



**SĀMOAN ART
MUSEUM-PERFORMANCE**

Samoaan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I and II (2020, 2021)

SĀMOAN ART MUSEUM-PERFORMANCE

Introduction

Léuli Eshrāghi, Niki Little, Jesse King, Vicky Moufawad-Paul

imagineNATIVE commissioned poem, October 2021

Rosanna Raymond

Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance

Léuli Eshrāghi

Charting hxstories in Sāmoan visual and digital art

Léuli Eshrāghi

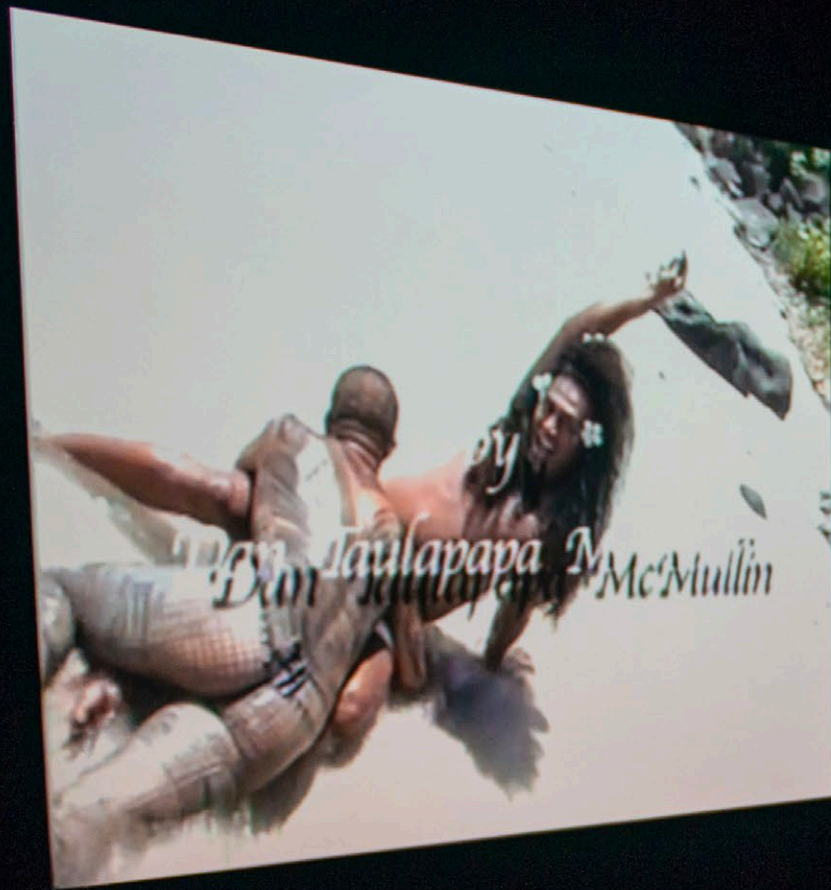
Contributors

Rosanna Raymond, Yuki Kihara, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, Jason Edward Lewis, Lani Tupu, Lisa Taouma, Angela Tiatia, Chantal Fraser, Pelenakeke Brown, Christopher Ulutupu, Louisa Afoa, DB Amorin, Brian Fuata, Talia Smith, Isi (Chris Emory), Nadeem Tiafau Eshrāghi, Léuli Eshrāghi

Funding Acknowledgements

»imagine
NATIVE





Dan Taulapapa McMullin, *Sinalela* (2001), exhibition view,
Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I, 2020, A Space Gallery/imagineNATIVE

Folasaga | Introduction

Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I and II, as exhibitions at A Space Gallery in Tkaronto/Toronto, visit the ancestral territories of the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe peoples, including the Michi-Saagig. The exhibitions' digital iterations as screening programs on imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival's platform ripple outwards from Tkaronto/Toronto to many Indigenous territories around the world. Curator Léuli Eshrāghi (Sāmoan/Persian/Cantonese) humbly recognizes the continuing rights to territory, language, culture and relationality of the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe peoples, including the Michi-Saagig.

Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I and II are the two first exhibitions in an ongoing transnational archival project, *Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance*, that began in March 2020 through discussions with Niki Little, Artistic Director, of imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, in the heady days of the NIRIN: 22nd Biennale of Sydney opening just before the health crisis gripped the planet. Building on continuing dialogues with Dr Lana Lopesi, Ioana Gordon-Smith, Caroline Monnet, Sébastien Aubin, Mylène Guay, Camille Larivée, Angela Tiatia and Lisa Hilli, this Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance is a way to gather important work by living Sāmoan artists that is outside the control of Eurocentric institutions of culture in the settler colonies where a majority of Sāmoans make our homes today.

Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I and II are two research-creation outcomes of Eshrāghi's Horizons/Indigenous Futures Postdoctoral Fellowship (2019-21) with the Initiative for Indigenous Futures/Aboriginal Territories of Cyberspace, led by Professor Jason Edward Lewis at Concordia University. These projects were made possible through the generous support of imagineNATIVE particularly Niki Little and Jesse King, A Space Gallery, particularly Vicky Moufawad-Paul, the, Nia Tero Foundation, and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures Research Partnership funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as the Horizon Postdoctoral Program funded by Concordia University.

These projects were realized from occupied Arrernte Country (Mparntwe/Alice Springs), Muwinina Country (nipaluna/Hobart), and Dish with One Spoon treaty territory (Tkaronto/Toronto). All our thanks to the artists for their incredible work.

Léuli Eshrāghi, Niki Little, Jesse King and Vicky Moufawad-Paul
nipaluna and Tkaronto, October 2021

