

KING GEORGE



GARDINIA



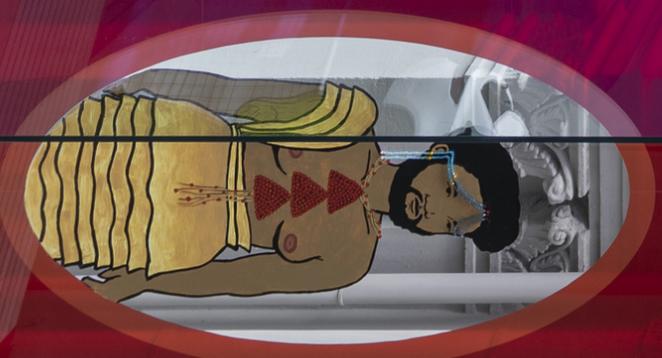
CHANEL



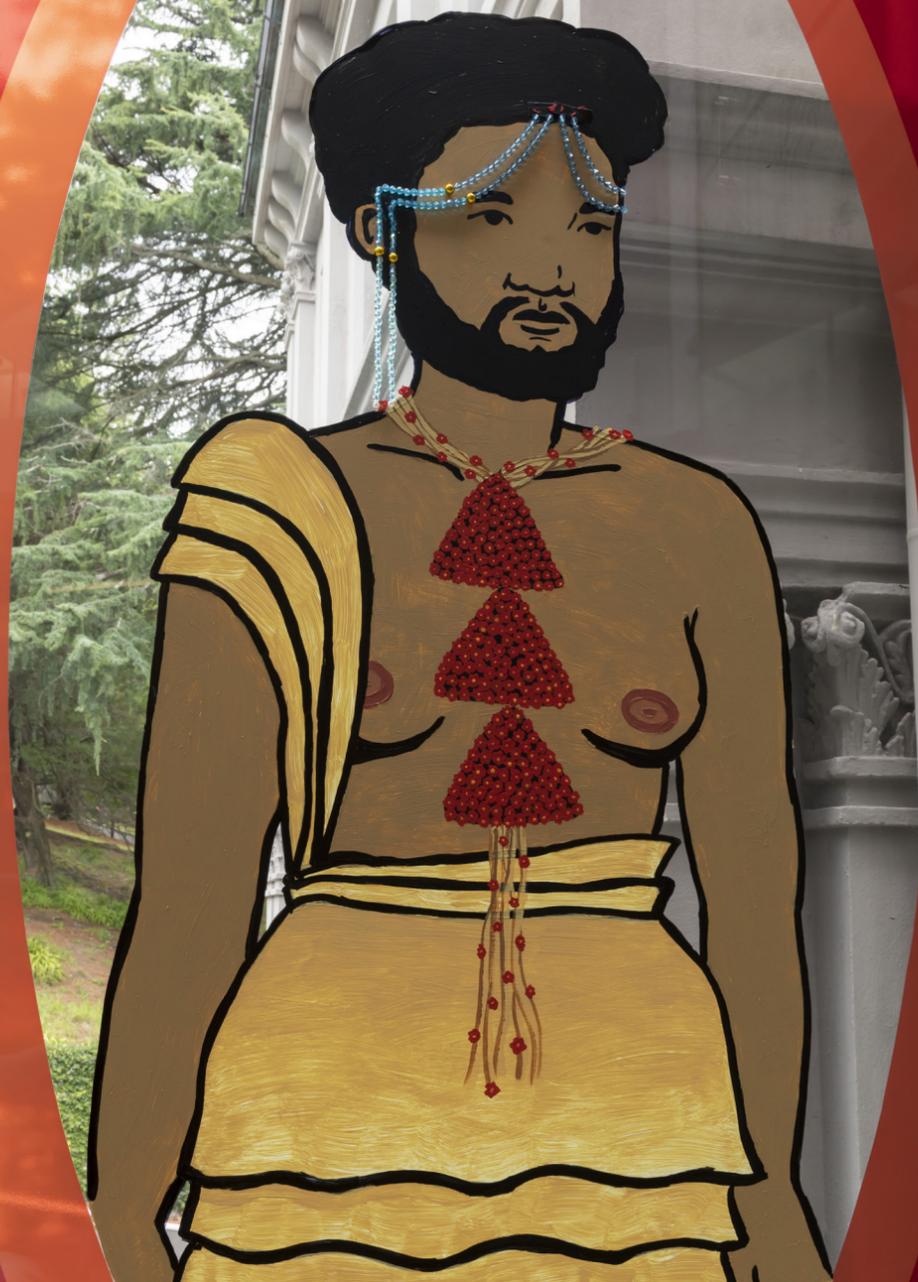
JOEY



ŠISĪ



Sione Tuvaliala Monu & Manuhatapai
Vaeatangiatai, *Kirored: A Levi Chronicle*,
vinyl, paint and beads on glass, audio.
Commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o
Tamaki, Supported by Auckland Contemporary
Art Trust



