

Fatu Feu'u



'O le tautai Samoa



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Ron Brownson

Fatu Feu'u is the first painter and printmaker to bridge the cultural traditions which exist between Samoa and New Zealand.

By employing his images to speak publicly about what it means to live surrounded by dissimilar societies, Fatu stimulates a dialogue using two divergent visual languages. He envisions the oral narratives inspired by memory as being a beacon that reveals how Pacific identity is growing forwards and is reaching outwards. He focuses on the humanist ideas surrounding family, relationships and location to communicate stories about Pacific experience.

Fatu's comprehension of being surrounded by two cultures brings each society's divergent visual perception into immediate personal contrast. *Tausala* echoes the 1000 BC figural designs found on Lapita pottery from Nenumbo in the Solomon Islands. *Manaia* celebrates the escalating authority of contemporary *tatau*. *Orongo* imagines a mask filled with physical longing. In giving his images potent stories to tell, Fatu continues the ancient Samoan practice of *fagogo* – where tales are revealed and communicated at the same moment. The three males in *Taula'aitu*

and *Ivi'ivia* are immeasurably sturdy ghosts stripped down to their bare bones and filled with a wilful, uncontrollable energy. They appear at night to frighten and suppress, while encompassing spooky feelings of protection and safety.

Found among the many renowned traditions of Samoan proverbial expression is the phrase - *O le i'a a tautai e alu i le fa'alolo* - which might be translated as 'the fish are doing the what the fisher hopes for'. *Tautai* has many other evocative connotations, of the mariner who safely steers an ocean-going vessel,

and of the person who sails over immense seas to another locality. For Fatu, *tautai* indicates that his migration to New Zealand was a singular creative act of diaspora defining how he could work as a Samoan artist outside of Samoa. *Tautai* is the fisher who seeks the fish, the doer, the navigator, the person who knows the direction they must take when they initiate their journey.

Until he was teenager Fatu Feu'u lived in the Samoan village of Poutasi Falealili and it was there that he created his first drawings. *Vali e laupepa* - paint and paper - weren't available to him as materials; instead he used coral to draw designs on black volcanic scoria. Fatu did not learn to become an 'artist' who was Samoan, he learnt what being Samoan meant for him as an artist. What Fatu was drawing in Samoa during the 1950s was not graffiti but the figures, textures and patterns that would become the first visual symbols of his image-making.

By watching the treatment of *siapo* decoration and the application of *tatau* he assimilated the fundamental traditions of Samoan pictorial representation.

Siapo decoration and *tatau* were the first Pacific 'paintings' that he encountered and this knowledge motivated how he would approach his own design making. The recent print *Vi'iga poula* coalesces many of the artist's early learnings in Samoa as well as his extensive research into Pacific design history. *Vi'iga* is a key symbol in the artist's work because it is an element of praise that gives respect to others. *Pale auro*, however

reveals how the migration of Samoans to Aotearoa continues the extensive traditions of Polynesian voyaging, yet the land that is arrived at is not as brightly lit as the home that is departed from. *Ulutoa moana* shows Auckland's Hauraki Gulf as being a fish-filled zone protected by local guardians who are also sentinels.

Fatu's prints are storyboards that depict visual narratives from a Samoan viewpoint. Fatu recognises that Pacific design has a long history which, when brought together, expresses rich stories, especially when combined with what he learnt from exploring traditional patterns.

Fatu's art works are like a pictorial vein from a beginning to an end, where the intersections of oral and visual languages disclose narratives. His vision operates across time to affirm the ancient purpose of Samoan imagery as an insight to understanding. By processing design from an internal memory to an external symbol he reflects on the affirmations of cultural self-recognition. As he says: 'I want my images to look like my culture'.

Vi'iga poula 2001
Adoration of fertility ritual by night
woodcut
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 2002



Taula'aitu 1996
lithograph and woodcut
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 2000

Tausala 1990 (detail)
lithograph
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 2000



Va'aomanu - vessels of knowledge

Kate Gallagher

“This too is part of the tradition of *fa'a Samoa* using art to remember; to convey; to explain; to interpret our lives”¹

Fatu Feu'u's art functions as *va'aomanu* - vessels of knowledge - that contain evocations of memory, migration and reconciliation. Feu'u has worked in a wide range of mediums since the 1980s: bronze, wood and stone sculpture, pottery design, lithographs, woodcuts, glass, carpet designs and more recently poetry. However, he is best known for his large-scale vibrant paintings and prints that combine Polynesian imagery with idioms of modern

Euro-American² art, reflecting his dual cultural experience by mixing influences, inspirations, techniques and motifs from *fa'a Samoa*³ and Aotearoa and more generally from Euro-American to Pacific cultures.