Speaking in Ceremony | imagineNATIVE commissioned poem by Rosanna Raymond

Water and blood flows through my mother's grave

Remembrance will be channelled
through a sacred river

Native wombs
Shedding unwanted signs of occupation

Tears shed dry, bruised from the inside

Erasure
Handed down through time
Stranded in the DNA

Woven genealogies
Saturated in semen
Sanctified by the atua

The mats are soft and warm
We are dreaming, constructing who we need to be

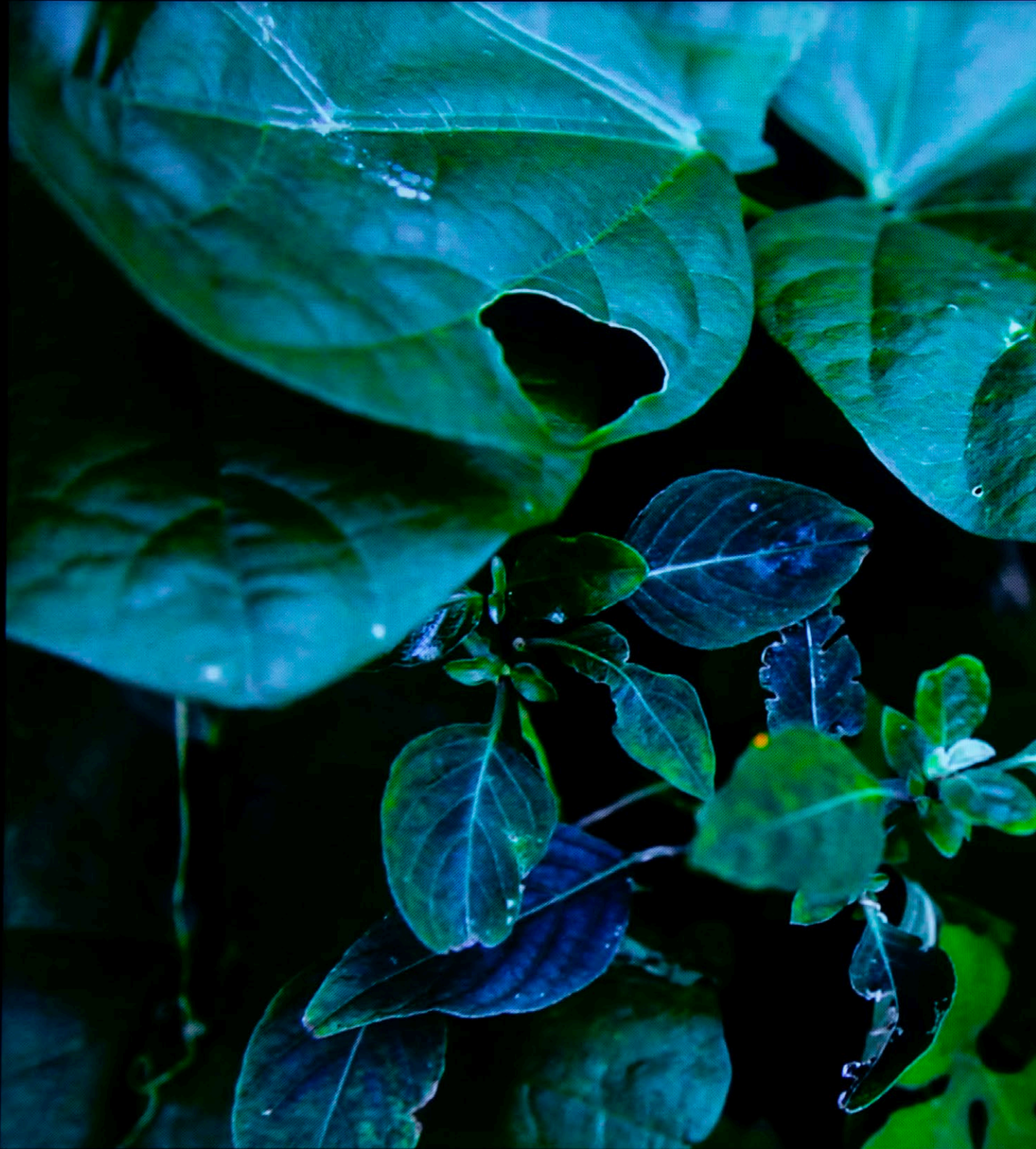
Nothing is impossible
when we speak in ceremony

The niu aitu, bathing in the scent of the underworld
Crips, bush queens, streetwalkers, queers, pink flamingos

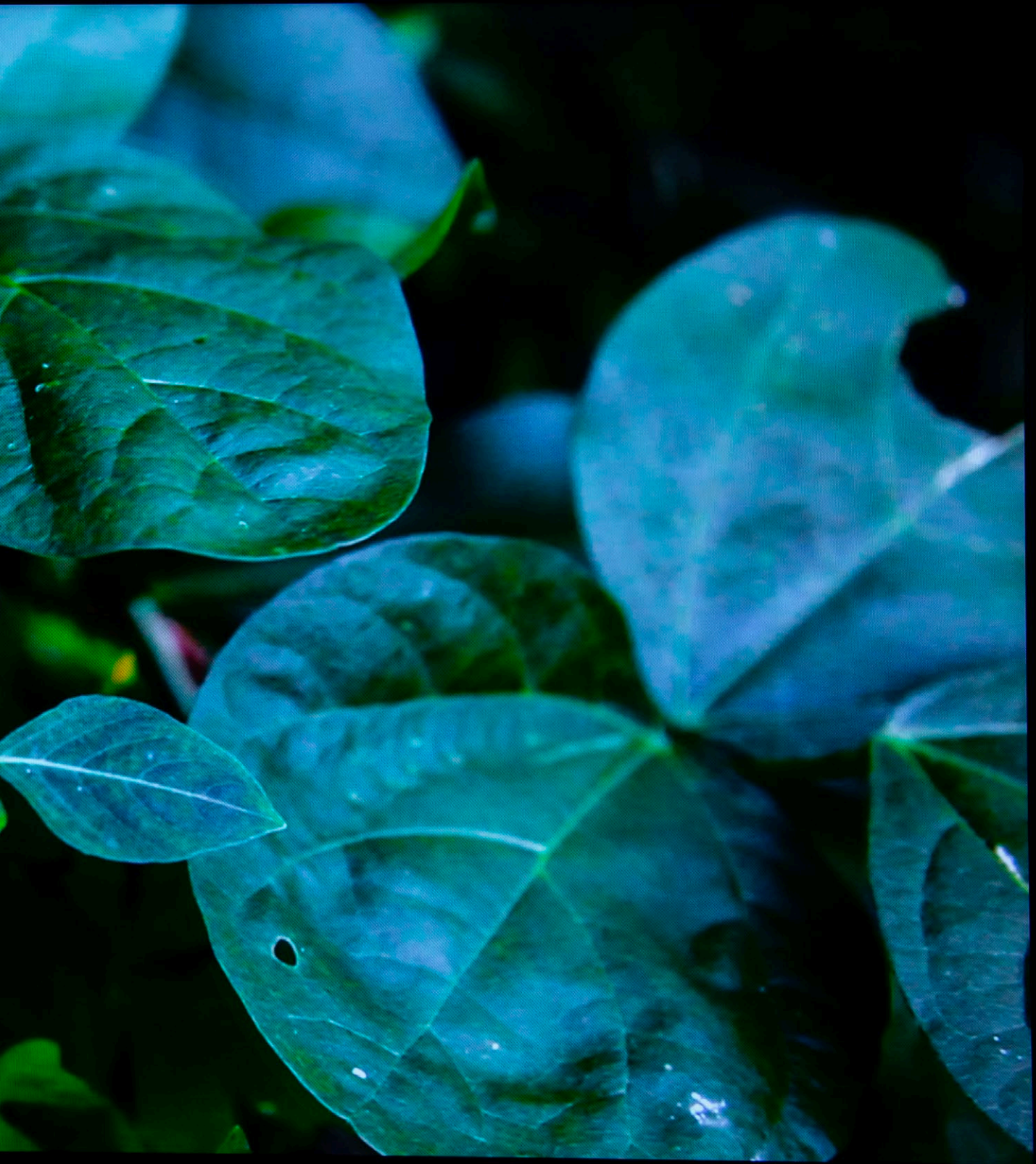
Defiant bodies thriving in urban taro plantations
The drone of the motorway; a backdrop for our own sovereignty

The vā reimagined as a self-perpetuating continuum
taking form in a (con)fusion of flesh and time

Resolved in the shadows found in the blackness of a dark ocean
A sublime spectacle that needs neither you or me



