

REBUILDING THROUGH ART: AN INTERVIEW WITH FATU FEU'U

Lydia Baxendell and Fatu Feu'u

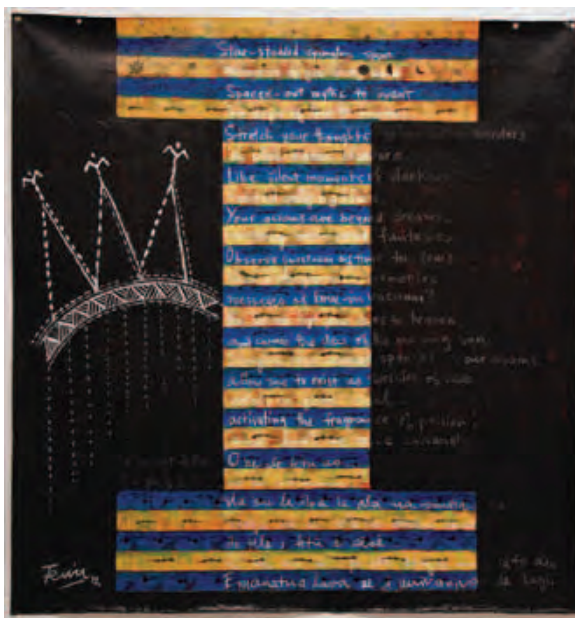


Fig 1 Fatu Feu'u , *Star Studded Spangled*, 2012, mixed media on unstretched canvas, photograph by Kate Mang

In 2011, to mark the 15th anniversary of the University of Canterbury's Macmillan Brown Pacific Artist in Residence programme, Fatu Feu'u (the first recipient in 1996) returned to Christchurch to complete a second residency. It allowed him the time to produce paintings for his post-residency exhibition "OLA" (meaning 'to create life') shown in March 2012, as well as research and write a new body of poetry to be published later this year. In April 2012, Lydia Baxendell met with the artist to ask him some questions about his time in Christchurch as well as his art practice and upcoming projects.

L.B.: You returned to Christchurch in 2011 to complete the Macmillan Brown Pacific Artist in Residence programme. As a result of the February 22nd earthquake and subsequent continuing aftershocks, to the risk-averse, Christchurch could be considered a daunting location to reside. What made you choose to come?

F.F.: Well a variety of reasons. I think one of them is because I have warm feelings toward Christchurch and the Macmillan Brown Centre. The other reason is I have a lot of close artist friends in Christchurch and understand their situation, their plight of damage, devastation, losing houses and studios and so on.¹ I think it is also important

to give them moral support. They need people to listen to them, talk about their art and loss and trying to find a way forward. For many in Christchurch, a way to rebuild their lives will be through art.

L.B.: Residencies often enable artists to reflect on where they are in their career; embark upon challenging projects, or just get on with producing art without distraction. In your case, what has this residency enabled?

F.F.: I used the residency to paint and to research, and it was especially helpful in writing a collection of poems. It's a totally different thing for me to write poems for a publication and therefore I needed the time to collect ideas. It helps me formulate things clearly to create a body of work. That's why to me residencies are so important. If you ask any artist, they will tell you how much they need those opportunities.

L.B.: Your residency culminated in the exhibition "OLA." Many of the paintings in this show explored an intermingled vernacular of the visual and written. Some of the text stems from your recent poetry and others from traditional Samoan songs. To me, the works seemed to be about love and longing. Can you tell me a little about your choice of words within the compositions?

F.F.: I feel that now is a time in my life where I have to carefully choose the right words to say. Before I even write them down, paint them on a canvas, or get them published, most of the words are about love and relationships. To me, romantic poems are important; they are like listening to a beautiful song. I was also interested in speaking of rebuilding, whether this is a relationship or to rebuild a damaged place such as Christchurch. Some of the traditional Samoan songs talk about the village, how to build up that place. The songs gave me a direction; gelling in my mind, they became a starting point for my own poems. Not to translate the songs, but to think about ideas or emotions related to them. One of the songs is about rebuilding your village, your love for your village and your love for life. I then went back to looking at not just the village, but how to build or nourish personal relationships.

