Albert L. Refiti in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry

An interview with Contemporary HUM

by

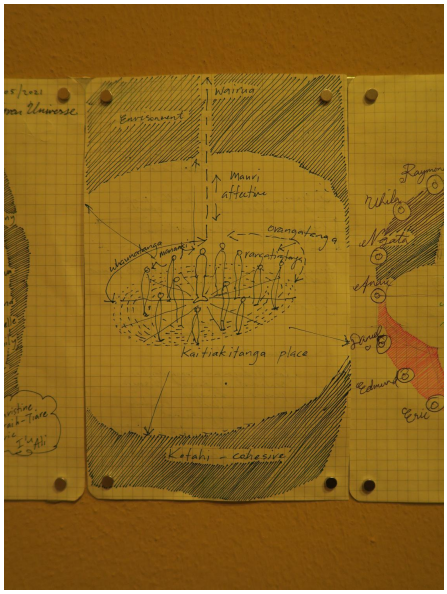
Published on 09.04.2025



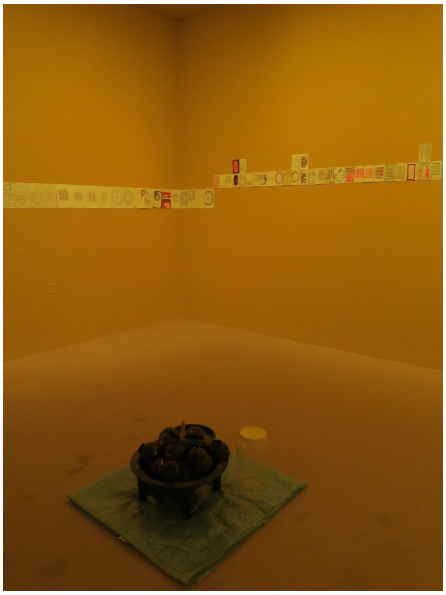
Albert L. Refiti hosting a kava session as part of *Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry*, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 8 February 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Albert L. Refiti, *Vānimonimo* (detail), *Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry*, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Albert L. Refiti, *Vānimonimo* (installation view), *Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry*, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Albert L. Refiti, *Vānimonimo* (installation view), Sharjah *Biennial 16: to carry*, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 8 February 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

In February 2025, Contemporary HUM was on the ground at the opening week of Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, speaking with the Aotearoa artists who were present.

Here, architectural theorist and academic Albert L. Refiti discusses his featured presentation Vānimonimo, *which displays a selection of his "cosmograms": graphic representations of relational systems developed through his research, including his work examining the Sāmoan*

concept of vā. In this wide-ranging interview, Refiti discusses the theoretical framework behind his works, the necessary complexities of traversing cultural contexts and the importance of the artist's role as an historical "outsider".

This interview has been supported by individual donors and Creative New Zealand. With generous thanks to Sharjah Art Foundation for the press invitation to Sharjah, which enabled HUM to cover this significant event for Aotearoa artists.

CONTEMPORARY HUM It's lovely to meet you Albert. You have a multidisciplinary practice and you've been exhibiting and been active internationally. HUM attended the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, where you were involved in Elisapeta Hinemoa Heta's presentation, *The Body of Wainuiātea,* in the exhibition *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania* at Ocean Space.

We're speaking together because you were invited by Aotearoa-based co-curator Megan Tamati-Quennell to the Sharjah Biennial. Can you talk about the work you're presenting?

ALBERT L. REFITI I don't consider myself an artist. Sharjah Biennial is a kind of interdisciplinary project and multi-vocal, which is probably why I got involved.

I've known Megan for a while, and she knows my role as an architectural educator and designer in the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector. Because of this project, she approached me to see if I was interested in exhibiting what I call "cosmograms." The work is mainly known through a series of posts that I have done on Instagram. My son, who is an animator studying digital design, got an Instagram account around 2014, 2015. I had an account on Instagram, but I had very few followers, so we had a competition to see who [could get] the most followers.