Angela Tiatia, *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis* (2010), exhibition view, Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I, 2020, A Space Gallery/imagineNATIVE



Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance | Dr. Léuli Eshrāghi

Informed by the mixed results of the Sámi Dáiddamusea, Sámi Art Museum-Performance of the Northern Norway Art Museum in 2017, this project encompasses multiple exhibitions bringing distinct aesthetic practices into constellation, united by ancestral ties to the archipelago called Sāmoa situated in the centre of the Great Ocean, colonized from Gregorian year 1830 by competing European churches, plantocracies and empires. The western islands Savai'i, Manono, Apolima and 'Upolu which constitute today's Independent State of Sāmoa, were colonized by the German Empire and Kingdom of Prussia, then by the Dominion of New Zealand for the British Empire, before achieving apparent decolonization in 1962. The Westminster systems of parliament, justice and policing were prerequisites to independence from the United Kingdom, and so a complete decolonization, notwithstanding the effective fusion of church and state, has not yet taken place. The eastern Tutuila, Aunu'u and Manu'a (Ofu, Olosega, Ta'ū) islands, forming today's Unincorporated Territory of American Sāmoa, were colonized by the United States of America through the same arrangement as the western islands.

Neither of these current political frameworks fully reconstitute sovereign balance to precolonial Indigenous governance systems based on soālaupule, deliberative consultation, and leadership earned through service to clans, villages, districts, and the Tafa'ifā, four precolonial royal domains. Since the Gregorian 1960s, tens of thousands of Sāmoans have left both sides of the divided archipelago, pillaged as it is by plantations and fisheries, for employment and education in the larger anglophone settler colonies of the Great Ocean's rim. Large communities call the United States, New Zealand and Australia home, with smaller communities in Canada, Fiji, Germany, United Kingdom and France. In this context of global displacement and diasporic experiences of 'aganu'u māo'i or Sāmoan indigeneity, questions of access to Indigenous histories of aesthetic and intellectual practices are demonstrably pivotal to necessary futurities that are firmly situated in the world of our ancestors. Kānaka Maoli scholars Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua and Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada define Indigenous futurities in the following terms, specific to the Hawaiian archipelagic context, but applicable to Sāmoa and other Indigenous territories impacted by ongoing forms of colonization.

Fururities are ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures; thus futurities shape the horizons of possibility for specific futures. We see Indigenous futurities as practices of future-making that often disrupt the linearity of Western liberal-democratic understandings of temporality. We foreground Kanaka Maoli enactments of relationalities of times and places that transcend

settler temporalities and mappings, expressions that posit preferred Kanaka Maoli futures over U.S.-imperial ones.¹

Haunted by the spectre of the cabinet of curiosities, human zoos, and salvage anthropology, tens of thousands of Ancestral Belongings and also Ancestral Remains from the Sāmoan archipelago lie dormant, categorized and exhibited in staid museums of world cultures (aka anthropology, ethnography, humanities, social history) and of art history with a penchant for Western linear and encyclopedic collecting. The small formal museums located on 'Upolu and Tutuila are sadly informed by an inferiority complex to colonizers, such as Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson who is buried at the sacred summit of mount Vaea. Considering the majority of practicing artists, critics, poets, makers and curators who would consider themselves tagata mā'oi to the Sāmoan archipelago live and work on the occupied lands of kin and distant relation First Peoples, building a physical repository for Sāmoan aesthetic and intellectual practices on these territories implies myriad breaches of cultural protocols of visitation, architecture and orature.

This Sāmoan Art Museum–Performance is justifiably made of ephemeral physical and digital display territories, offering a new archive of Sāmoan media artists' work spanning 1995 to 2021. The physical and digital exhibitions *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I and II* have been realized through the curatorial and financial support of Niki Little, Artistic Director, and Jesse King, Programming Assistant, of imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, and Vicky Moufawad–Paul, Director/Curator, of A Space Gallery. Through data banks and domain hosts throughout the world, this exhibition reaches across countless occupied territories of First Peoples. Through the physical walls of A Space Gallery in Tkaronto, these exhibitions visit the ancestral territories of the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe peoples, including the Michi–Saagig, for which I am deeply grateful and humbled.

When I was living in the city for the first time—Meanjin and surrounds in occupied Turrbal and Yuggera lands—I learnt that the archipelago called Sāmoa was everything except the 'tiny specks in a wide sea' that Europeans and East Asians liked to think. I learned that surrounding archipelagos and us shared conceptions of worlds that encompassed all things in relation. Déwé Gorodey, Epeli Hau'ofa, Tusiata Avia, Karlo Mila, Marcel Melthérorong, Grace Mera Molisa, Haunani–Kay Trask, Serena Tusitala Marsh, Tamatoa Bambridge, Chantal Spitz, Martin Nakata, and Moetai Brotherson are just a few of the voices who peopled the Great Ocean beyond the reductions of plantation, mine, hotel, base and church. Sāmoan filmmaker Sima Urale's participation in the Asia Pacific Triennial

1 Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua and Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, "Making 'Aha: Independent Hawaiian Pasts, Presents & Futures," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, Spring 2018, 50

of Contemporary Art in 2006–07 was a key moment of validation for me and my family, as we spoke at length at the Queensland Art Gallery café. Sima Urale’s seminal short film *O tamaiti* (1997), and Tusi Tamasese’s significant innovation of the first feature film in gagana Sāmoa, *The Orator (O le tulāfale)* (2011), both creative explorations of Sāmoan intergenerational duty, colonial trauma, and redemption, have been critically framed and analyzed at length elsewhere.



Still of Louisa Afoa, *Pink Flamingo 2*, 2016. From the series *A Pool is not the Ocean*. Aotearoa. 3:55 mins.

These two works in particular provide paths towards a transnational Sāmoan screen history in the making. In *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I*, from September 22 through October 31, 2020, at A Space Gallery, and on the imagineNATIVE Online Platform from October 20–25, 2020, a selection of key works by Angela Tiatia, Yuki Kihara, Jason Edward Lewis, Chantal Fraser, Lani Tupu and Lisa Taouma, and Dan Taulapapa McMullin, testified to the vitality of collective kinship and of critical inquiry of the artists’ distinct contexts and creative communities. My essay *Charting hxstories in Sāmoan visual and digital art*, focusing on the conditions of assembling a digital archive for *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I* in 2020, was published in the “Currents of Crisis: Emergent Life beyond the Climate Emergency across the Pacific” special issue of the *Journal of Environmental Media*, out in coming months.² Held from October 19 through

2 Available here <https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-of-environmental-media>

December 11, 2021, at A Space Gallery, and on the imagineNATIVE Online Platform from October 19–24, 2021, a more recent selection in Western linear terms, the works in *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies II*, are by Louisa Afoa, DB Amorin, Pelenakeke Brown, Talia Smith, Christopher Ulutupu, and Brian Fuata. A new commission by emerging artist Isi completes these first chapters of A Sāmoan Art Museum–Performance.