L.B.: Your work is rich in a symbolic language built over time. Some motifs such as those from lapita pottery;² the mask, the X from a *tātāu* (tattoo), the lizard and frangipani are synonymous with your work. They provide a narrative as well as an exploration of your Samoan heritage. There are also newer motifs emerging such as the 'I' shape. Some people have made the natural assumption that this shape is a response to Colin McCahon's *I AM* series. Can you tell me about how this dominant compositional element developed in your paintings?

F.F.: McCahon's *I AM* is very different to my motif. It is predominantly large in scale, (*Victory over death 2* (1970), for example, is over two metres high and five metres long).³ My 'I' is a classic symbol. Pronounced 'i' in English and 'ee' in Samoan, 'I' is for 'ifoga,'⁴ meaning reconciliation. It was formulated out of a desire to make something different utilising the concept of ifoga in combination with research I had made into tapa cloth patterns. Previously, I had been making a lot of grid paintings based on the siapo (bark cloth) or painted tapa of Samoa. In 1998 I was asked to research the origin of some tapa that was collected during or just after the First World War. This dated back to when New Zealand came to Samoa at a time of German occupancy. 1914 was a turning point – the German flag was cut down, bundled away, and the captured German soldiers were sent to New Zealand's Somes Island⁵ in Wellington. The soldiers had collected a large number of artefacts, especially tapa, which was brought with them to New Zealand. This was in time put into the collection of the Wanganui Art Museum. There were two in the collection that consisted simply of horizontal black lines, and I had never seen any Samoan tapa like this. I then discovered several more similar examples in Te Papa and some German collections. I was inspired to use the horizontal stripes of the tapa in my paintings and began filling an 'I' shape representing the concept of ifoga with these bands. Together the 'I' shape and the bands reveal a sense of harmony and are about the importance of people thinking of their family. In Samoan culture, when you go to do an ifoga, it is a time when your family, your ancestors and your village support you through a reconciliation process. This is a strong example of how using culture to gain acts of forgiveness open new dialogues and unity. My *Ifoga* series were first exhibited in 2000; they changed my art-making and became a turning point in my painting.

L.B.: You live predominantly in Auckland, though you travel regularly to Samoa. There seems to me to be a crossover or intersection communicated in your work that reflects New Zealand, Samoan and the wider Pacific cultures. How do you see this expressed?

F.F.: It is true I travel a lot, not just to Samoa but to many Pacific Islands. I have travelled to Rarotonga, Tahiti, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands and Hawaii, and of course you get influenced or affected by their art forms. While I am informed by the people and their culture, I also have the opportunity to view and discuss similarities or differences in our art forms and why some of our imagery is very pan-pacific. Like the frangipani, it is a recurring motif practised predominantly by Polynesian artists and tapa makers, but there are a lot of other common motifs which you become familiar with from islands such as New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands and Fiji. My work reflects this, expressing an intermingled, expansive and contemporary vision of New Zealand and Pacific cultures.

L.B.: It is well known that Tony Fomison was both a mentor and friend to you. How did he shape your development as an artist?

F.F.: He helped me a great deal by getting me to become more focused on making art. Fomison explained to me the importance of being serious about undertaking projects and being on time to appointments. To research and be prepared for lectures so I could talk intelligently. He was very hard on me to deliver on time and was not always an easy person to get on with. On one particular visit to my studio, he noticed I had made copies or reproductions of Van Gogh and Picasso (most artists do this – paint copies of the people they admire); he said to me, "Can you show me your real art?" Of course, I was too shy to show him, but eventually I did. I showed him a grid painting I was doing based on tapa, which you didn't really see in New Zealand at that time. You didn't see anything that smelt or looked like a Polynesian painting in a contemporary sense, because there was no other Pacific artist on the horizon. When he saw these multicoloured paintings, he thought they were different and he asked me whether I felt good about them, and I said, "Well, I feel good because it is part of me and part of my culture." That was the beginning of my career. Through Fomison, I learnt to make art based on the things I enjoy and know.