He posted his animation drawings and manga drawings. Over the years, I have kept, from my training in anthropology, ethnographic diagrams that explain certain relational systems in different cultures or things that I've read. I developed a system of graphically outlaying social systems and things like that. The ones

that are presented in Sharjah were made between 2017 and the end of 2024.

HUM Did you originally make the drawings specifically for Instagram?

ALR I've been working with a whole series of ideas and theories before even considering these works to be in a gallery. There's this concept of vā, space between. It's really simple and it usually works horizontally. A relationship between me and my family, my community, other people, colleagues. It's always engaging in how you deal with exchange. There's other vā systems. There's a vertical one, to do with the divinity, the gods or ancestors who have passed on.

I run a research cluster at AUT (Auckland University of Technology) called Vā Moana. We do a lot of reading groups, discussions, seminars and we also have a forum called the Vā Kōrero. In 2017, 2018, I had Lana Lopesi as a PhD student. She instigated in our reading groups to have kava. There were a number of students at the time doing their research on how effective kava is as a mechanism for talanoa, for discursive [practice] and developing a community of discursive people. [The reading group] is for Pacific and more and more Māori and other students now. It's a much more informal, friendly and collegiate way to discuss interesting issues: decolonisation, architectural theories or design theories, or Pacific art. Whenever we sit, we sit around the kava bowl. In a lot of these [drawings], you can see there's a kava bowl in the middle and people sit around in a circle. A lot of the diagrams involve the kind of graphic representation or the planning of how people sit.

When I wrote my PhD thesis in 2014, it was on the Sāmoan relational system of vā. I did a number of drawings in the thesis, [in which I] invented a way to show relationships: the dot, a series of lines. I write about relationships as a form of threads, loops, lines and a number of other terminologies, which come straight from drawings.

I have a PhD student now, the artist Rosanna Raymond. She'd taken some ideas that reference some of the things that I've done, and she's developed this notion of the vā body. A certain kind of vā is unfolded. The person is what you call a dimensional being. It's a portal to other people that come through me, which are my great-great-grandfather, my grandmother, my village, the plants, the stones. It comes through the person. You here in the present, you're the latest manifestation of all those things. You're an accumulation of layers of these things. When you look at those diagrams, each one of those persons are nodes sitting in this ring. It comes from the Sāmoan and other Polynesian rituals where, at least in Sāmoa, when you're sitting in those rings, you have a title —a Matai title, a chiefly title—and that title has an origin back maybe 500, 600 years ago. Everything all at once appears in that moment and the faces of all those people become faces of the last ancestors. One of the things that we do when we have kava is, when we pass the kava around, we say, "Tell us who you are and who you're bringing with you today." I'd like to think of each one of those diagrams is a kind of dimensional engagement between ancestors, between your ancestors and mine and others who sit in that rank.

I'm widely read in philosophy, especially the French—Gilles Deleuze, Félixe Guattari—and a lot of those ideas gel with [my experience of being] a Sāmoan living in Auckland and having to be immersed in knowledge that is not traditionally from my culture. I like the term *bricoleur*, *bricolage*. It's the way that I process knowledge, information, people. Drawing became an important mechanism as a way to process and make sense of those multiplicities.

HUM Is this the first time that you've exhibited these drawings? And how do they relate to the Biennial's theme "to carry"?

ALR This is the very first time, and it took some convincing from Megan.

The theme, “to carry”; for me, that's really important from a Sāmoan perspective. It’s a really important notion and a Sāmoan ritual for exchange. In Sāmoa, “to carry” is “si'i”. Si'i is basically to pick people’s, community’s, food up. It's also related to the notion of alofa, aroha, aloha. “Si'i ole alofa”: whenever there's a wedding—funeral, birthdays, an important event—if you have relations to the people who are holding the event, you have to call in, because you have a pathway, this line of connection between you and the people. “Si'i”, carry, “le'alofa”, to carry your love. It's the expression of love and that's usually in terms of fine mats, ʻie tōga. There are rituals when people are receiving you: you do speeches, and then these tōga or measina are opened, and they go from the visiting family towards the hosting family.

