Resistance through Koloa

by Ysabelle Cheung

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Ta'ovala Fala Vala (Tangata). Courtesy of the Dowager Lady Fielakepa. Photo: Tanya Edwards.



Koloa: Women, Art and Technology at Para Site (G Floor). Installation view. Photo: Kitmin Lee.



Koloa: Women, Art and Technology at Para Site (22 Floor). Installation view. Photo: Kitmin Lee.



Vaimaila Urale, *Aniva*, 2019, courtesy of Sanderson Contemporary, Auckland, Aotearoa/NZ.

Continuing to expand its geographical coverage, Contemporary HUM is pleased to bring you the second essay covering New Zealand's art activity in Asia. Working with local sub-editors in the region, we have commissioned a first series of new publications about projects in Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangladesh. This one is an essay by Hong Kong-based writer Ysabelle Cheung reviewing the most recent exhibition at Para Site, Hong Kong, and is produced in collaboration with HUM's Associate Editor Amy Weng.

Throughout history, the Kingdom of Tonga has adapted to unpredictable societal, economic, political and environmental changes. Then and now, the work of women has been instrumental in the persistence of Tongan cultural narratives, in particular the practice of *koloa*, an umbrella term denoting tangible and intangible wealth and encompassing various forms of cultural exchange, such as textile-making. As testament to the significance of *koloa*, the latest show at Para Site art space in Hong Kong

showcases the work of the Tongan women, from the historical to the contemporary. “Koloa: Women, Art, and Technology” showcases artworks mostly drawn from the collection of Tongan cultural ambassador Dowager Lady Fielakepa Tunakaimanu Fielakepa, who curated the show alongside Cosmin Costinas and Vivian Zherl, and also includes artworks by three female artists from New Zealand, each tackling in subtle or explicit ways their own relationship to indigeneity.

Para Site’s space is separated into two levels. At ground level, there is a specific focus on depictions of industrial and technological progress in the form of modernised hardware (such as the water tank, which when introduced to Tonga in the 1940s, allowed for more convenient accessibility to clean water). Further along, synthesised modes of artistic production are evident in the works of contemporary artists Tanya Edwards, Nikau Hindin, and Vaimaila Urale. These are contextualised against newly created Tongan *kupesi*—pictorial stencils made from pandanus or coconut leaves, and stitched with coconut frond midribs—and *ngatu*, the painted tapa cloth that bears these patterns.



Koloa: Women, Art and Technology at Para Site (G Floor). Installation view. Photo: Kitmin Lee.



Tanya Edwards, *Queen Salōte*, 2018, digital print. Courtesy of the artist.



Nikau Hindin, *Te Uranga (The rising and setting of the sun due East and due West. Autumnal Equinox. 20.03.2020)*, from the series *Kōkōrangi ki Kōkōwai: From Celestial Bodies to the Earth*, 2019, kōkōwai (red ochre), ngārahu (soot pigment) on aute (paper mulberry). Courtesy of the artist.



Nikau Hindin, *Taparau II*, from the series *Kōkōrangi ki Kōkōwai: From Celestial Bodies to the Earth*, 2019, kōkōwai (red ochre), ngārahu (soot pigment) on aute (paper mulberry). Courtesy of the artist.

At the entrance of the space is Tongan Māori artist Edwards' digital-print portrait of Her Majesty the late Queen Sālote Tupou III, the beloved first female ruler of Tonga between 1918 and 1965. Although other names appear in the exhibition, through wall texts and the accompanying catalogue, it is interesting to note that there are no other portraits or faces throughout, perhaps a deliberate curatorial move to avoid the problematic aspects of

photojournalism around indigenous communities. Rendered as an artwork with overlapping layers of colour, this image of Queen Sālote might be seen not just as a portrait of a woman, but also symbolic of the history of matriarchy in Tonga and society's connection to *koloa*. Edwards has also included a clue to her own bi-cultural heritage, seen through the patterns of traditional Māori weaving in the background, and perhaps hinting at her own matriarchal lineage—her grandmother, Puti Hineaupounamu Rare, is an expert weaver.

In addition to illustrating Tonga's matriarchal society, the portrait also references the increased interactions with British monarchy and industrial growth under Queen Sālote's reign. Through the wall text, we learn that Edwards has in fact created a copy of a photograph of the monarch when she visited England to witness the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Here, Queen Sālote's expression and outfit that day is captured: she wears a European-style silk mantle with a Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire badge while simultaneously proudly bearing her Tongan heritage with a feather hairpiece, communicating through her dress, as many global political figures have done before and after, Tonga's gradual adoption of European practices while maintaining overall power or governance. (Although the Kingdom of Tonga was under British protectorate rule from 1900 to 1970, it retained its monarchical government structure). Around this room we see other examples of this marriage of local and foreign influence, such as *kupesi* depictions of spitfire planes that were purchased by Tonga and donated to Britain during the Pacific War, and the water tank, whose motif is seen in a *ngatu* created by Women's Group Kautaha Painitu'ua and painted by Tongan artists Matei and Mona Ta'ufo'ou. In these works, meetings of industry and tradition, manmade and natural, and foreign and local, are presented in a neutral context, with little or no background information. For visitors with no prior knowledge of the region's history, it might be easy to conclude that Tonga has adapted to modernisation and globalisation with relatively little negative social or political repercussions.



