



Kirsten Lyttle *Lila* from *Te Whare Pora* (the *House of Weaving*) series, 2014, handwoven archival inkjet on Kodak Lustre paper

WE ARE BORN OF THE FANUA Moananui arts practice in Australia

*Artist and curator
Léuli Eshraghi maps
the diaspora and
reconsolidation of Pacific
or Moananui peoples in
Australia through the art
of Taloi Havini, Kirsten
Lyttle and Jasmine
Togo-Brisby*

*We are born of the fanua, of the moananui, of Tagaloa and our gods,
and of all our tupuga.¹*

Moananui a Kiwa or Moananuiākea² encompasses vast worlds of atoll and volcanic archipelagos, all connected through millennial *vā*³ of customary exchange, from Timor, Kaho'olawe and Pora Pora to Viti Levu, Te Ika a Māui and Rekohu. Thousands of peoples maintain Moananui geocultural, sociopolitical and spiritual practices in every part of this expansive ocean, and far beyond it through international diaspora.

In the most recent part of millennial histories, European, Asian, North and South American migrants came to the Moananui in search of capital and evangelical gain. From this expansionist impulse, our worlds were altered forever. Plural governance and cultural practices were brought into the Euro-American Christian capitalist system. Intensive land alienation, introduced diseases, evangelisation and

enslavement followed on plantations in Australia, Fiji and the New Hebrides and mines in New Caledonia, Chile and Peru. Moananui communities drastically shrank in size, as ancestral practices eroded. Many cultural practices continued surreptitiously. Regular customary exchange voyages across the Moananui ceased, due to the impact of the uninitiated newcomers.

Euro-American settlement colonies in most archipelagos wrested control from numerous ruling monarchs and chieftains, especially in the multiple lands and waters which were arbitrarily divided, grouped together and often named after the newcomers' homelands, 'Fiji' (British colony), 'New Hebrides' (French and British colonies), 'New Caledonia' (French colony), Hawaii (illegal American annexation), 'New Zealand' (British colony) and 'Australia' (British colony).

The invasion of this region has brought particular unspoken traumas. These include the slavery of 60,000 people from the many different islands and archipelagos in western Moananui, on the cotton and sugarcane plantations of Queensland and New South Wales, from 1863 to the early 1900s. Once significant material gains were made through unpaid and underpaid slave labour in harrowing conditions, the European colonial ideal of the Anglo-Celtic colony was reiterated through laws and policies. This saw the forced deportation of many South Sea Islander labourers and their families, even after the establishment of multiple generations. The South Sea Islander families that remained and endured the following century, closely connected to First Nations⁴ communities along the eastern seaboard, are the recent ancestors of today's 30,000-strong community.

The second wave of migration to Australia occurred in the 1970s. Following the expansion of Australian immigration criteria to non-European peoples, Moananui communities began to arrive in search of work, education and social mobility, removed from island life. Large populous groups came from the former Queensland Trust Territory of Papua and New Guinea, Sāmoa, Viti Fiji, Aotearoa New Zealand and Tonga. Settling in rural mining towns and in the lower socio-economic suburban stretches of colonial towns and cities, Moananui peoples have enjoyed the spoils of empire, through social welfare, menial jobs, and sporting success. Today's largest communities are based in and around Meanjin Brisbane, Warrang Sydney, and Narm Melbourne. The largest communities are: Māori 128,500, Sāmoan 55,000, Zenadh-Kes Torres Strait Islander 48,000, Indo-Fijian and iTaukei Fijian 40,000, Tongan 25,000, South Sea Islander 20,000, 'Avaiki Nui Cook Islander 16,000, Papua and nearby archipelagos 15,500, with other smaller communities.⁵

Moananui arts practice has enjoyed pockets of presence across Australia. Exhibited with an experiential invisibility, where the majority of audiences, arts education spaces, media and public and private institutions do not see the work in the same light as arts ecologies in Aotearoa New Zealand that more fully embrace contemporary Moananui arts practice.