The Great Ocean is not solely our primary Ancestor and home in the epistemic and metaphysical frameworks that significantly predate European and East Asian colonizations. I first spent time with DB Amorin’s practice in March 2019 at the Honolulu Biennial (now Hawai’i Triennial). The 2018/2021 iterative artwork *x-routes, occlusion* (“*shadows pass you down & keep ringing now*”) is constituted by multiple installation elements and a large projection of treated documentation of waves from shores that hold significance for the artist’s ancestries. Processing documentation of the surface of the ocean from the interstitial space just under it, the artist imbues the watery world with 1980s VHS colour combinations in rich blues, cyans, greens, pinks and blacks that splice light refractions with camera movements. Fluid turbulences are key here: waves crash, sand and debris swirl, bubbles rush and the artist navigates the spaces between situated topographies of belonging and *dépaysement*. Visualizations of the surf in Hawai’i and Azores, the missing footage would have Sāmoa included in the artist’s aquamarine trilogy, were it not for the health crisis’ border closures. Diaspora lingers some more.

The fluid expanse is also the foundation of the continuing roles of *tufuga tā tatau*, expert tattoo making, *tufuga faufale*, expert architecture making, *tufuga fauva’a*, expert outrigger canoe making, and *tauave measina*, expert aesthetic practitioners. In Talia Smith’s 2019 Prototype commission *Tākerekere (to blacken, make darker)*, the spectre of the orality practiced before evangelization is translated into a poetic recounting of the movements of the artist’s parents. The rhythmic lines of genealogy and place accumulate in sound waves in the foreground. With each line the previous imagery is built on with further layers of sublime black. In the artist’s Cook Islands and Sāmoan aesthetic frameworks, black is a deeply sacred colour linking humans and kin animals, birds, fish, to the primordial night of potentiality at the beginning of the universe. A striking visual effect in this case, compounding the effects of displacement and colonization with strengthened ties to the islands of one’s Ancestors.

Markers of diasporic belonging and equally of food autonomy, the bed of talo lines the suburban fence behind artist Louisa Afoa in *Pink Flamingo II* (2016) from her Masters of Fine Arts series *A Pool is not the Ocean*. The artist often uses durational performance and text to refuse the racist gaze and behaviour of white New Zealand society on Indigenous bodies and spaces. In this work, Afoa appears in the centre of this very Aotearoa of tableaux vivants, comfortably seated on a large pool flamingo, together a new gesture

in place of dehumanising microaggressions survived in recent times. Afoa generously offers: "A pool is not the Ocean because a pool is a construct — but the Ocean is my sovereignty."³ Alternating a sensual gaze directed at the camera and a laissez-faire nonchalance visited on the lush talo leaves, the artist lets the viewer into a keen sense of brown feminine sexual power. Moving elsewhere in the backyard garden, the artist allows the viewer into the currently quiet space of Sāmoan-Pākehā intergenerational living, basket balls and lemon trees, but not to rapaciously consume alterity, only to visit for a time. Invested in affirming intersectional representation of Great Ocean women in art, media and politics, Afoa confronts the inherently political site of the Indigenous body, asserting her presence and autonomy in the world.



Still of Christopher Ulutupu, *Into The Arms of My Colonizer*, 2016. Commissioned by CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand. Aotearoa. 16:22 mins.

Into the Arms of My Colonizer (2016) is the first work in *The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy* (2016–17) by Christopher Ulutupu. Delving into the hyphenated place between cultures, it features performance vignettes that muddy the power dynamics at play in viewing and reproducing postcard imagery of the 'South Seas'. A fake band sang the Selena Quintanilla-Gómez 1992 hit *Como La Flor*, which was significant in the islands and in particular in the artist's family. Toying with the viewer, bodybuilders flex, family members play or sing, and a white heteronormative tourist couple dances, all set

3 Louisa Afoa, 2016, *A Pool is not the Ocean*, Master of Fine Arts exegesis, AUT University, Auckland: 29

on a studio sandy beach with restrained lighting. Reminiscent of the siva afi and siva fou performances for tourists that take place in hotels and visitor centres across Savai'i, 'Upolu and Tutuila, but equally across the many islands in the Great Ocean in militourism's tight grip, *Into the Arms of My Colonizer's* central tableau vivant is striking. The camera vantage point remains high above the scene, echoing Guillermo Gómez-Peña's seminal work with Coco Fusco, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* (1992).⁴ Ulutupu's white hetero couple preen and read on deckchairs, two brown bodybuilders flex to their reflections presumably in mirrors off set, while three islander vocalists give a punctuating rendition of Britney Spears' 2000 single *Lucky*. My mother, aunties and uncles all found a certain economic mobility through gruelling performances every night and day in such touring cultural groups that zig-zagged across white towns in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada in the 1970s through to today. Ulutupu's work is as much a meditation on intercultural affective and sexual partnerships between Indigenous and Colonizer actors, as it is an analysis of diasporic Sāmoan cultural practices (singing, dancing, caring in this case) that seep through colonial structures of containment and dehumanization. In another tableau vivant, the two bodybuilders glance at each other while caressing their oiled up bodies, one fixes the camera and grins, and one of the three singers dances to, and sings along to a synth-heavy Sāmoan pop classic.

In Pelenakeke Brown's 2015 work *Creating the Vā (Space)*, the artist's hand is edited out of frame, methodically sketching a figure or motif repeated across a large sheet of paper. In a delicate gestural language on paper, the artist builds this image-movement, viliata in Sāmoan, as a stop-motion work that breathes in and out, expands and contracts. The linework carries through both future choreography and finely hand-made drawing. All things are considered living in a Sāmoan epistemic and ontological frame, and the figures are joined in relational space, vā, in this work. Brown is an artist deeply invested in movement cycles, celebrated for having collaborated with Yo-Yo Lin to develop Rotations Dance, a digital platform encouraging 'a collaborative movement practice working towards deepening and challenging our understanding of artistry, disability, and access.' that was created out of the pandemic crisis recognising the opportunity for Disabled artists to connect, collaborate and share their practices, digitally. spanning Lenapehoking, Tāmaki Makaurau, Berlin and Atayal territory. I first came across Brown's work in Movement Research Performance Journal's special issue on Indigenous dance and performance in late 2019. Much like *Creating the Vā (Space)*, the artist invites the reader/viewer on a folauga—progressive journey, traversing the land in the precolonial trails across Savai'i, 'Upolu, Tutuila and Ofu in particular—across the Great Ocean from which we come. In this case, Brown's travelling practice recognizes the keyboard as holding Sāmoan design principles and ancestral knowledges in a contemporary

4 Christopher Ulutupu, 2016, *Into the Arms of My Coloniser: Re-imagining Myself and The Other*, Massey University, New Plymouth: 15

context. Mirroring the motif repertoires laden with matrilineal belonging and Earth-centred epistemic balance, tattoos, carvings, movement phrases, and landed practices all connect back to the circular time before and after colonization that surrounds humans and beyond-us kin, in the Indigenous temporalities spanning the Great Ocean.

divining gushing water sounds



Still of Brian Fuata, *a house besieged (preposition tweaked)*, 2020. Commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Videographer, editor and sound design: Matthew McGuigan from Hospital Hill. Australia. 11:49 mins.