These are considered the act of “teu le vā,” to mend or embellish one’s relationships using material culture: things that you make, art. It's the way that [things are] passed down. Yeah, you can make art to make you feel good, but usually art, especially the highest form of productivity, like the fine mats made by women, are considered the most prestigious treasures, and they're the ones that are passed through [these rituals]. That was one of the ways that I connected with [the theme].

HUM Why did exhibiting in the Sharjah Biennial take a lot of convincing?

ALR I have a real imposter syndrome being in an art context, because I don't practice art as a form of experimenting with reality. The things that I do are more like diagrams. [They] are not yet material. They are part of the virtual thinking world.

HUM And yet it's interesting to have other disciplines in a contemporary art exhibition.

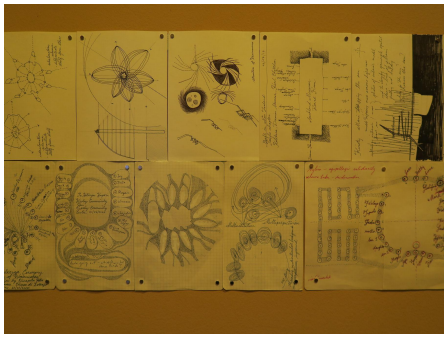
ALR Yes, so the [Biennial’s] logic of the multivocality really attracted me, and also the idea [of] what you bring with you

and the many that come together forming some sort of relationship, or some sort of discursive community, that will have some effect; if not now, the connections that you have will resonate in this other form of creativity or [in the] expression or making of a new vision for a world to come.

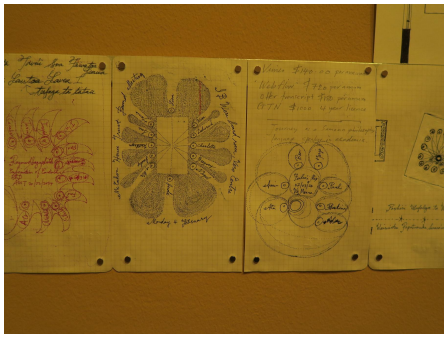
That's very much one of the things that interests me, having had students who are dealing with issues of trauma, of climate change. The idea: "What would you carry with you when your house or when your world is on fire?" What was really clear from some of the discussions I've had in Sharjah is the notion of the thing most precious being your lineage, your genealogy. Your ancestors have to be carried forward in some way, made safe from this burning calamity around you. Also, how to formulate another idea, another reality beyond the terrifying present that we are living in. That also attracted me to be with artists because I know from the students that I have that they don't do the politics that most of us in academia do. They always cut through the grain to make something other, and I love being around people like that.

Then I have these small [drawings] from my journals. Over the years I have maybe 15 or nearly 20 little books. I worked on a number of articulations of how to exhibit them. It was going to be freestanding, so I designed a number of elevations. [The works] were going to be floating off a substrate, which we were trying to make. But I was given another space where I could mount them on the wall and that made it so simple. I just got my assistant—my daughter Madalena—to cut away all the pages from the journal, and they're literally mounted on the wall at eye level.

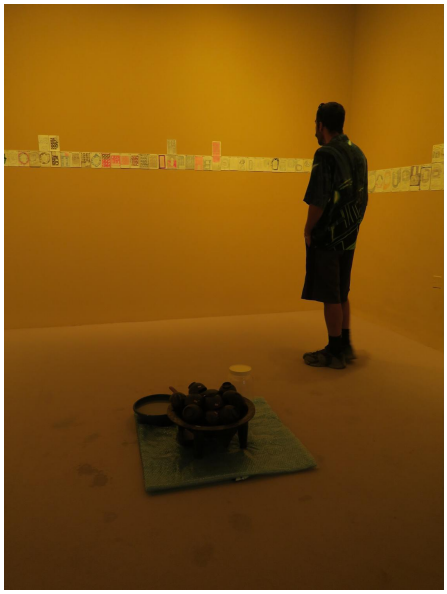
If you look at the work, there are what I would call many presences. There are gatherings, people sitting together, talking together, all the multiple moments that I've attended, talked to people, had talanoa with people, engaged with people. It's about talking to people. The role of vā or relationality or discursive community that I've built along the way.