Koloa: Women, Art and Technology at Para Site (G Floor). Installation view. Photo: Kitmin Lee.



Ngatu with spitfire plane motifs, c.1940. Photo: Eddie Lam, 2019.



Vaimaila Urale, *Aniva*, 2019, courtesy of Sanderson Contemporary, Auckland, Aotearoa/NZ.



Mixed design Tongan kupesi, prior to 1930s. Courtesy Lady Tunakaimanu Fielakepa.



Koloa: Women, Art and Technology at Para Site (G Floor). Installation view. Photo: Kitmin Lee.

However, Samoan-born, Auckland-based artist Vaimaila Urale aims to deconstruct and subvert stereotypes of modernity and colonisation in her practice, examining the relationship between indigenous communities in the Pacific and the enlightenment ideals of Euro-American arrivals. For *Aniva II*, she applied sand and glue to paper to write in an invented vocabulary that references both markings in traditional Samoan bark cloth, a practice on the brink of disappearance, and computer script in the American Standard Code for Information Exchange, which was developed in the 1960s to popularise global digital communications. Urale's merging of cultures at once equalises the two systems of language—one suppressed and the other aggressively promoted by the Global North—and proposes an alternative narrative that recognises similarities between the languages, such as the delicate wedge-shape of bird's feet in Samoan bark cloth and the greater than or less than symbol in mathematics.

This radical repositioning of history seems to begin and end with Urale's work. That specific aspects of Tongan culture were lost or suppressed in pursuit of colonisation and progression isn't otherwise immediately clear in the show. *Ngatu* and *kupesi* appear to be crafted using the same labor-intensive methods that depend on skilled artisans, despite the availability of machinery and mass-produced objects popular in other areas in the Pacific. However, in the accompanying printed material, it is pointed out that the materials used in *ngatu* production have become commercialised, and there is a concerted effort by organisations such as The National Woman's Council to preserve tradition through training women, with some producing crafts specifically for tourists, in order to maintain economic growth. While acknowledging that such changes are inevitable, the curatorial text suggests that the Tongan community is committed to adaptation over erasure of culture.



Black ngatu, reproduction (detail). Courtesy the Dowager Lady Fielakepa.



Kafa Lou'ulu Teuteu Kula. Courtesy of the Dowager Lady Fielakepa. Photo: Tanya Edwards.



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As the show moves up into the upper-level space, its focus shifts to the inheritance and interpretation of Tongan cultural artefacts

through the context of global contemporary art. Various historically-significant *ngatu, kupesi*, ceremonial mats, *ta'ovala* (a dress mat, worn around the waist) and *kafa* (a woven rope made of fibres or hair) are displayed, not under glass and in low light, as in typical institutional—and Euro-American ethnographic—presentations, but draped across the expanse of the space, resting on tables under bright lights and against fuchsia walls, seemingly to prioritise the living, breathing, and modern aspects of these practices. In the context of a contemporary space, the work rejects the stuffy label of relic and asks to be identified as an artwork. A *ng atu t*ā*'uli* (blackened tapa cloth), a re-creation of one in the collection of Her Royal Highness the Princess Sālote Mafile'o Pilolevu Tuita, is a scroll of red clay and black candlenut pigment—rich, uncontaminated hues that in their oneness with the earth might remind viewers of the introspective landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe or Etel Adnan. (One also recalls the work of Gutai or Color Field, but these examples seem too hyper-masculine, aggressive.) Pulled in a simple but dramatic diagonal line from ceiling to floor, the 32-metre textile also finds a likeness in Eva Hesse's experiments with material, space and gravity. Additionally, this presentation allows for microscopic access into the work's texture, scent and story. We almost hear the pounding and drying of mulberry tree bark into fine strips (*feta'aki*); we smell the perfume of the candlenut kernel being burned into dark soot; and we almost see girls and women lined up along a semi-circle wooden table upon which the *feta'aki* is stretched, shaped, and painted.

Like artworks exchanged through networks of artists, curators, collectors and institutions, these objects are similarly shared and gifted from one owner to another. *Ngatu* and *kafa* draw out not just economic and social provenances but also narratives of womanhood and intergenerational knowledge-sharing. The hair of daughters and mothers are braided together with cowrie shells to form *kafa* belts, and *kupesi r*eveal pictorial references to significant periods of Tongan history, such as the war efforts of Queen Sālote. Juxtaposed with these stories is Urale's *Mea Ila Ila II* (2019), whose title translates roughly to "the shiny things." These shiny things refer to an admixture of sand and biodegradable glitter, which Urale used to write from her vocabulary on a metal square, and which hint at activities of play and leisure with her daughters.

