

## ***E gase a ala lauvao: Samoan contemporary art at the crossroads***

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It is time to remember our forebearers and our Heritage, our traditions and customs, our arts and crafts - those things that make us ... unique<sup>1</sup>.

As nations rush towards the end of the twentieth century, excitement and expectation is high. Governments, groups and individuals are reflecting on what they have accomplished what they have lost and where they are going. Many wonder how they can survive in an ever increasingly globalised world where the pressures of modern living are producing more complex but fewer distinct societies. There is a real danger that in a decade or two all the ecological and cultural diversity that took hundreds of years to develop in Samoa will be homogenised with globalisation<sup>2</sup>. In order to understand such trends we need to address issues relating to tradition and change and debate the implications for our nation in the next millennium.

Reflect on these questions and ask yourself; what kind of society did I grow up in? Is this the place of my childhood, the society my father knew? Where is the evidence of the past, our ancestors? Where are their monuments, sacred sites, where have their voices gone? Am I in danger of losing my heritage? What will my children inherit? Such contemplation may surprise and sadden us. We realise many precious things we had as children are no longer there. We comprehend that life moves on and that too rigid an attachment to the past may diminish our society. Understanding change is part of societies natural cultural evolution, Samoa must move forward. The clock does not go backwards and our children do not live in the world in which we grew up. We are in many ways unable to prepare them for the world they are entering. However, it is important that we provide them with a cultural data bank so they have some knowledge of their heritage, values, beliefs, identity, and know where they come from.

As the “mirrors of society”<sup>3</sup>, artists are needed in a society as they play an important role in portraying and maintaining our culture. They awaken our imagination and provide spiritual and cultural sustenance. In the past Samoan artists had priestly rank. Their skills were not shared, their practices were sacred and they were highly visible and important members of society. They were the embodiment of the past, had place in the daily life of the people, were essential in the maintenance of tradition and ritual, were the link to the after world and could predict the future. Colonialism and subsequent changes eradicated many previous belief systems, rituals and practices, which resulted in the loss of a great deal of traditional knowledge. The special skills of the many different types of artists and traditional artisans have been lost, and their intrinsic creativity compromised through oppression and bigotry.

Today Pacific artists are trying to revive ancient traditions and rituals to help keep their cultures alive. They act as mediators so worlds, stories, images, rituals and values can be relived and appreciated. Through dance, song, drama, image and apparel, they focus attention on the importance of our heritage. The issues are very political and Governments play a vital role in promoting aspects of their culture they see as valid, while also giving individuals the

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intellectual space to express ideas in a democratic and free way. Governments must provide the material incentives and centres for artistic development and exhibition if they value these aspects of their cultural heritage.

Samoan contemporary artists bring ideas both old and new into the social, political and cultural environment. New art forms cannot be seen only as those following a Western formula. Weaving, tattooing, and *siapo* production in villages must also be viewed as part of contemporary art production<sup>4</sup>. However in this instance new art forms are seen as those addressing topical themes such as: decolonisation and colonialism; reflection on loss of traditional religions and rituals; identity; anxiety about the present; loss of indigenous languages; growing nationalism; migration; human rights and the environment. Artists focus on these themes and can make their audiences affirm their faith and loyalty in their heritage while helping to prevent their cultures from being erased.

