

# All our relations

## Art from Moananui a Kiwa at the NGV

Léuli Eshraghi, *Narrm Melbourne*

Four exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Narrm Melbourne signal that contemporary art from Moananui a Kiwa has matured enough for its own solo and group exhibitions at the institution, mere decades behind interstate and overseas counterparts. How the works of First Nations and settler artists are represented, including the ‘Contemporary Pacific Art and Community Day’ opening celebrations,<sup>1</sup> are indicative of slow, hopefully steady change in First Nations agency and presence within Australia’s largest public art museum. Moananui a Kiwa

(Reo Māori), Vasa Loloa (Sāmoan), Lul (Hakö), Na Ta (Kuanua), Solwora (Tok Pisin, Pijin, Bislama), are only a few of the names for our planet’s largest ocean. A third of the Earth’s surface is populated by thousands of diverse animals, birds, sea life, peoples, languages, practices and ecologies. Various referred to as Oceania, Australia, Pacific, Australasia and South Seas by invading settlers, traders, farmers, miners, planters and missionaries, these worlds were viewed as a sea of islands by late critical theorist Epeli Hau’ofa (1939–2009).

The encounter between Moananui a Kiwa and Europe has been brought into the Indigenous worldviews of Lisa Reihana and featured performers in her two-channel work *Pursuit of Venus* (2015). Set against a decoloured European imaginary of the ‘exotic South Seas’, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804–05) by Jean-Gabriel Charvet, the work is an example of āhua rerekē, non-customary art informed by kaupapa Māori, including multiple visions of tattooing, performance and ceremony from different Moananui a Kiwa cultures. Reihana returns Indigenous voices to entangled histories, resisting ‘European imperialist acts of discovering, naming, depicting and claiming.’<sup>2</sup> Decolonised bodies are critically present, before and behind the camera, holding spaces in ‘an Indigenous inflection that rests heavily on the living traditions of performative gestures and cultural knowledge.’<sup>3</sup>

Concurrently on display upstairs at NGV International (until recently) was the largest Lul art collection exhibition ever

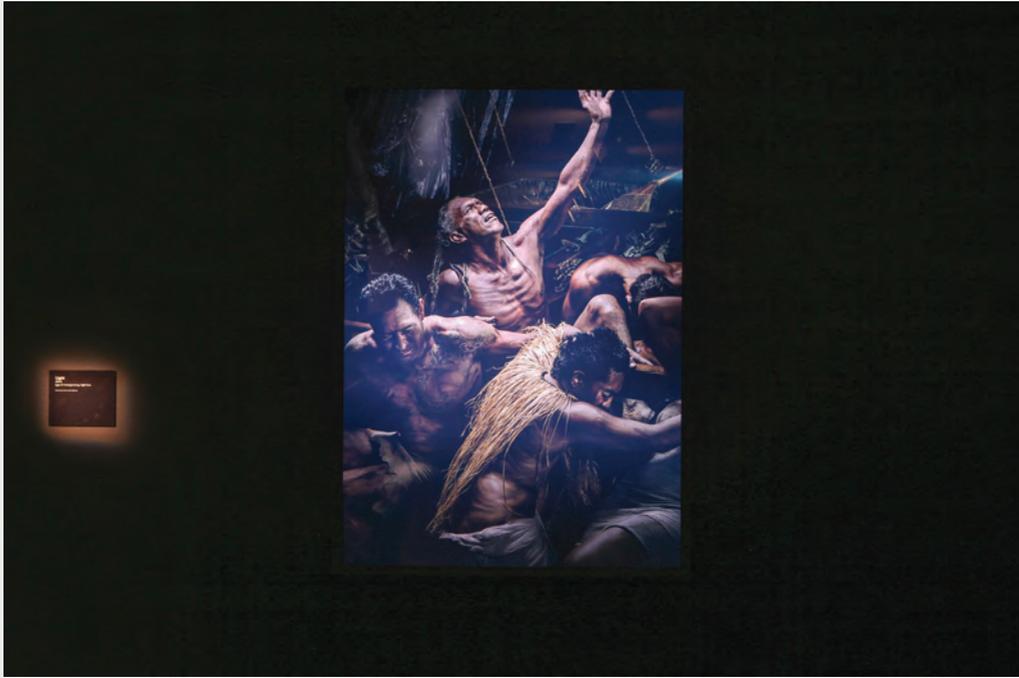
at the institution, ‘Art of the Pacific’, lead-curated by Aunty Sana Balai and Judith Ryan. The ‘inspiration’ gleaned from ‘tribal Oceanic art’ by avant-garde European artists a century ago was here decentred, with First Nations and settler works interspersed, particularly a feature section on contemporary lei practices. Barkcloths by unknown makers from Viti Levu, Bau and Rarotonga adorned the walls in a commanding display featuring Francis Upritchard’s signature clay figures. Daniel Boyd’s dotted painting referencing rebbilib, Marshallese navigational charts, stood