A Leiti Chronicle Chapter 1: Kindred Ane Tonga

For thousands of years, superior beings known as 'ultimate leiti' walked the lands and roamed the heavens. Ultimate leiti were celebrated as transgender deities who moved freely in a utopian world, where self-determination was manifested in an economy that used colourful glass beads as currency. Distinguished by their glamazonian stature and beaded armour, ultimate leiti were responsible for building and protecting the wealth of the Kingdom of Tonga. Returning from warfare in another galaxy, the ultimate leiti arrived in Tonga at the outbreak of civil war. The arrival of European travellers and missionaries were significantly changing the Tongan way of life. Tāufa'āhau I, ruler of Tonga, had embraced Christianity and ordered the destruction of all deities, including ultimate leiti. They fled through the portals of the Ha'amonga a Maui, to seek asylum in another multiverse, taking the guise of civilians in Aotearoa...

This is the world of leiti according to artists Sione Tuivailala Monū and Manuha'apai Vaeatangitau.¹ Theirs is an ever-evolving, futuristic reality centred on leiti as elite glamazons called 'ultimate leiti'. Transcending conventions of time and place, this radical reimagining is premised on illustrations that have enabled the artists to map their own personal experiences. Initially expressed in drawings, the artists have since developed a complex world in highly experimental artworks that combine film, animation, performance and sculpture.

Since 2015, Monū and Vaeatangitau have been engaged in an artistic endeavour to project their leiti experiences into futuristic artworks, drawing on their faka'kaukau (thought), queer diasporic anga (way/state of being) and ongo'i (emotions). In the moving image work *Only Yesterday*, 2020, the artists draw on science-fiction themes of time travel to position their 'ultimate leiti' across an array of scenarios. From the banality of the everyday to standing guard at the top of Māngere Mountain, these situations chronicle a world in which leiti are free to be themselves, shaping an alternative future. Vaeatangitau elaborates on their process of time travel:

... the objective is to bring life to the leiti characters that we create and the alternate reality they live in... it sort of feels like we're manifesting that reality and drawing from it to liberate and empower us in our current existence.

Ultimate leiti find form and voice in the artists' commission for Auckland Art Gallery's South Atrium. *Kindred: A Leiti Chronicle*, 2022 materialises a pantheon of ultimate leiti. Extended across the lower

glass panels is a suite of painted portraits of dearly loved leiti with their chosen names hovering above them. Represented in this Marvel-esque line-up of heroic portraits is their collective sisterhood, which includes portraits of the artists recast as ultimate leiti. Partly inspired by the world-building of renowned African-American science-fiction writer Octavia E Butler and named after her 1979 novel, *Kindred*, each portrait is executed in the artists' animated and playful graphic style and embellished with Monū's honorific beaded headdresses that symbolise the world of leiti. Beaming down through coloured rays, the leiti are dispatched to deliver messages of hope – a visual declaration that real heroes don't wear capes.

Monū's painted portraits evoke a sense of grandeur which is embodied in the diamond necklace draped over Chanel and the regal magnificence of the kie Tonga (fine mat) wrapping the body of Vaeatangitau in her self-portrait as Gardinia. With arms crossed and covered by black opera gloves and fala pati (mats decorated with wool) arranged in patterns across the body, Gardinia exemplifies sophistication and glamour. As a poet with a deft understanding of heliaki, the Tongan tradition of saying one thing and meaning another, Monū co-opts the image and national symbolism of flowers, which refer metaphorically to individuals and their chiefly lines. Kātinia (gardenias) are often used in poetry and song compositions by Her Royal Highness Queen Sālote III; she uses the fragrant flower to evoke a sense of loss in her song 'Kātinia':

Kātinia si'oto sei manakoa
'Alaha kāpui ai 'a si'ete 'ofa
Hā sino mai ho'o tō'onga
Kae vaifā 'a lo'ifofonga
Gardenia, my favoured sei
Your fragrance engulfs this love of mine
Your ways are impressed on my mind
And tears stream down.²