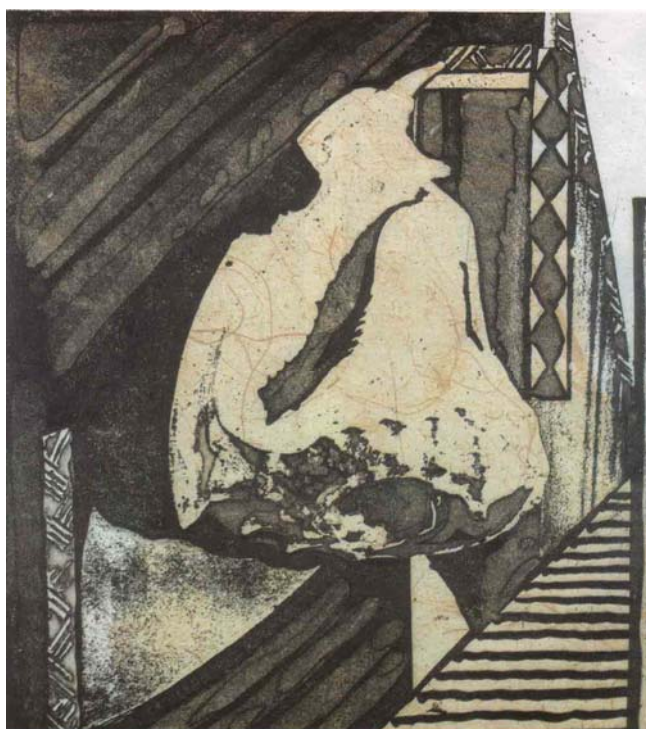


Figure 1: Vanya Taule'alo, 1997, *Gase a lauvas* – photo-etching

My art works reflect on these social, political, cultural and environmental questions<sup>5</sup>. In many ways, I try to uphold values that are central to Samoan society. As a contemporary artist I create images that relate to the society in which I live and where my day to day perceptions are tantalised and woven into visual imagery<sup>6</sup>. In a photo etching titled, *Gase a ala lauvas* (see Figure 1), I highlight how a path in the bush, although overgrown and covered with trees will never be obliterated. The work symbolises hope that although traditions may change they will always be visible through time<sup>7</sup>. My paintings, prints and installations are my thoughts and reflections translated onto paper, canvas and material. I address the cultural beliefs and practices I see around me. I conceptualise works based on themes relating to culture, tradition, family, gender, mythology, identity, change and the environment.

I utilise Samoan *siapo* and tattooing symbols manipulating them in semi-abstract ways to create my own symbolic iconography. I use Samoan oratory as an integral part of my imagery. I want to create immediate intimacy with my Samoan audience. I want them to have a direct connection to my work through word and form and be proud of their heritage. At the same time, when my works are exhibited overseas I am inviting other cultures into the belief system of the Samoan people<sup>8</sup>.

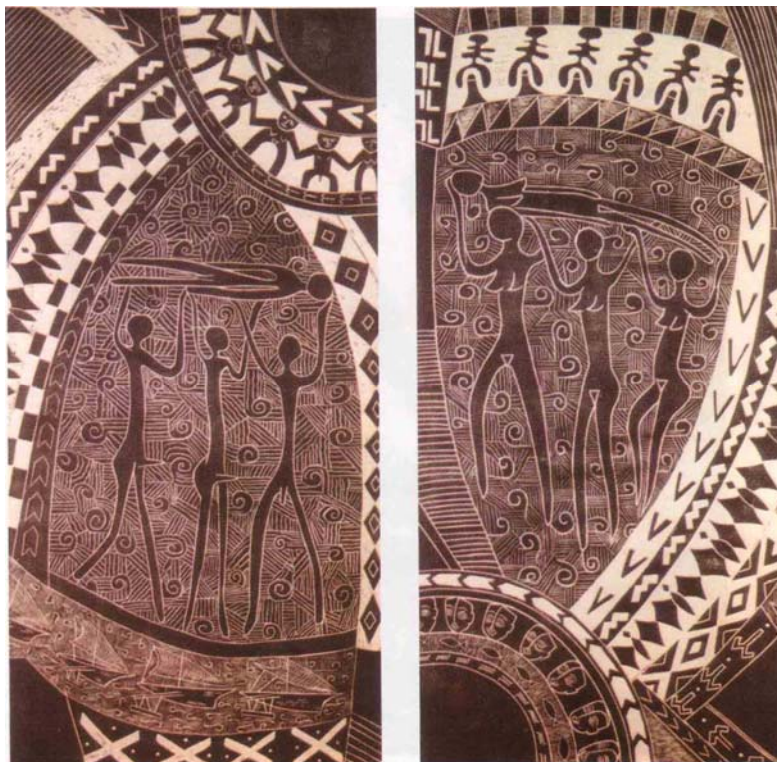


Figure 2 Vanya Taule'alo diptych, 1997, (left) *Malie toa*, (right) *Malie tau* – woodblock on calico

Myth, oratory and tattooing play an important role in Samoan life. They are vital to the maintenance of genealogies, land and political philosophies<sup>9</sup>. They explain social relationships and provide models for gender roles and the social order. They are the spiritual and moral stories of the nation. In the diptych, *Malie Toa – Malie Tau* (see Figure 2) , I celebrate the rites of passage of the young tattooed male and female. These large woodcuts depict the lifeless child body being carried aloft into a death state only to be reborn as an adult with all the potent sexual implications that occur when assuming an adult role in society. In *Taema ma Tilafaiga* I salute the mythological goddesses who bought the art of tattooing to Samoa. Carved on wooden doors and printed onto three-meter panels of muslin, the installation depicts the myth of *Taema ma Tilafaiga*, and includes images of the two Fijian men who were said to teach the goddesses the art of tattooing. This installation has been hung in Frankfurt and Australia, allowing those who saw it a greater understanding of Samoan culture and artistic practises<sup>10</sup>.