The artist's intent is to code the routines of motherhood—play, sleep, eat—into these glyphs, at once recording the mundanity of quotidian life, in contrast to the *ngatu*, which are typically created for special occasions, and revealing the tensions, in the usage of sand and glitter, around raising her daughters in a rapidly modernising world and between the natural islands of Savai'i and urban Wellington. "I feed them words to counter certain Western ideals around concepts of individuality, ownership, superheroes, gender roles, commercialism and the need to have things," she writes in her description of the work.



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Vaimaila Urale, *Mea Ila Ila*, 2018. Courtesy of Vunilagi Vou, Casablanca, Morocco.

This effort of subversion and of continual resistance to overwhelming external influence is felt at every level within the show, from the granular to the macroscopic. It seems more than coincidental that the exhibition opened in a year marked by political action in Hong Kong and rife with debate around the erosion of sovereignty and identity. In a city whose people feel at times groundless, one can find hope in the works of Nikau Hindin, an artist from Te Rarawa who maps her own oceanic and celestial navigations onto newly-created Māori bark cloth, known as *aute*, a practice lost in the mid-19th century that she is dedicated to

reviving. In Hindin's works there is a subtle push to connect the skies, sea and stars and reclaim them from colonising history, and from the Western modernisation-centric way of looking at the world. There is yet another clue in the exhibition's title that argues for this reclamation. Technology *can* entail computers, artificial intelligence, GPS systems, and other cutting-edge machinery, but at its core it is a philosophy, describing the ways in which knowledge is collected and applied for practical uses. Should we not then see these celestial navigations, the passing down of information through *koloa*, and the communion with earth's pigments, as the most vital form of technology?

Biographies



Nikau Hindin (Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi) is a contemporary artist and with a revivalist agenda to reawaken Māori aute. She completed her conjoint BA in Māori studies and Media studies and Honours in Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. In 2013, she did an exchange at the University of Hawai'i (UH) where she first learned about Māori aute. In 2014 she was part of the crew on Hōkūle'a from Auckland to Golden Bay. She is the recipient of the Māori Battalion VC scholarship and the Sir Hugh Kawharu award which enabled her access to study the Auckland War Memorial Museum collection. She returned to the UH, on a Graduate Assistant Scholarship, where she learned from Master knowledge holders. In October 2018, she completed a deep-sea voyage from Norfolk Island to Tāmaki Makaurau. Nikau completed her Masters of Creative Practice at Toihoukura Art School.

In 2021, Nikau showed at the Auckland Art Fair, Te Uru Contemporary Gallery, Millers O'Brien Gallery. She has been featured recently in three shows around Aotearoa New Zealand: *Native Voices* at Tairawhiti Museum, *Te Rangi Haupapa: A Woven History* at Tauranga Art Gallery and *Tākiri: An Unfurling* at the New Zealand Maritime Museum.



Tanya Edwards is a Tonga-based artist of Maori (Tainui) and Tongan descent. Primarily a print-maker, Tanya's work is often an exploration of her bi-cultural heritage reflecting both the fine art of maori weaving of her maternal lineage and the Tongan tapa textiles of her paternal side. She has exhibited work in New Zealand, Australia and around the Pacific and has works on permanent display at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. Edwards has been living in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, for the past 21 years and founded Me'a'ofa Gallery in 2018, the only art gallery currently operating in the Kingdom, which seeks to promote contemporary Tongan art.



Vaimaila Urale (b. 1972, Fagamalo, Sāmoa, lives and works in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand) has developed a distinct art making process that draws on traditional Sāmoan elements expressed through digital media and contemporary social art practices. Referencing early computer image making known as ASCII, Urale explores digital mark making utilising universal computer keyboard characters / \ backslash and forward slash, as well as mathematical symbols < > less-than and greater-than. Using this process, she has designed tattoos, screen prints, ceramics as well as large-scale public murals. Urale graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from Auckland University of Technology (AUT) 2010 and received the Head of School Visual Arts award. Her art practice has a strong focus on collaboration and audience engagement. She is known for her work as part of the art collective D.A.N.C.E art club and her involvement with Whau arts festival in Auckland. Her work has been exhibited nationally at Dowse Art Museum and Māngere Arts Centre – Ngā Tohu o Uenuku, as well as internationally at SOMArts, San Francisco, Para Site, Hong Kong, Fei Contemporary Art Center, China and Blak Dot Gallery, Australia.



Ysabelle Cheung is a writer and editor based in Hong Kong. She was formerly the managing editor at ArtAsiaPacific and associate editor at *Time Out* Hong Kong. She writes about literature, film, music and art and her work has appeared in *Artforum*, *ArtReview*, *Artnet News*, *Hyperallergic*, *ArtReview*, *Catapult*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the *South China Morning Post*.

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