

WHAT'S IN A NAME – THE LABEL 'PASIFIKA'

Bridget Inder

It is human nature to want to label and name things. It's a useful survival mechanism as well as an identifying tool. Labels are necessary.

I am of Pakeha and Samoan descent. I was born and raised in Central Otago, which is about as far removed culturally and climate-wise from Samoa as I can imagine. Needless to say, my relationship to the label of 'Pasifika' and, to be specific, 'Polynesian artist' and 'Pacific Islander' is not the normal one. It took me a long time to even feel at home with the cultural identity of 'Pacific Islander' and, once I did, I clung to my newfound sense of identity. I was proud to be considered a Polynesian artist; I wanted to be pigeon-holed. The reason is that I believe I saw the label as a tool, not as a destination. Labels can be helpful, and not always a negative thing, as long as the bearer feels that he or she carries the label, thus being free to put it down when it suits – the bearer is not *stamped* with the label.

What is this term 'Pasifika?' and when did the 'c' get turned into an 's' or a 'k'? Does this signify something? Is it to somehow differentiate culture (kulture?) from geographic location? Is it to subvert a Western term and make it into something that is ours? I'm really not sure – maybe all of the above, and I can't quite say where or when I first saw it. I've nothing against the letter 'c,' but I wonder if it is a reflection of the spelling of many Polynesian words? The letter 'k' is prevalent, but not the letter 'c'. As a label it encompasses all of the Pacific Islanders, and is much less of a mouthful than Polynesian, or Pacific Islander. Also it is slightly funkier. It hints at more than just traditional heritage. Mention 'Pasifika,' and the hearer thinks of beats of the South Pacific, a festival perhaps, bright colours, something that is more of a hybrid of modern, contemporary New Zealand-based culture than the more traditional, structured cultures of the islands.

As I mentioned above, it took me a long time to bear the label 'Pacific Islander' and feel comfortable with it. Even now, however, I still see myself as a slight outsider. Speaking personally, I am still much too shy and unsure to use the term 'Pasifika' to describe myself or my work. I still prefer Pacific, or Polynesian. I am, after all, Pākehā as well as Samoan. I feel comfortable being called a Samoan artist because I've got a Samoan side to me, but I'm not comfortable being labelled as just a Samoan artist. I'd rather be known as a New Zealand artist, because I was born here. I've got a kiwi mum. Everything I am influenced by is from within New Zealand, although I do dig my father's heritage. There are things I want to know and learn because that's part of me as well.¹

I am an artist of Samoan and Pākehā heritage, and these two elements make up my work. As my relationship with the two evolves and changes, so does my understanding of the label Polynesian/Pacific Islander/Pasifika artist, and the way I may choose to apply it to myself and my work. I do not make work with the intent that it will fit under that heading, but am comfortable for that label to be applied to what I make. This is an important distinction. The label comes after: It is way of viewing or unpacking the work, to put it in some sort of context to help further understand or gain insights. In this case the label is a tool, just as you could describe an artwork as a painting, or woodcut, an etching. It simply gives the viewer more information when observing the piece.

The term Pasifika, however you choose to spell it, when applied to modern and contemporary visual culture within New Zealand, often conjures up an image of the four-petaled frangipani symbol – perhaps some triangle patterns

based loosely on *siapo* or *tapa* cloth (traditional cloth made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree) or seen in the *pe'a* (male tattoo) or *malu* (female tattoo). This formulaic image unfortunately is what happens when the label ceases to be applied to the art or craft, becoming instead a static destination.

Thus the telltale sign of a piece of formulaic work is conventionally the four-petaled flower. In 2011, I was a tutor in the Fresh Horizons workshops organised by the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust in Invercargill. One of the other tutors, Johnny Peninsula, spoke of his frustration with the 'Samoan flower;' he stated that he had never seen a flower with four petals, so how has it become such a prevalent symbol in modern Samoan art? He took us back through the evolution of the four petals to its origin, which was, in fact, bird footprints in the sand. Through endless and thoughtless repetition of a symbol that is perceived to be 'Samoan,' it has been taken completely out of context; even though it immediately signifies something as 'Pasifika,' a four-petaled flower does not actually exist. The label has become more important than the work that it is applied to.

So when this label has been so deeply entrenched that the idea of 'this is what Pasifika artwork looks like' is planted firmly in our minds, what of the work that does not depict happy brown people doing happy brown things? That hasn't got a triangle pattern or frangipani anywhere in sight? When the label takes over, such work can be difficult to classify, and it is at this moment that we must discard the label, or allow the people to whom we are trying to apply it to define it and determine it for themselves. We need to be fluid in our application, allow room for growth. Artists and makers themselves also bear a responsibility to not simply churn out and lazily use the same old patterns in the same old way. Instead, they must challenge themselves to think deeply about the symbolism behind the images, to find their own personal narrative, and not to be bound to a label.

Bridget Inder was born in the Maniototo, Central Otago, in 1982, the youngest of three girls to a Samoan mother and Pākehā father. She grew up in rural areas in both Central Otago and North Canterbury. She attended the Dunedin School of Art, first as an undergraduate student – completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts (printmaking) in 2003 – and later undertook a Master of Fine Arts, which she gained with distinction in 2010. Bridget's work explores her dual heritage and the conflicting relationships that emerge from the creation of a cultural in-between space. Bridget is currently the manager of an art studio and gallery for people with disabilities. Her other interests include rugby, and she is a member of the Otago Women's Rugby Squad.

1 See *Speaking in Colour – Conversations with Artists of Pacific Island Heritage*, eds Sean Mallon and Pandora Fulimalo Pereira (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 1997), 80.