The transfer of traditional forms and how they are utilised, re-produced and manipulated to create a visual language that expresses the individual's political and social concerns is central to my work and other Samoan artists. In the exhibition titled *Manatua Aiga* held in Auckland. I celebrate the role the family plays in Samoan society. The *aiga* binds the individual to the

land and is the life force of the individual. You know who you are and where you come from. The family gives the individual the security to face the world and forms the foundation of the society. Works address various aspects of family life and in the painting *Ua sii le Matalalaga* [things have changed], I lament my sons who now live overseas, wondering if they will ever return<sup>11</sup>.



Figure 3: Fatu Feu'u, 1996, *Aiga Tulua* – mixed media on canvas

This manipulation of traditional images is also seen in the works of Samoan born artists Fatu Feu'u. Feu'u has lived for 30 years in New Zealand, and has shown in Australia, Germany and USA. He nostalgically recalls his Samoan heritage in *Aiga Tulua*, (see Figure 3) where he attributes his personal development to his 'belief in faaSamoa and the importance of the family. He hopes it is something that emerging artists will find in their own cultures and their art. He maintains that art is very important and is at the heart and soul of every culture<sup>12</sup>. Feu'u recalls stories learnt while young in the village, family myths, past memories, and environmental concerns in works such as *Conserve for Tomorrow*. He combines traditional images to convey his ideas about authority, the symbols of power, mythology and his cultural heritage.

Migration, adaptation and change have always been part of Samoan culture<sup>13</sup>. Historical evidence tells how Polynesians navigated their way across the Pacific from Southern China. Famines, wars and desire for adventure spread them across the vast Pacific Ocean. Over the last 30 years search for a better life, better jobs and educational opportunities, has created a new wave of Samoan migration. Many young Samoan artists have never lived in their parent's homeland. They were born and raised in a society that has vastly values to their parents' values. School and family life and values were often in direct conflict. These tensions and conflicts have been expressed in many artistic and creative ways through image, writing, plays, fashion and film.

In some ways, living overseas has given space for critical dialogue to emerge. Distance from a more traditional setting has allowed the artists, whether in performance or visually, a greater freedom to question and criticise without fear of criticism. One such artist is Michel Tuffery, born in New Zealand of Tahitian/Samoan decent and raised by his Samoan mother

and *palagi* stepfather. He inhabits those in-between cultural spaces. Tuffery is clearly exploring his Samoan side with works like *Tiangi*, where an unashamedly Polynesian and tattooed Christ figure draped on the cross. Another young Samoan artist Lyle Peninsula touches on issues of personal and cultural identity in his painting *I.D.* His works attempt to find the balance between two frequently disparate cultures and express the pain and sadness associated with this process<sup>14</sup>.

Perhaps the most confrontational and exciting young artist is Andy Lelei who feels driven to explore issues that would be hard to raise inside Samoa. Issues of identity, confusion, racial tension and religious greed and bigotry are addressed in his works. In *I am Present* and *The Blueness of my Tapa Cloth* (see Figure 4), Lelei unceremoniously depicts the confusion of being the outsider in a New Zealand setting. He highlights the feelings of Samoans sending money back to family members in Samoa, the demands of the church, the struggle to educate children and preconceived ideas about Polynesian people<sup>15</sup>. The polemic of identity is like a painful scream in his work. The ability to criticise and not alienate the Samoan public is an issue Lelei has to come to terms with but his voice is certainly echoed by many young Samoans living overseas and perhaps here in Samoa as well? We must learn to listen to these voices as they expose some of our cultural contradictions. As Samoans live across the globe and no longer live in a traditional life style, we see greater diversity in attitudes, where questioning of traditions and values is part of the natural process.