For the artists, ultimate leiti have always sat within the realm of hou'eiki, the class of nobility in Tonga who descend from the Tu'i Tonga, the sacred kings of Tonga. This is incarnated in the portrait of the inimitable Joey Joleen Mataele, who is arguably the ultimate leiti. Profiled in the feature-length documentary *Leitis in Waiting*, 2018, Mataele is a transgender activist of noble descent who in 1992 founded the Tongan Leiti Association (TLA), an organisation that continues to advocate for the improvement of human rights and HIV responsiveness for leiti. The TLA and their events receive support from their patron, the Honorable Sālote Lupepau'u Tuita, who is the daughter of the Princess of Tonga Her Royal Highness Salote Mafile'o Pilolevu Tuita. One of their events is Miss Galaxy, an annual pageant where, in the words of RuPaul, leiti strut their charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent. Meaning can be drawn from the name of the pageant itself which, as anthropologist Niko Besnier discusses shares, is a spectacular manifestation of global cross-community cultural exchange that lays claim to an ambitious cosmopolitan context.³ The celestial manifestation of Miss Galaxy as a celebrated space for leiti as ultimate beings – particularly within a conservative Tongan society – parallels the ambitions of the intergalactic imaginings of Monū and Vaeatangitau.

Presentations of the leiti body are rare as much as they are inherently political. In these carefully constructed portraits, Monū pushes past a gender binary to assert more fluid representations that exude glamour and authority. Monū's self-portrait as 'Sisi', an alter-ego the artist adopted as a teenager, is emblematic of this gender fluidity. Sisi can allude to many meanings but is most prominently associated with the Tongan adornment of a sisi kakala, a decorative waist garment made from fresh flowers. Here, Sisi has a full beard and is bare-chested, their breasts revealed, and wears a kahoā (necklace) and a tiered empire line skirt that extends over their arm. Kinship is honoured through the appearance of Monū's real-life sibling George Manumua, who is recast as their alter-ego King George, a regnal name that immediately signals Tongan rulers of the past. These subtle, yet powerful gestures consciously embrace and re-instil gender fluidity as an enduring part of Tonga's history and future.

Like historians, artists – and dare I say curators – can create new frames for history and position themselves within or outside them. Intertwining spoken-word dialogue with vogue chanting and classical music, Vaeatangitau's soundscape suggests and disrupts historical legacies. Showcasing her power as spoken word artist, Vaeatangitau's monologues weave several thematic strands into a history of leiti that predates colonialism and ranges from the philosophical musings of a 'faux-academic' to 'dumb-bitch vibes', 'unpacking layers of cultural essentialism tied to us both in Tonga and here in Aotearoa and in any other diasporic community.'⁴ Crossing between the material and the immaterial, this mashup of imagery and sound is at once fleeting, humorous and hopeful.

If, as art history tells us time and again, windows can serve as metaphors for change, *Kindred* is an aspirational vision that strikes at the heart of the current reality in which leiti exist. Beamed across and reverberating throughout the Gallery's South Atrium it is not just an escapist imagining but an expression of hope and courage in the face of homophobia and constant threats of violence and degradation. One thinks of the dearly beloved Polikalepo Kefu, president of the TLA and prominent activist, who was brutally murdered in 2021 and to whom this is dedicated. Or the fights to decriminalise homosexuality in Tonga and end conversion therapy in Aotearoa. But hope is not lost. This chapter in Monū and Vaeatangitau's leiti chronicle asks: What if the capacity to act heroically is also fundamentally ordinary and available to all of us? At the start of this project, the artists asked me whether Toi o Tāmaki represents work by leiti or has commissioned leiti before. And the answer was no, until now. But what if the capacity for transformational change is as simple as saying yes? To allow others the freedom to represent themselves; to, as the artists have said, 'Show, don't tell'? The future is yet to be written; what happens now can shape the world we wish others to inherit. Recent events prove that the future is secured only when we imagine one that includes everyone, a future that provides the kind of freedom defined by Black Panther activist Assata Shakur as 'the freedom to grow, it's the right to blossom. Freedom is the right to be yourself.'⁵

¹ Leiti is an appropriation of the term fakaleiti meaning 'like a lady'. It is one of the gender identities distinct to Tonga and refers to transgender women.

² 'Kātinia', in *Songs & Poems of Queen Sālote*, Elizabeth Wood-Ellen (ed), Vava'u Press, Tonga, 2004, p 174.

³ Niko Besnier, 'Transgenderism, Locality, and the Miss

Galaxy Beauty Pageant in Tonga', *American Ethnologist*, vol 29, no 3, August 2002, p 553.

⁴ Manuha'apai Vaeatangitau, Email communication with author, 16 August 2021.

⁵ Common, 'A Song for Assata', *Like Water for Chocolate*, MCA Records, 2000.