Albert L. Refiti, *Vānimonimo* (detail), *Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry*, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Albert L. Refiti, Vānimonimo (detail), *Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry*, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Albert L. Refiti, *Vānimonimo* (detail), *Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry*, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM How do you feel about exhibiting this work in Sharjah? I'm always curious about how work from Aotearoa or the Pacific can resonate in a different way when it's outside of its original context.

ALR Absolutely. That's why I tried to design the substrate so that the work will float. The idea that they're disconnected from the lived reality where they were collected, because there are literally people in these things. They're there. I named them. In fact, almost everyone in those diagrams have names.

HUM Have you been to Sharjah before?

ALR No, never been. I've been to Dubai maybe twice, but not for very long. It's a world that I've only ever known from reading, from the architecture studies that I've done.

HUM One of the challenges for artists who are invited to a Biennial is how to think of presenting their work in that specific context. Sometimes it can be too much to ask artists to also respond to that context, especially if it's an existing work. Your work is bringing its own history and also connecting with other Indigenous stories presented in the Biennial.

ALR There are design elements that I have instigated in the room. For instance, the walls are painted yellow, yucky yellow. Even the lights have got a yellow filter. The room, in a funny way, was quite different than what I originally imagined. It's a liminal space. Some of my students are reading Mark Fisher, the late philosopher of the calamity at the end of the world and anti-capitalist. I was really interested in the idea of having a space that is sick. But in a funny way, it's quite calming. It's really weird. The floor, the wall, the ceiling and the filters are all a similar yellow colour.

The idea is that you're stepping into a world that is other to who you are; also to say that this environment frames something completely foreign to this place, that you are entering into another liminal reality. I'm very familiar with the diagrams, but I would imagine other people will find it quite different, and the feeling I want them to have is “What is this?” They can see that there are people in these diagrams, that they have some logic of relationship, but I don't want them to completely understand their context.

HUM You've participated in other international events and programmes, like we said in Venice, but also at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where you undertook a research fellowship. I'm curious to know what you think, maybe not as an artist, but as a practitioner and an academic, what the significance of being internationally active is.

ALR I've always thought that it's important. From my perspective, I work with concepts, ideas, philosophies. For a long time I’ve always thought it was important that the ideas that we

work with in the homeland, or in New Zealand, or in the diaspora—the roots and routes—they have to live elsewhere in the world. At least in New Zealand, we are already developing a culture away from the homeland in Sāmoa and other places [like] Tonga. In that world, cultural practice or things that emerge from everyday life in the village are no longer the same.

A lot of the students that I have who are no longer born in the homeland, they have multiple identities straddling Pākehā, Sāmoan, Tongan, Māori. It's really important, when they take on board some of the traditional ideas, customary ideas, that the work that they're doing stands on its own. The work that we're doing in New Zealand is no longer referencing the homeland so much. The actual practice that they do in the village has now become concepts in New Zealand; coming to Sharjah, even more conceptual. For me, that idea of the concept is really important, because it's the way that you fold all these things—identity, genealogies, cultural belonging—into these things called concepts. Our artists are so good at folding them into actual works and unfolding them in different places around the world.

The idea that the ancestral body is emerging elsewhere all the time. The continuity happens. [It] has different routes, rather than always [being] rooted in place. The significant thing with the way that we practice these sorts of ideas, at least in New Zealand, is that a lot of us do return to our roots. We tend to go home, to go to the homeland for visits, and to see the way your families are, where your grandparents are buried. I was born and raised in Sāmoa before going to New Zealand, so I have a firm foot in the homeland and also a running foot in many places elsewhere. I think it's the reality that for a lot of artists, thinkers, to have to engage in this other world, especially when the world has a lot of effects on what we do at home, in the homeland.

There's so many ways for me to answer that question, but I don't think there's an authentic thing. There's always this idea that there's an authentic way one should practice. That's how I always challenge my students. I think if you're given the gifts of knowledge, you have to make more interesting knowledge out of that. If that means that knowledge has to travel and has to find new routes, routes elsewhere, I think that's really important. I

guess you could say the same makes me comfortable to be in the company of other artists. I know that I'm not completely one, but some of the things I'm working with, I can see the similarity, the comparative ideas that we're all working with.