Brain Fuata, in the 2020 commission by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *of a house besieged (preposition tweaked)* assigns the roles of vocalist and of dancer to the animate gallery space, in a conceptual innovation that brings the customary theatre practice of faleāitu into the formal Western gallery system. Produced as part of the state art museum's first online exhibition in its 150 years, the presences laid siege to in that first lockdown in April 2020, offer a harbinger of the necessary Black Lives Matter rallies and protests that rocked the United States Empire to its core, and had strong reverberations in other white-dominant settler colonies around the planet. This post-improvisation film sifts through key displays of voice and animated text to highlight narrative devices at play in expressions of gestural languages and improvisations surrounding image-making in performance phrases. Firmly at home in the rich space between contemporary dance, decolonial hauntology, and ceremonial practice, the artist inhabits the persona of the non-descript ghost as a strategy to conjure presences and absences all too often erased or omitted by dominant art historical and political canons that contain fanua, topography-that-births-you, and vā,

the relational space between all things. The striking image-movements, viliata, beginning surtitled 'divining enters child sounds' of the work enable Fuata to navigate states of being. The artist presences onomatopoeic sounds, declamations of relationality with beyond-human kin such as winds, armies, hunters, and rains. Documentation of previous incantation improvisations are projected across the body of the gallery and of the artist as the space is rendered contoured.

To gather the screen hxstories of Sāmoan video artists and filmmakers since the entry of our people into formal galleries, museums, cinemas and archives as bearers of cultural practice, is a serious undertaking. Attested to in the two exhibitions that together form the humble beginnings of Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance, the role of the artist as conjurer, as critic, as hxstory-teller and as knowledge bearer cannot be underplayed in the majority diasporic makeup of Sāmoan peoples today. Continuing this momentum into the future, emerging Sāmoan and 'Uvean artist Isi, based between Seattle/Tacome and Honolulu, present new work *a'ano ma mōlī* (2021) that redresses the linear Western narratives and stereotypes of colonial archival footage from the artist's neighbouring ancestral archipelagos of Sāmoa and 'Uvea (currently a French overseas territory grouping the three islands, 'Uvea, Futuna and Alofi, and their distinct Indigenous governance in two kingdoms). This work premiering during the Art Crawl affirms the purpose of Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance not only as a digital home to gather Sāmoan aesthetic and intellectual practices made previously, but also to commission works by artists coming to prominence.

Critic, curator, researcher and author Dr Lana Lopesi is adamant that in Indigenous peoples remediating colonial archives, there is much that must be challenged, from what is included and excluded, to how they are dis- and embodied. Detailing an appraisal of Sāmoan cultural practices that validate collectively-held and -developed knowledges, from the falefono meeting house to hxstories shared on Facebook and TikTok, Lopesi demonstrates how our ways of archiving knowledges are beyond the comprehension or containment of the 'colonial archival logics' that see what is storable knowledge as significantly limited and objectified. In contrast, in the example of the gafa, genealogizing practices that order land tenure, socio-political status, and epistemic relationality with all things, "the knowledge [is] limited to the embodiment of the chiefs. This living, breathing archive sits in stark contrast to written knowledge collecting dust in airtight bunkers."⁵ This understanding of sociality in the collective resists the simplistic Western approach to collecting and archiving objects rather than cherishing Indigenous systems of knowing and being. Lopesi goes further in recognizing that there cannot be an archiving of Sāmoan aesthetic and intellectual practices, because there are in fact "precise systems holding

5 Lana Lopesi, 2021, 'Your Non-archivable, Our Archival Assemblage, A Sāmoan Perspective,' in *Uneven Bodies* (eds. Ruth Buchanan, Aileen Burns & Johan Lundh, Hanahiva Rose, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth: 96

precise knowledges.”⁶ Together with the gatherings required for knowledges to be activated, such object-centric archives can make more sense in a fuller way:

Moana contemporary art is now being archived outside the formal avenues of art criticism and art history. Art history, as a discipline and as an archive, is infected by the faults of the colonial archive, both concerning the limits of its understanding of art and its restrictions concerning the textual archives fit for entry. Art history is written no longer only by art historians, critics and academics, but more recently also by social media users.⁷

What remains to bring into constellation for further expansion of this Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance are not only the former church pews where many sat to watch Kevin Reynolds’ 1995 ridiculous epic *Waterworld* in the heat and medley of tropical humidity and English-as-a-second-language comprehension. It is also the many hxstories told in the collective of the extended family or village society where Beach Road, Āpia, is one node in the genealogizing practices that relate us to worldviews far removed from the bleached capitalist dystopia of the film where Indigenous peoples and our responsibilities are once more erased. In considering how the archiving of Sāmoan video and digital art can support shared understandings of the speculative practices that enable a richer cultural expression today, it is important to note that this venture first makes sense to Sāmoans, second to neighbouring and distant kin peoples, and further afield to Indigenous and other racialized peoples who have suffered the impacts of the Eurocentric biases in anthropology, ethnology, film and television, and visual culture more broadly. ‘O tala fa’asolopito a fa’āliga ata ma viliata mā’oi nei, o measina na e tausia ‘o tua’ā mo tātou uma. These sequential hxstories of Indigenous visuality and moving image treasures have been looked after by the Ancestors for all of us.

(On the following page) Exhibition view, Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I, 2020, at A Space Gallery

6 Lana Lopesi, *ibid.*: 99

7 Lana Lopesi, *ibid.*: 98-99

I wrote The World That Surrounds You Wants Your Death in 2013. It saddened me then, as I was just realizing that I needed to talk to my then pre-teen boys about how people might not like them simple because of the colour of their skins. It saddens me now, seven years later, as we finish a year in which the casual brutality of North American white supremacy towards brown and black people became visible to the general public. I am normally a ridiculously optimistic person, but, at times in 2020, it has been difficult to not see sharks everywhere.

J'ai écrit The World That Surrounds You Wants Your Death [Le monde qui t'entouret veut ta mort] en 2013. Cela m'a attristé à l'époque, car je venais de réaliser que je devais parler à mes garçons, alors pre-adolescents, du fait que les gens ne les aimeraient peut-être pas simplement à cause de la couleur de leur peau. Cela m'attriste maintenant, sept ans plus tard, alors que nous terminons une année au cours de laquelle la brutalité fortuite de la suprématie blanche nord-américaine envers les personnes marrons et noires est devenue visible pour le grand public. Normalement je suis une personne ridiculement optimiste, mais, par moments en 2020, il a été difficile de ne pas voir des requins partout.

Jason Edward Lewis



Charting hxstories in Sāmoan visual and digital art | Dr. Léuli Eshrāghi

First published in the Journal of Environmental Media's "Currents of Crisis: Emergent Life beyond the Climate Emergency Across the Pacific" special issue. Revised October 2021.

With erratic weather patterns, insecure remittance flows from precarious diasporic citizens, and a total ceasing of tourism and some industries in the archipelago due to the self-imposed blockade against COVID-19 with hard border closures (and the local measles outbreak just preceding this), how can a shared art history and sovereign display territory be imagined and created? One that bypasses the many obstacles facing Sāmoans everywhere in understanding our cultural inheritance and the ways we are capable of participating in the world today?