L.B.: You are considered as both a leader and mentor within the Pacific arts community in New Zealand and Samoa. Your practice and identity are firmly positioned as Pacific, so it is not surprising that you are so dedicated to the promotion of Pacific art. During your residency you spent time working with tertiary and secondary school students. What kind of knowledge or ideas are you keen to convey to a younger generation of artists and what advice would you give them in achieving a career as an artist?

F.F.: Firstly I spend time talking to individuals, finding out how their mind ticks and what they like. If they have a Pacific background, I find out if they are keen to explore their Pacific side. If they are, I encourage them to spend time talking to their mum and dad or guardian about it, and then once they build up confidence they can go ahead and start making. The last thing I want to see people doing is working from a textbook or copying from another person. It is disappointing when art is produced with no original idea and no research. It is very important to read and talk to people about their different cultures. Talk to their elders, even go back to the islands and do research. If they are a visual artist, my advice is to go and paint and paint and paint (the same applies for any other discipline). My other advice is not being afraid to make mistakes. Don't be afraid and keep painting until you yourself know it is finished – when your own soul is happy that it is yours, sign the art work as your own.

L.B.: Since completing your residency and consequent exhibition, what projects have you been working towards?

F.F.: My poetry will hopefully be published this year. I am also working on a show in my home village, Poutasi, opening in August. It is the first show to be held in a newly established cultural centre which will be opened by the Honourable John Key. The exhibition will be about different events that have occurred in the last 50 years since Samoa became independent in 1962. I am reading and researching for this at the moment. On August the 1st 1962 a treaty of friendship was signed between Samoa and New Zealand. It is a nice crossover, the freedom to explore both cultures. It is also good for the younger generation who are part Samoan and part New Zealand; they have freedom to travel, to own and experience both cultures. This exhibition will be a highlight of my career.



Fig. 2 Fatu Feu'u in the Macmillan Brown Pacific Residency Studio, photograph by Kate Mang



Fig. 3 OLA, exhibition preview event, photograph by Duncan Shaw

Lydia Baxendell is art collections curator at the University of Canterbury. She has spent the last decade working in curatorial roles within dealer, public and institutional arts environments. Recently she was awarded an MA with distinction in art history by the University of Otago.

Fatu Feu'u was born in Samoa in 1946, and settled in New Zealand in 1966. A senior contemporary artist, Feu'u is an adept painter; printmaker; sculptor; designer and poet. He is also considered as both a leader and mentor within the Pacific arts community in New Zealand. Feu'u is the only Pacific Island artist to receive an ONZM for his

services to Pacific art in New Zealand. Feu'u has exhibited regularly both nationally and internationally. His work is held in major collections such as the National Gallery, Brisbane; Auckland City Art Gallery; Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington; and Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton.

- 1 Feu'u strongly identified with Christchurch, having undergone a similar experience of devastation after the 2009 earthquake and tsunami that hit Samoa. He lost several relatives and, two and a half years on, his home village, Poutasi, is in the slow process of rebuilding the physical structure and community.
- 2 Discovery of Lapita pottery fragments in numerous Pacific sites, including Samoa, provides significant evidence for the early migration and settlement patterns of the Pacific Islands. Feu'u's friendship with archaeologist Professor Roger Green (1932-2009) led him to explore the decorative motifs of Lapita pottery dating back 3000 years within his art. In particular, Feu'u utilises the 'mask' face from a pot-shard unearthed by Green during an archaeological dig in Santa Cruz.
- 3 Colin McCahon (1919-87), *Victory over death 2 (1970)*, synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas, 2075 x 5977 mm. Collection of National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
- 4 Ifoga is pronounced ee-FONG-ah.
- 5 Also known as Matiu Island.