While Euro-American society generally passes on knowledge through text, pre-colonised Samoan knowledge of history, genealogy and information relating to indigenous technologies was either committed to memory and passed through the community in the form of oratory, or recorded in graphic symbols, rather than written language. The sharing of Pacific

knowledge systems plays a crucial part in daily life in Samoa. This dissemination of knowledge results in the existence of highly revered figures in the community, who are responsible for maintaining knowledge and ensuring that it is passed on to the younger generations. These crucial principles of *fa'a Samoa* heavily influence Feu'u's work. He holds a *tulafale* (orator) title, *Si'a*, in his home village, Poutasi in Falealili and is deeply committed to establishing a visual continuity for Samoan culture within Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Feu'u gains inspiration from Polynesian art forms such as *siapo* (bark cloth), *tatau* (tattoo), *ietoga* (fine mat), carving, lashing and ceremonial mask making. In these forms, he has discovered a rich lexicon of motifs and compositional structures. Reworking symbolism drawn directly from ancient Polynesian patterns, he combines them with a personal symbolic vernacular to create complex contemporary narratives and multi-layered metaphors.

This can be seen in *Fa'aola mo taeao*, which is comprised of three painted panels hung between four carved totem poles. The latter combine Pacific materials and processes, including pottery, *siapo*, sinnet lashing, and the carved wood of Samoan planting sticks rendered with traditional tools. While the painted panels employ Euro-American materials and processes, their balanced compositional grid structure is derived from *siapo*. The element of balance created by the repetition of motifs has an historic precedent in *siapo tasina*⁴ where the design

carved into the *upeti*⁵ is repeated throughout the work. The mask and frangipani motifs are also repeated in the pottery placed on the totem poles. These refer to ancient Lapita culture which is known primarily through pottery remnants. The most prominent of the four motifs is the frangipani, alternated with the stylised form of the mask, the frigate bird and the linear cross motif. Feu'u frequently employs the same motifs to convey a variety of different meanings dependant upon their context. The frangipani motif is used as both a cultural signifier of the Pacific Islands and as a visual metaphor of migration. The flower is

not an indigenous plant in Samoa although it is now plays an important role in community life. Here the frangipani symbolises femaleness; its presence providing an essential balance to the ancestral spirits, represented by the frigate bird and mask motifs, which are male.

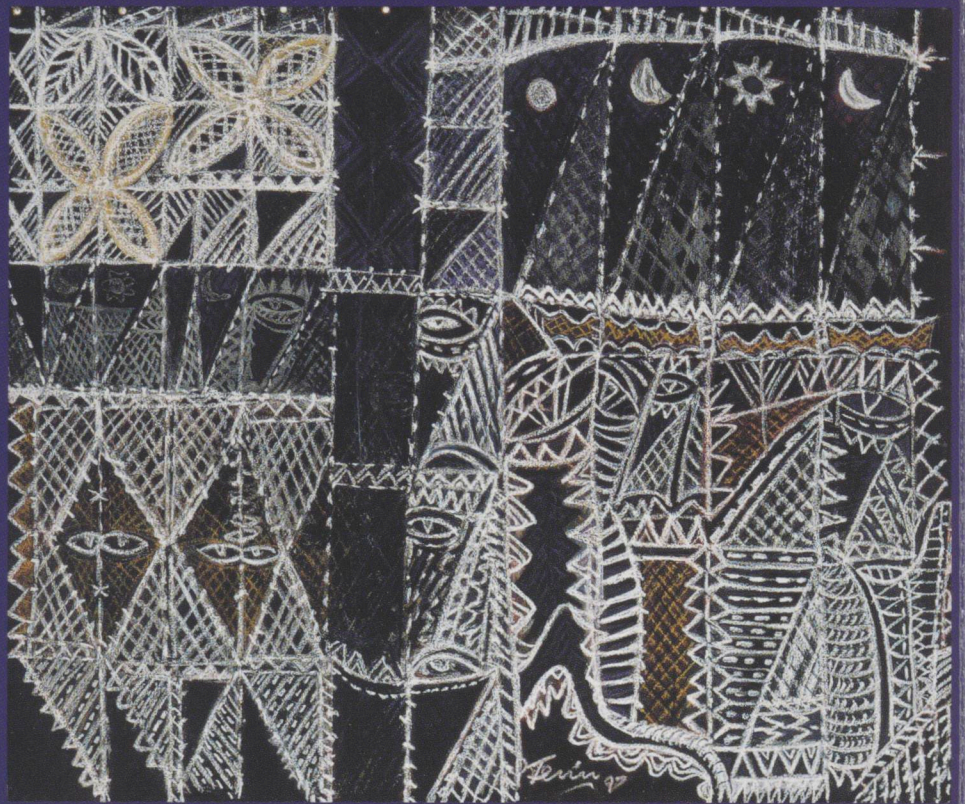
Ceremonial masks were used to connect humans to indigenous Pacific deities. Originally derived from Lapita pottery symbols they then found their way into the art of *tatau* and can now be found in a stylised form around the knee region of the *pe'a* (male tattoo). While the mask motif has an historic precedent of referencing a connection to

ancestral spirits, the frigate bird does not. In Samoan culture these migratory birds are related to good omens, because they are believed to warn of storms or calamities. Feu'u expands their meaning to incorporate a personal reference to his own ancestors. Combined, the mask and frigate bird motifs symbolise both protection to the Pacific people and convey Feu'u's contemporary belief in the importance of spirituality and cultural pride. They also reflect his personal commitment to fostering awareness of the management of Pacific resources by its indigenous peoples.