Multiple major cyclones have ravaged my homeland, the Sāmoan archipelago and the neighbouring archipelagos Tonga, Viti, and 'Uvea mo Futuna over the southern hemisphere summer 2020-21. When I was a child, we could count on storms each wet season, but major damaging cyclones occurred every 5-10 years. Now the devastation is more widespread, and more frequent. In December 2020, many major roads were washed away, and new flash floods coursed through neighbourhoods and market gardens in Āpia, the Sāmoan capital on north coastal 'Upolu island, according to my mother Soné Eshrāghi who runs Goshen Trust mental health rehabilitation centre. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic is keeping most island territories' borders shut across the Great Ocean region. This comes on the tail of the border closures during the late 2019 measles epidemic localised within the State of Sāmoa, where government negligence in vaccinations over decades compounded with an anti-vaccination campaign spearheaded by local businessman Edwin Tamasese—whose extremist position belied his lack of medical training or acquaintance with peer-reviewed literature— as well as heavy outsider influence including from American and Australian anti-vaxxers likes Robert F Kennedy Jr and Taylor Winterstein, which resulted in the deaths of almost a hundred of Sāmoa's youngest citizens, part of its future. The correlation of faith and sporting affiliations with proponents of anti-vaxxer messaging has been particularly damaging for our people.

Recalling the colossal mass deaths inflicted by the New Zealand colonial administration on Western Sāmoa during the 1918 influenza pandemic, precious few Sāmoans and other peoples are currently able to cross through each side of international borders, even between both jurisdictions in the archipelago. The current physical separation of the many Sāmoan diasporic communities around the world with the United States Unincorporated Territory of American Sāmoa to the east, and the Independent State of Sāmoa to the west, exacerbates and accelerates a necessary digital pivot for the continuity of our visual cultural practices in their plural perspectives and positionalities

around the world. Very different influences impact the many diasporic communities, particularly across North America in Hawai'i, Alaska, California, Oregon, Washington, Utah, and beyond.

Amongst these is the international date line that bifurcates the archipelago between yesterday and today, a Protestant temporality decreed from colonial centrepiece Greenwich, between northern and southern white supremacist spheres of influence. *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I* (2020) was presented at A Space Gallery in Tkaronto/Toronto from 22 September to 31 October 2020, and as a special screening program on the imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival platform, available in numerous countries from 20 to 25 October 2020. It was the first iteration of *Sāmoan Art Museum-Performance*, a larger curatorial research-creation project creating a permanent Sāmoan visual and digital art archive, responding in part to questions of cultural viability in diaspora and existential possibility in the archipelago. I translate the Sāmoan term *tala* as history, genealogical epic and story, so with my ungendered English neologism *hxstories*. Sāmoan language terms have not been italicised throughout this article in accordance with contemporary Indigenous publishing practices wherein Indigenous language terms are deemed knowable by settler readerships. Our cultural genealogies remain disrupted and imbalanced by the absences and estrangement experienced with the vast majority of Ancestral Belongings being held cold and sterile in European and North American public museums, archives, libraries, and private collections. It is extremely unlikely that in my lifetime a permanent physical repository of most of these colonially looted collections will be created and that these Ancestral Belongings will find their way homewards. Instead, the answer is where we already connect, between TikTok, SnapChat and many other networked applications that weave and weft small parcels of information and connection across the ocean floor via the fibre optic cables spanning the fluid Great Ocean continent and the surrounding above-sea continents.

(On the following page) Léuli Eshrāghi, *AOAULI*, 2020. Digital artwork commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Birrarungga/Melbourne. Dimensions and duration variable. <http://aoauli.acca.melbourne>. Courtesy of Léuli Eshrāghi.



The dizzying thousands upon thousands of siapo mamamu and siapo tasina—handpainted and imprinted barkcloth made by Ancestors that remain in these Western epistemic and political institutions of sanctioned culture and rarefied monumentality—haunt us, their descendants, as tangible archives of their making between the 1700s and 1960s. In other words, from before Western rationalism, morality, centralised governance, plantations, capitalism and Gregorian shame-time; from before the suppression of our multiple clan-based polities based on responsible, deliberative decision-making and close kinship with lands, waters, skies, and the entire beyond-human world. The climate crisis diminishes islands, lagoons, mountains, villages, sacred sites, associated knowledge of archipelagos in order that we may no longer continue our distinct socio-political trajectories, despite far-flung industrialised countries being in fact primarily responsible.

As in my recent Australian Centre for Contemporary Art commission *AOAULI* (2020), comprising both a digital artwork responding to the oldest Sāmoan barkcloth in museum collections and an art history archive, the curatorial research-creation project *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I* (2020) considered this most recent ‘fall’ of catastrophes and pandemics within much longer Sāmoan hxstories of visibility, cultural practice, movement and plurivocality. Like me, the majority of Sāmoan peoples grow up physically dislocated as Indigenous peoples of the diaspora, sometimes at home in the voyage, sometimes torn between conflicting epistemic and political frameworks. We are, despite us, enmeshed in the settler colonial and militourist (Teresia Teaiwa) industrial complexes that dispossess kin First Peoples in Australia, New Zealand, United States and Canada. We are not living in large communities in close proximity to the Ancestral Belongings of our Ancestors in most of the many places where they are kept. The six key works I selected for *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I* (2020) cover the period 1995–2013 and artists living and working in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland, Gadi / Sydney, Tiohtià:ke / Mooniyaang / Montréal, Lenapehoking / New York, and Meanjin / Brisbane. In some ways, this project was part of my response to wanting my own moving image work and that of my peers to be seen on our own terms, rather than dependent on Eurocentric ideas of queer or auteur Australian or Canadian art and film.

In the 1995 short film *Tala Pasifika - Talk of the Town (Tala o le Taulaga)* written by Lisa Taouma and directed by Lani Tupu, now veteran directors and actors, the peregrinations of famed fa’afafine cabaret performer and queer icon Cindy of Sāmoa contrast racist and fa’afaphobic (as coined by Yuki Kihara) treatment in a New Zealand high school with diminishing opportunities for gender expression in a diasporic Sāmoan household in South Auckland. The trope of queer flight to the urban metropolis is a very real voyage of self-initiation and self-determination in this film and in the lives of many fa’afafine, fa’atane, and other Indigenous-gendered peoples able to choose for themselves. This of

course echoes the minoritising conditions of the very real existential flight of Indigenous and other racialised peoples of the Great Ocean towards higher ground territories as a result of the deepening climate emergency that has gripped the region since well before the first atomic tests by the British, French, and American empires.

The narrative style and ironic 1980s video aesthetic in fa'afafine artist, poet and theorist Dan Taulapapa McMullin's seminal 2001 work *Sinalela* presents a queered, idealized portrait of mobility, nightlife and romance in the American empire, whether in the islands or across Turtle Island. The bright lights of the scenes shot on Āpia's seawall belie an increasingly precarious ecological and ceremonial-political order, teetering on the edge of breakdown and uninhabitability, peppered with creation history references such as Sina and Tuna's ordinary romance. These two works by Taulapapa McMullin, and Tupu and Taouma provide insider perspectives on the flair with which fa'afafine and fa'atane peoples live and the important socio-spiritual roles we have always held within our communities. As a marker of respect and shared kinship, the gender-neutral and only pronoun in the Sāmoan language, *ia*, is preferred throughout this article as a way of recognising ongoing gender and sexual fluidity.