HUM Historically, Sharjah Biennial is known to engage with political subjects. At the same time, there is a contrast with a state that some could perceive to be quite conservative and limiting for certain people or communities. Was this something you considered or discussed with participating artists or the curators in your preparations to come to Sharjah?

ALR I did have those questions. I live in a feminist household, and when they found out I was invited, they said, “Don't go.” And that's what I mean, it took some convincing. You do your research about the place. There's something great about democracy, that outside this place (Sharjah) we live in a democracy, where you can't give up some of the freedoms that have been won, especially for women and other genders and minorities. If it wasn't for democracy and to some extent capitalism, they wouldn't have existed. However we rail against capitalism, it allows other things to exist, in its great complexity and irony.

I always have to try and think, I come from a culture where, yes, we do know what democracy is, but we also have tradition that ranks people. That ranking can mean that certain people don't have access like some people have. Chiefly systems are still very strong. I think, if you're an Indigenous person, you would know similarly you're from an environment where democracy is important elsewhere, but there's a certain kind of mechanism that you have to engage with your own community and maintain that.

When I came to Sharjah, I knew it for all its complexity. The people here, very similar to Sāmoans, are ritual people. They are encircled by a responsibility. Three or four times a day there are prayers. You can hear it everywhere. The architecture expresses that with the towers. It completely encircles people. Part of me said, “That's worth maintaining, and that's worth having me engage with those communities.” It really interests me. At the same time, I have to

think, like I do with my own community, of all the harm that is being caused by those kinds of systems of relations or spirituality, religiosity. On that level, I have to admit that I keep one eye open and one eye closed, because I know that if I keep both of them open, I could go mad. It is absolutely a complex idea.

Having said that, there is a role for artists from communities I come from in the Pacific and Sāmoa. Artists were always believed to be foreigners. The people who built the very first house in Sāmoa were foreigners, from a place called Lagituaiva, the ninth heaven. They are not Sāmoans. The tattooists who make the tattoos in Sāmoa, they come from a place called Fiti—Sāmoans often think "Fiji". There is this role that artists always had. They were outsiders. They make a prestigious material that the community invites them for: to build this sacred house, or tattoo the people with the markings that allow the people to be marked as people of service. They have rituals to invite them in and keep them safe and when their work is finished, they are cast out. There are rituals to literally throw them out of your village, out of your family.

Artists were not trustworthy people in the Sāmoan community, because they're willful. They do odd things. They see things that most people don't see. I would like to think that in most societies, communities, artists still have that role, because I think that's a function of how artists can have a vision of something other than what we have currently. That they invent the future in a different way. They take what's here, and they go out of the norms of society, to make this other world possible. They point to it. They're a mirror to reflect the trauma that we have, or the trauma that the perpetrator of violence can see.

Necessarily, then, artists are always on the outside margins of society. That's the only way artists can do what they do. If you ask most artists, they probably identify with those characteristics. So it's an absolutely contradictory world that we come into here in Sharjah, and complex, and you see people that absolutely would not be able to live in a society like this, but they're here. They're being looked after, well fed, and obviously the community here needs something sacred coming in from the outside to make this place more than what it is.

From what I hear, the Biennial has been that for a number of years now. The five women who are curating this edition talk about very radical ideas, and it's been entertained really well. As an academic, I would defend that they coexist in a place that's very complex and contradictory, because artists have that function. I'd like to think that I've kind of come along on the journey to either witness that or be part of a community like that.

Biographies



Albert L. Refiti is a Professor of Art, Design and Material Culture at Auckland University of Technology. His research and publications focus on the Pacific spatial and architectural environment. He is co-author of *Pacific Spaces: Transformations and Transmutations* (Berghahn, 2022), *The Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture* (Springer, 2018), and *The Concept of Vā: Relationality, Time and Space in the Pacific and Beyond* (ANU Press, forthcoming).

HUM

creativenz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa