes a zone of pattern, sometimes a mythic imaginary, sometimes a map bearing the names of places and their owners. The various fields of *The Pulenoa Triptych* (1995) suggest several of these kinds of spaces; and it looks, in this case, as though the organic energy of the painting did simply billow out, producing three canvases rather than one.

Pulenoa is in part a tribute to hiapo. But this work emerges from a very different space and time, one in which Niueans are no longer dominated by a paternalistic mission and colonial regime.

Pacific art has become increasingly popular. John Pule's paintings both nurture this growing interest and challenge it. They are not merely decorative experiments of the kind that help New Zealand consumers understand themselves as people who live within the Pacific, instead of Europeans too far from Europe. It is no doubt a good thing,

if the Pakeha inhabitants of Aotearoa relocate themselves in this way, but history does not allow us to simply switch geographic relations in this way. The Pacific – for all its own power and energy – remains somewhere that is 'south of the west', and New Zealand is on the Pacific's edge rather than in its heart, it is somewhere that remains neither 'here' nor 'there'.

Pulenoa speaks directly to this situation — which is to speak about the colonial acts of the past and present that have shaped this part of the world. Its title means 'without consent' and refers here to intrusion. It is a protest not against a particular invasion but one that summons up many — from early settlement to nuclear testing and beyond. But this is not a vision without hope: one group of figures point towards a house of sanctuary, showing, as the artist says 'the distance we must travel'. Mobile itself, it is a work that allows no-one to stand still.

Nicholas Thomas

Nicholas Thomas is Professor of Anthropology at Goldsmiths College, London. His recent books include *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* [Thames and Hudson, 1999].



The Death of a God: a performance over time and space

In our meetings, John Pule liked to fabricate stories to lead (and mislead) me into his architecture of paper, ink and colour which forms *The Death of a God* suite of drawings. He refers to them as an 'architecture' because in it he has used the motif of the tala¹ or tale to unravel stories using words and pictures to reanimate recorded and oral histories. His reconfigurations have the words and pictures competing for the space of imagination and interpretation.

Each drawing suggests a cinematic reality where the space of the script, and the images they convey, are collapsed together on the same surface as a kind of architecture where the plans of the building, and the actual object, exists together in the same space. Pule likes to play with these double-edged meanings and ideas, running them parallel to each other in order to create tension and suspense which overloads and overwhelms the senses. Thus the images have a sort of busyness about them, as if something has been let loose. The words and sentences which tell the story of the god Limaua appear to be literally 'drawn out' or pulled apart, by lines that fly away and extract pictorial images from them. These small pictorial motifs become unruly as they jump to and fro tugging at the ordered spaces of sentences and paragraphs.



The story informs us that the god Limaua has three names, which all imply the idea of abundance or overwhelming. Limaua means two hands or double-nature; his nicknames are Gutupuhi (spouting mouth) and Fulukovi (disorderly person). This Janus-like being is the central character in the story that spans two centuries and is set out in two sections. The first section is set in 1891 (drawing 1) and reveals that he is the deity for fishers, a merman who can bring forth storms and 'slap canoes about' unless he is presented with gifts of food. The god also appears as an effigy (drawings 2-7) to be sacrificed as an oracle to resolve and to decide if the village of Tuapa or Mutalau will keep Nemaia, the Christian teacher. This scene takes place in the hurly-burly environment of the maale or ceremonial grounds where the villagers in their finery and their colonial guests prepare to witness the sacrifice of Limaua who is to be speared by a warrior from Mutalau. The god having being impaled through the heart (drawing 6) lies dead on the ground as birds, plants and fishes escape from his body, and are let loose to roam the following drawings. The sacrifice has parallels to the crucifixion and lamentation of Christ (drawing 7) and is a symbolic reference of the triumph of Christianity over ancient beliefs of the Niueans.



The second section, and most dramatic part of the story (drawings 8-18), focuses on the visit of the anthropologist Edwin Loeb and the last re-enactment of the sacrifice of Limaua in 1924. Loeb, carrying his camera, notebook and callipers, is surrounded by villagers He performs an almost Chaplinesque comedy act in spearing the god after a couple of attempts - his role as a scientist is swapped to that of an actor. He then takes the effigy to be stored in the vaults of the Bishop Museum and produces the first ethnographic study on Niue. Loeb's scientific project, and his performance, signals the destruction of ancient beliefs in the face of the modern world.

Pule reanimates these histories and stories like a shaman or poet conjuring up a vision grounded not in the present but somewhere in the distant past or the future - the poles of Arcadia and Utopia. He speaks with a tongue that twists, overwhelms and breaks words, allowing ancient creatures and spirits to escape from the confines of museums and books to haunt our imagination.

Albert L Refiti

Notes

1. Tala is a common word throughout Polynesia denoting a tale or the telling of stories, which the teller relates in a performance to an audience thus bringing the story to life. Pule refers to this performance aspect of tala in our conversations about *The Death of a God* as a performance over time and space. Tala also means to unravel, untie, to let loose.



List of works

Lā: the sun (triptych) 2000 oil on canvas, 1520 x 1000 mm each [3] Private collection, New Zealand courtesy of Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland

Small mountain 2000 oil on canvas, 300 x 300 mm, Private collection, New Zealand courtesy of Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland

Different people 2000 oil on canvas, 610 x 480 mm Private collection, New Zealand courtesy of Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland

The Death of a God: a suite of 18 drawings 1999 oil stick and india ink on paper, 768 x 568 mm Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki collection gift of Harriet Friedlander, 2000

The Pulenoa Triptych 1995 oil on unstretched canvas, 2190 x 5430 mm (overall) The Chartwell Collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki purchased 1998

Unknown Niuean artists *Hiapo* c1880-1900 Auckland War Memorial Museum Te Papa Whakahiku 19869

Unknown Niuean artists *Hiapo* c1860 Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongararewa Fe008655



John Pule *People get ready* was an exhibition for Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki 28 October 2000 - 7 February 2001



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