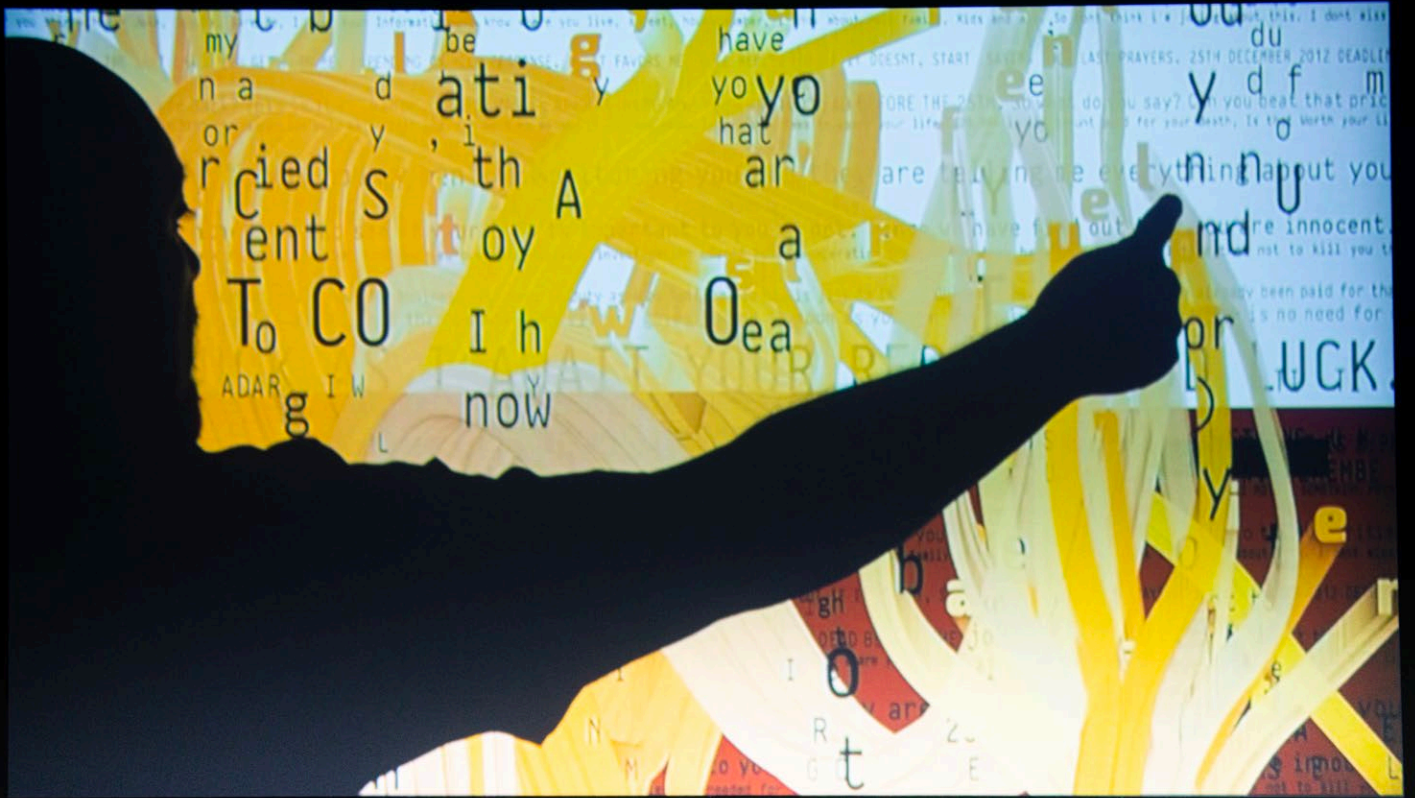
In fa'afafine artist and curator Yuki Kihara's powerful 2012 work *Siva in Motion*, *ia* interprets movement phrases from the sacred tauluga dance form in an homage to 19th century stop-motion photography, in honour of the almost 200 lives lost to the 2009 tsunami in northern Tonga, American Sāmoa and the State of Sāmoa. Kihara's rendition of the siva also mimics the form of the galu afi, literally waves of fire, of the tsunami, based on interviews the artist undertook with survivors in Sāmoa. Here *ia* is the recurring mixed-race Victorian-era Sāmoan persona Salome, based on a Sāmoan figure who appeared unnamed in a colonial portrait by Thomas Andrew found in Te Papa Tongarewa National Museum of New Zealand collections in Te Whanganui-ā-Tara/Wellington. Gestures of the tauluga dance are made tā, marking or measuring time in beats, in the expansive vā, relational space between all things, including those recently passed on in natural and artificial catastrophes.

(On the following page) Still of Chantal Fraser, *It Hangs with Rattlesnakes and Rubbish #2*, 2013. Australia/United States. 3:27 mins.



In *It Hangs With Rattlesnakes and Rubbish #2* 2013, artist and designer Chantal Fraser covers, stretches, drapes and plays with adorning ia's brown body just in sight of the Western gaze but never fully visible. Shot at the site of the wind farms in ʔivíluqaletem and Taaqtam territories in southern California, it is difficult to determine where the force and noise of the wind comes from. The monumental wind turbines, created to harness energy, fluctuate with the drumming of the winds, their own machinery, to create a place of collision and chaos between natural and unnatural energies and orientations for the viewer/visitor. Fraser's movements in joyous multicoloured fabrics become a spiritual ritual, fluttering in the wind, taking in the pleasures of the sun and the shadows, in the aural space of the wind turbine installations.

In artist Angela Tiatia's signature 2010 work *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis*, shot in Rarotonga, ia performs a devouring of the hibiscus, the storied flower associated since contact with pale travellers from Spain, England, France, Netherlands, Germany, with tropes of the dusky maiden, the sexually available feminine body, and yet Euro-American projections of desire and possession that dehumanise Indigenous bodies. This work draws on Mexican writer Enrique González Martínez's 1911 text *Tuércele el cuello al cisne de engañoso plumaje* (Wring the neck of the swan with the false plumage), which called for honest poetic expression in Mexican modernist work over then-conventional European rose-tinted perceptions. The islands strike back!



Jason Edward Lewis, *The World That Surrounds You Wants Your Death* (2013), exhibition view, Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I, 2020, A Space Gallery/imagineNATIVE.

Lastly is digital media theorist, software designer, and poet Jason Edward Lewis' 2013 work *The World That Surrounds You Wants Your Death*. Part of the acclaimed touch screen-based series *Poems for Excitable [Mobile] Media*, Lewis processes the language and visuality of Indigenous survival despite centuries of genocidal regimes and mercenary attitudes across Turtle Island. Particularly drawing on his experience as a then-new father, ia wonders about the shame and existential threat to each Indigenous culture when faced with Euro-American colonial domination and the obsession with accumulation of wealth and property. These colonial places that he termed as 'culturally and legislatively hostile' to Indigenous peoples could in fact be bent and swished on screen, in a richly voiced and imaged poetic corpus, to display the rich cultural geographies that anchor Indigenous futurities despite so many odds.