opposite an assembly of intricately carved ceremonial shields, by makers from across West Papua and Papua New Guinea. Materiality was not the sole connection across time, space and cultural practice. Continuing colonial impositions on bodies, lands, waters and minds informed the reading of Angela Tiatia’s video *Walking the wall* (2014), Greg Semu’s ‘Self-portrait with Pe’a, Sentinel road, Herne Bay’ photographic series (2014), and Taloi Havini and Stuart Miller’s ‘Blood Generation’ photographic series (2009–12).

Back downstairs, ‘The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (People of the Pacific)’ series (2014–16) by Semu offers a chiaroscuro effect with dramatic photographs installed on light boxes glowing in the darkened atmosphere. Working closely with Rarotongan Māori advisers and collaborators, Semu created this series as a reinterpretation of Louis Steele and Charles Goldie’s decried painting *The Arrival of the Maoris in New Zealand* (1898), itself based on Théodore Géricault’s painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19). Semu’s works challenge the reductionist logic of these epic European paintings to breathe Indigenous voices into their restaging, bringing to light vast civilisational relationships and ceremonial routes across Vasa Loloa.

Eight of Robin White and Ruha Fifita’s majestic Tongan ngatu barkcloth compositions further map contemporary voyages and connections in ‘Siu i Moana: Reaching Across the Ocean’. To Fifita, in each beautifully hand-imprinted and painted ngatu ‘is embedded the questions and wonderment of a people seek-