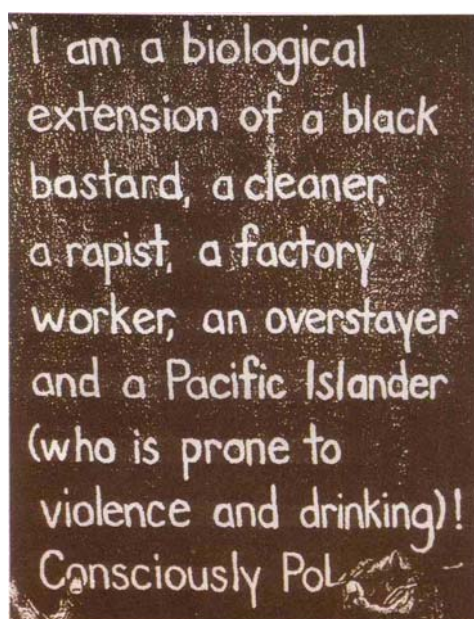


Figure 4: Andy Lelei, *The blueness of my tapa cloth* – acrylic on canvas

Ironically, most Samoans living in Samoa are unaware of the value of their own art. It took New Zealand 150 years to see the value in Maori art. Previously shunned as ‘primitive’ and with little artistic merit, they only came to realise this after the international attention given to Maori art with the *Te Maori* exhibition in New York in 1984<sup>16</sup>. Yet the end of the twentieth century is witnessing a growing interest in contemporary Samoan art and Pacific art<sup>17</sup>. The Seventh Pacific Arts Festival in September 1996 saw the usual colourful array of performing arts. However, what was a first was the Contemporary Art Show that had been absent in all

previous six festivals. This heralded a commitment, however temporary, to visual arts and for the first time, Samoa had an exhibition gallery at the Tooa Salamasina Women's Centre.

Why is this interest in Samoan art occurring? Who is driving this interest? What are the implications for Samoan traditions and culture? The strongest interest is coming from Germany partly because of its historical connection with Samoa. The *Talofa Samoa Sudsee exhibition* for 14 months at the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Frankfurt is testimony to Samoan culture and art being taken seriously abroad. The Contemporary Art Room in the exhibition highlights one contemporary Samoan artist for three months at a time. That I am the only artist showing who lives in Samoa is a sad reflection on the visual arts. What is most impressive about this exhibition is the realistic, hands-on view it portrays of Samoa. Arranged thematically each room provides a wonderful insight into Samoan material culture. As one enters the room of *Reciprocity* [or ceremonies], fine mats hang along-side traditional adornments and garments used for different ceremonies. In the corner of the room, a model of how gifts are given is displayed; rolled mats, necklaces made of up rolled up money and sweets, tins of fish, corned beef and biscuits. The *Religion Room* displays examples of white church clothes hanging on a rack with thongs displayed underneath. A bible is on display along with a poster saying, 'No swimming on Sunday'.

New Caledonia's exciting new Tjibaou Cultural Centre will be a major contributor to the exhibiting and purchasing of Samoan art. In September this year, *The Tautai Exhibition* showed works of major Pacific artists. My installation *Tautua- Pule-Mana*<sup>18</sup> became the focal point for the official opening. This work celebrates tattooing in Samoa and the high esteem with which this cultural practice is held. Sixteen muslin poles are arranged in the shape of a fale, which represents the central core of Samoan life<sup>19</sup>. I have printed on each pole tattooing symbols of both the male *pe'a* and the female *malu*. Masked faces are centred on each pole which form a slowly moving *fono* as one pole rotates and interacts with the pole beside it. The words focus on the status attributed to tattooing and the acquisition of power both earthly and temporal.

The sustainability of Samoan culture will largely depend on the Government and community's willingness to adapt to change while treasuring those things that remain central to our society. There is also a need to develop 'multiple filters'<sup>20</sup> to prevent Samoan culture from being erased by the present speed of globalisation, from those things that are alien and detrimental to our culture. It is important that we strive to create a climate of debate and understanding with young people who may feel their voices are not being heard, as power has always been in the hand of the *matai* and the elderly. This society needs to allow greater individual freedom of expression as it moves into the next century. However, it is important to mediate tradition into modernity<sup>21</sup>. In this context Samoan contemporary art is at the crossroads. Artists form a vital role in this debate as they provide the vehicle for the expression of cultural values and feelings. We must all work for continued growth, revival and rediscovery of Samoa's cultural environment and guarantee that the path of our heritage will be like the paths in the forest, always visible, never obliterated.

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