The *Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I* digital and physical exhibition created a sovereign display territory, a place for our culture to be centred and innovated, for the continuity of practices of Sāmoan artists and filmmakers who engage with embodiment, gender, sexuality, kinship and futurities. Among the first surveys of Sāmoan moving image and digital art, its scope included the minority remaining in the archipelago as well as the majority living in diasporic communities in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, the European Union and Canada. Connected digitally rather than solely severed by physical and intellectual distances, Great Ocean communities have been very active players in their own destinies and imaginaries, since Bebo and Geocities to the multifarious applications and platforms of today. While located in many places, these communities' ceremonial-political connections across vā, relational space, and feso'ota'iga i le tafa'ilagi, internet connectivity, are resolutely strengthened by the multiple fibre optic cables bringing high bandwidth internet access to the two jurisdictions splitting the Sāmoan archipelago. This occurs in a region-wide context of entangled crises: rising seas, drought-stricken plantations, salinized water tables, and severely diminished income from halted tourism and strained overseas contracts for fruit picking labour.

As could be suspected with the many criss-crossing border closures and flight restrictions during a global health crisis, I was unable to physically visit the exhibition at A Space Gallery, which was attended by a few hundred people in its run during the stop-and-start restrictions in Tkaronto/Toronto. The pandemic accelerated the implementation of imagineNATIVE's online platform, allowing this exhibition to be experienced virtually. The digital platform created a specifically sovereign Indigenous territory that reached much larger audiences in Sápmi, Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand, Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland and Taiwan. In a way, this wider access is exactly the point and purpose of realizing a Sāmoan visual and digital art archive in multiple iterations.

Multiple barriers to deepening cultural practice exist in all these territories, meaning that this project offered a timely and culturally responsive context to chart the relationships, important moments and achievements of recent Sāmoan moving image and digital art hxstories. Co-design with Sāmoan curator, writer, artist, theorist peers over many years has led to new Indigenous language terms that we are continually workshopping, trying out, and putting into practice, across the Indigisphere. Drawn into a non-linear temporality as *siapo viliata*, animated barkcloth, the works within Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I exhibition realised and promoted various purposes including the keeping of cultural memory, innovating artistic practices and strengthening international Indigenous knowledge exchange during the very particular and currently ongoing conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, aggravating climate catastrophe, and resistances to white supremacy.

(On the following page) Exhibition view, Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I, 2020, at A Space Gallery

Cusp

Energy

Renew

Whispers

Deafening

Remains

Dichotomy

Chasm

Pull

Supersede

Pointe

Energie

Renouveler

Murmures

Assourdissant

Restes

Dichotomie

Gouffre

Tirer

Supplanter

Chantal Fraser



Still of Chantal Fraser, *It Hangs with Rattlesnakes and Rubbish #2*, 2013. Australia/United States. 3:27 mins.



Still of Chantal Fraser, *It Hangs with Rattlesnakes and Rubbish #2*, 2013. Australia/United States.
3:27 mins.



Exhibition view, Sāmoan Hxstories, Screens and Intimacies I, 2020, at A Space Gallery



Tufuga ā Measina ma Viliata | Visual and Digital Artists

Chantal Fraser (Meanjin/Brisbane) is an interdisciplinary artist interested in the connotations of adornment and silhouette when presented in varying contexts whose work questions reader relevance by subverting cultural and anthropological interpretations.

Yuki Kihara (Āpia; Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland) is an interdisciplinary artist of Japanese and Sāmoan descent whose work seeks to challenge dominant historical narratives through visual arts, dance, and curatorial practice, engaging with history and representation.

Jason Edward Lewis (Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montréal) is a digital media theorist, poet, software designer, University Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary, and Professor of Computation Arts at Concordia University.

Dan Taulapapa McMullin (Hupoken/Hoboken; Hudson) is an artist, theorist and poet from Sāmoa i Sasa'e whose poetry collection Coconut Milk (2013) was recognized on the American Library Association's Rainbow List.

Angela Tiatia (Warrang/Sydney) explores contemporary culture, drawing attention to its relationship to representation, gender, neo-colonialism and the commodification of the body and place, through the lenses of history and popular culture.

Lani Tupu (Warrang/Sydney) is a veteran educator, singer, dancer, actor and director. The first Sāmoan graduate of Toi Whakaari, Tupu has taught there and NIDA, and chronicled his experiences through the arts.

Lisa Taouma (Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland) is an accomplished artist, curator, speaker, educator, producer and director of TV, film and digital content with a special focus on Oceania. She founded the platform TheCoconet.tv.

Louisa Afoa (Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland) is a Sāmoan, Pākehā artist and educator. Completing a BVA (Honours) in 2016 her work comments on sociopolitical issues, while giving insight into the lived experiences of the communities she belongs to.

DB Amorin (Lenapehoking/New York) is a Sāmoan/Azorean Portuguese artist from Honolulu. His work addresses audio-visual non-linearity as a container for intersectional experience, often focusing on the role error plays as a generative opportunity.

Pelenakeke Brown (Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland) is a Sāmoan, Pākehā interdisciplinary, independent disabled artist. Her practice spans art, writing, and performance. Returning to Aotearoa from Lenapehoking, she co-founded Rotations.dance.

Talia Smith (Warrang/Sydney) is a Cook Islands, Sāmoan, Pākehā artist and curator whose photographic and video practice examines the outskirts of cities. Her curatorial practice examines notions of time, memory and the ruin.

Christopher Ulutupu (Te Whanganui ā Tara/Wellington) is a Sāmoan, Niuean, German artist working in video and performance to explore landscape and photography in the construction of colonial narratives. He has exhibited widely in Aotearoa and Australia.

Brian Fuata (Meanjin/Brisbane) works in the improvisation of live or mediated performance, writing and objects. He uses multiple registers of persona and public speaking to produce a dumb zone of dramatic affects.

Isi (Si'ahl/Seattle; təqʷúməʔ/Tacoma) creates videos that restore narrative fluidity to linear Western colonial archives of Sāmoan and Uvean ceremonies. Isi developed live performance with Rosanna Raymond's SaVAge K'lub (Honolulu Biennial 2019).

Tufuga ā Fatusolo | Poet

Sistar S'pacific, aka **Rosanna Raymond** (Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland), is a long-standing member of the Pacific Sisters, founder of the SaVAge K'lub, and has achieved international renown for her performances, installations, body adornment, and spoken word.

Leoleo ō Ata Mamanu | Graphic Designer

Nadeem Tiafau Eshrāghi (Meanjin/Brisbane) is an artist, designer and community organizer working at the intersections of sound, music, installation, and light to cultivate exemplary human experiences.

Leoleo ō Measina ma Viliata | Curator

Sāmoan, Persian, Cantonese interdisciplinary artist, curator, and scholar **Dr Léuli Eshrāghi** (nipaluna/Hobart; Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montréal) intervenes in display territories to centre global Indigenous and diasporic Asian visibility, languages, and ceremonies. They are Curator of TarraWarra Biennial of Australian Art (2023).

Funding Acknowledgements

**»imagine
NATIVE**