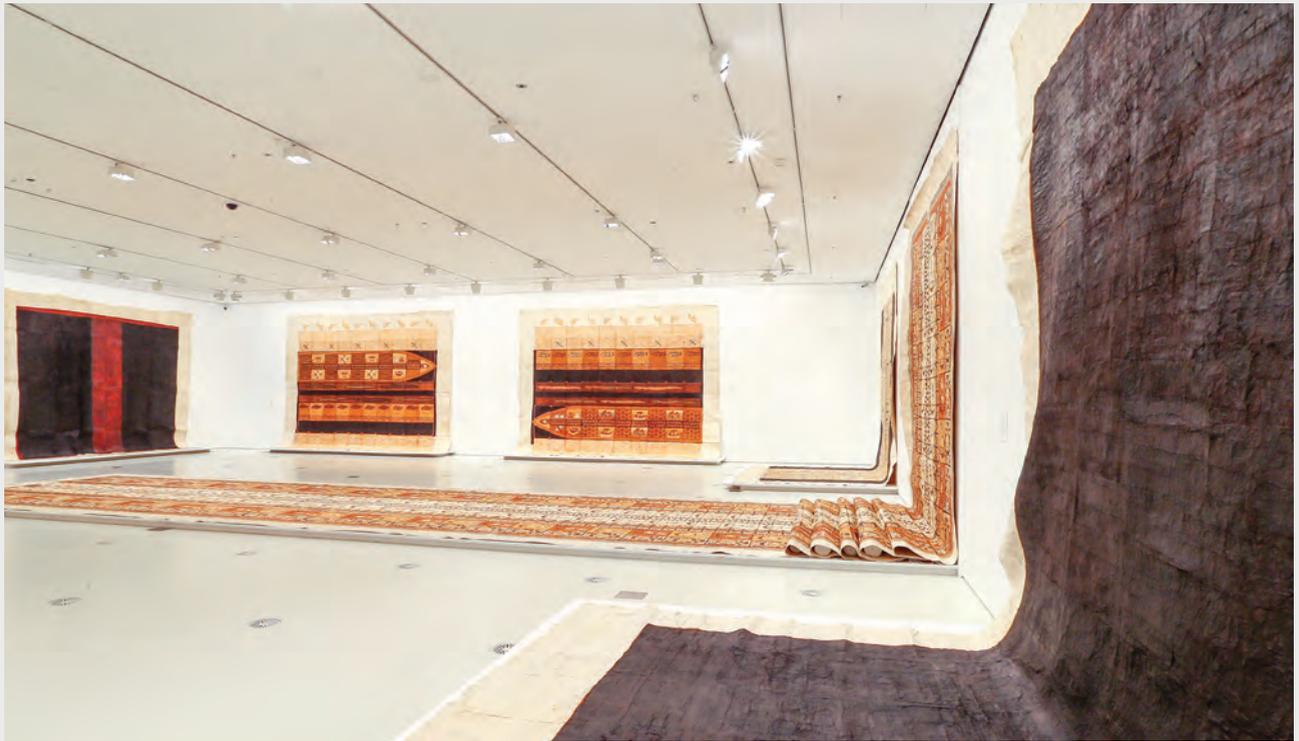




Top:  
*Greg Semu: The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (People of the Pacific)*, exhibition view, NGV International, Narm Melbourne, 2016; photo: Wayne Taylor

Bottom:  
*Lisa Reihana: in Pursuit of Venus*, exhibition view, NGV International, Narm Melbourne, 2016; photo: Wayne Taylor

Opposite:  
*Siu i Moana: Reaching Across the Ocean*, exhibition view, NGV International, Narm Melbourne, 2016; photo: Wayne Taylor



ing to be worthy students of life'.<sup>4</sup> Diaspora and continuity are intertwined in these examples of *nimamea'a koka'anga*, Tongan barkcloth produced in collaboration with the *kautaha koka'anga* group from Haveluloto village, Tongatapu. The various forms of *ngatu* celebrate the fish and human migrations to and from archipelagic waters, 'infusing modern everyday materials such as tinned food and tea packaging with human values that are timeless and borderless'.<sup>5</sup> The *ngatu* in the white cube of the space were activated in performance by Fifita on the opening weekend, surrounded by Islanders and others alike basking in their presence. The natural cyclical flow of Tongan artistic thought and practice is here restored, once again 'plural, holistic, circular and inclusive in approach'.<sup>6</sup>

The four exhibitions buck the wider trend of primarily exhibiting dead European male artists, with rough parity between male and female artists. Positive audience responses are part of success, but for First Nations peoples, fulfilling the promise of sustained engagement means so much more. Non-European art worlds, and non-European women, queer and non-binary artists especially,<sup>7</sup> do not yet enjoy just critical attention or representation in Australia's art schools and art museums. It bears reminding that there are currently no First Nations curators, public programmers or collection managers employed at our largest institution, including Aunty Sana Balai's recent departure after 12 years of curatorial advocacy work, without an active succession plan in motion either.<sup>8</sup> An equitable shared future in this part of *Vasa Loloa* would mean First Nations agency and presence. In the absence of our actual bodies and practices other than every five to eight years,<sup>9</sup> these powerful artworks act on our behalf as radical conduits to Indigenous worlds otherwise rendered invisible.

1. This took place at NGV International, Narm Melbourne, 11 June 2016.

2. Rhana Devenport and Lisa Reihana, 'An interview with Lisa Reihana', in *Lisa Reihana: in Pursuit of Venus*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2015, p. 6.

3. *ibid.*, p. 7.

4. Ruha Fifita, 'Pieces of infinity', in *Art Monthly Australasia*, no. 290, June–July 2016, p. 33.

5. Judith Ryan, 'Siu i Moana: Reaching Across the Ocean', *ngv.vic.gov.au*, 10 June 2016; see [www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/siu-i-moana-reaching-across-the-ocean/](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/siu-i-moana-reaching-across-the-ocean/), accessed 8 August 2016.

6. Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai and Manuēsina 'Ofa-Ki-Hautolo Māhina, *Nimamea'a: The Fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet*, Object-space, Auckland, 2011, p. 26.

7. Natalie Thomas, 'NGV #cockfest: Degas – a new vision', *nattysolo*, 30 July 2016; see <https://nattysolo.com/2016/07/30/ngv-cockfest-degas-a-new-vision/>, accessed 8 August 2016.

8. Léuli Eshraghi, 'On forgetting Aboriginal art', *Overland*, 2 July 2015; see <https://overland.org.au/2015/07/on-forgetting-aboriginal-art/>, accessed 8 August 2016.

9. The last exhibition was 'Wisdom of the Mountain: Art of the Ōmie' (2009–10), curated by Aunty Sana Balai and Judith Ryan.

'Lisa Reihana: in Pursuit of Venus', 'Greg Semu: The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (People of the Pacific)' and 'Siu i Moana: Reaching Across the Ocean' are on display at NGV International, Narm Melbourne, until 11 September 2016; 'Art of the Pacific: NGV Collection Focus' was exhibited at NGV International, Narm Melbourne, from 26 March until 14 August 2016.