Fa'aisifaga 2001
acrylic on canvas
Fatu Feu'u collection, Auckland
Courtesy Warwick Henderson Gallery, Auckland

Masina le sogi 1997
Moonscent
oil and oil stick on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1997



Masina le sogi employs a combination of motifs derived from *tatau*, *siapo* and navigation to depict a narrative based on the Samoan legend of Sina and Tuna. While there are a variety of existing versions of this legend, the interpretation that Fe'u employs tells the story of Sina, who is both the moon and the most powerful goddess of love in Polynesia. Tuna, an earthling, becomes obsessed with

Sina to the point where he gives up his canoe and turns day into night. Through this endless darkness he gazes at her, waiting for his love to be reciprocated. However his efforts are in vain and Tuna has to be content with just her scent.

The painting, and the legend that inspired it, symbolises the sensuous memory of unrequited love. The frangipani in the top left-hand corner represents Sina, the female protagonist of the tale. The eye motifs have a conflated symbolic meaning representing Tuna's endless gaze, the eyes of the ancestral spirits and the all seeing eye of god.

The diagonal lines that occur in the painting are derived from *tatau* motifs employed here to refer to Tuna's sailing boat. Symbols traditionally used to record navigational knowledge become signifiers of cultural identity. While the sun and the moon in the top right hand corner are common signifiers of Pacific navigation, in Fe'u's work they incorporate a multi-layered reference to Polynesian gods.

Decorative patterns of *tatau* can also be easily transferred to a contemporary graphic tradition. In Samoa, receiving the *tatau* marks the rite of passage into adulthood; their designs varying from individual to individual depending

on their ancestry and role in society. When Fe'u places these ancient body motifs within painting, their relevance is extended as signifiers of cultural endurance and identity.

The cross hatching that appears in a number of Fe'u's works refers to the ancient tradition of lashing that was crucial to most aspects of Pacific life. Prior to the introduction of nails the lashing of sennit around wood and

stone formed the basis of construction. These bindings were often woven into intricate symbolic patterns related to conceptual and spiritual knowledge. Feu'u uses lashing designs as a personal metaphor related to strength, and empowerment gained through unity. Like the abstracted motifs seen in the designs of tattoo, carving and barkcloth, lashing patterns formed a crucial part in the continuum of Polynesian knowledge systems.

Graphic symbols inspired by Pacific art forms and passages of written Samoan, communicate a message of *Ifoga* (reconciliation) in *Alofa pea 'oe' Samoa*. Feu'u's message here speaks of the need to recognise events in the past and move forward from them. The composition was influenced by an unusual piece of *siapo mamanu*⁶ that has a series of light and dark horizontal contrasting stripes. These represent communication between people and cultures, which Feu'u sees as a key component of reconciliation. The title therefore celebrates Pacific Islands culture and the coming together of people, while sending a message of *alofa* to the audience.

Feu'u demonstrates how oral base societies encode a wealth of information by manipulating graphic symbols. What appears to some as purely decorative elements can be deciphered by the initiated as symbolic codes. The artist reflects this understanding by placing motifs representing a visual language in a modern context, thereby allowing a re-interpretation of their meaning. By using a combination of traditional and contemporary visual motifs to communicate stories about the Pacific, both ancient and contemporary, Feu'u works within a continuum of cultural expression.

1 Fatu Feu'u in conversation with the author, November 1999.

2 I have chosen to employ the term Euro-American to avoid the problematic nature of the terms Euro-centric and Western. Euro American is used as an umbrella term to refer to the art aesthetic in Europe particularly the United Kingdom, America and countries who have been colonised by these nations.

3 *Fa'a Samoa* can be generally defined as the Samoan way. The social structure of Samoan society is held together and actively maintained by an adherence to unwritten but understood cultural conventions embodied in *fa'a Samoa*.

4 *Siapo* patterned from an *upeti*.

5 *Upeti* is a design tablet from which the pattern is transferred to the *siapo* through a process of rubbing.

6 The nature of *siapo mamanu* is that it is hand painted rather than printed from an *upeti*. This piece can be found in the collection of the Wanganui Regional Museum.



Agaga puaikura 2002
acrylic on canvas
Private collection, Auckland



Orongo 1992
woodblock on barkcloth, laid on paper
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1993

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