Nonetheless, 'the natives are restless' in Australia as an increasing presence through contemporary art shown in public and commercial exhibitions, festivals and across the

tertiary education sector. Following the *Pacific Wave* and *Pasifika* festivals in the 2000s, *Nesian Pride*, *Pacifica Festival* and *Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival* are the primary avenues, along with open call festivals, to address ignorance and the under-representation of Moananui peoples in Australian visual, literary and performing arts.⁶

Representationally and structurally, Moananui peoples are marginalised within the Australian cultural context. Moananui peoples make up a high proportion of criminality, social dysfunction and educational disadvantage figures. Moananui peoples are nearly invisible in the structures of power and meaning, from politics to business, the arts to heavy industry in Australia. It seems only sport, mining and private security are welcoming sectors. In recent years, Moananui arts practitioners have taken arts practices to the universities, arts institutions and festivals. Specific ecologies have been generated to hasten the advent of a more inclusive and nuanced society. A passionate cohort of artists has recently or are currently undertaking tertiary studies in fine art, social practice, conservation and curatorial practice across the major art schools in Narm Melbourne, Warrang Sydney and Canberra and Meanjin Brisbane. Their work builds on the critical mass of, writing, making and curatorial practices that have developed in the arts ecologies of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The dearth of critical engagement with Moananui arts practice in Australia has most recently been addressed through the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival's Symposium, held annually since 2013 at Footscray Community Arts Centre in Narm Melbourne.⁷ The symposium brings together practitioners, researchers, producers, collectors and community members from across Moananui to discuss art and politics, climate activism, Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP), engagement and activation of museum and gallery collections, curating and archival research, social practice and entrepreneurialism. The 2015 programme included keynotes by curators and artists from Aotearoa New Zealand and Turtle Island North America. The Moananui-specific critical dialogues contextualise and engage with heterogeneous arts practices usually under-represented and misunderstood in Australian arts spaces, forums and media.

Meanjin Brisbane-based South Sea Islander artist Jasmine Togo-Brisby's ancestors include people blackbirded from Santo and Ambae islands in northern Vanuatu into slavery on colonial plantations. Her research into archives and family histories along the eastern seaboard is part of community efforts to restore their cultural memory, culinary practices, and rightful place in contemporary society: 'When granny and grandfather were stolen from the islands, all island practice and tradition was stolen too. Our people were made to speak English and even call their children English names. Our culture is a combination of island traditions fused with culture inherited by the plantation owners.'⁸

Jasmine recently featured her sculptural installation series *Bitter Sweet* (2012–13) in the 150-year celebrations of



Jasmine Togo-Brisby *Latreille Austr-alien* from the *Austr-alien* series, 2013, watercolour, ink and acrylic on canvas



Jasmine Togo-Brisby *Eden*, 2013, from *Austr-alien* series, ink and acrylic on canvas

Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) community resilience across Meanjin Brisbane and regional towns in 2013. A series of life-size skulls moulded out of raw sugar and epoxy resin, this is arresting work on first encounter. Significantly, numerous unmarked graves of blackbirded South Sea Islanders are still being discovered by Queensland farmers.⁹ The installation responds as a memorial to the thousands of lives lost amidst suffering during the establishment of the sugarcane industry in Australia. The unsettling feeling imparted by the skulls is raw and harrowing. As Jasmine states, 'The Blackbirders had no regard for human life and they treated the islanders like animals. Their practices of slavery, kidnapping, murder and rape went on for years without any consequence. Our people died in the ships, on the shores (if they didn't cooperate) and in the cane fields.'

Australian South Sea Islanders are reclaiming their cultural practices through trips to Vanuatu and other island archipelagos, where they are relearning the customary weaving, complex genealogical sand drawings, and national creole language, Bislama.¹⁰ Increasing confidence in the efforts of communities to be recognised nationally points to a renewal of ancestral cultural practices, for ASSI children in Australia to regenerate from the losses of previous generations.

Political struggles against colonial encroachment on ancestral lands, waters, and cultural practices, feature

prominently in the ceramic work of Nakas Bougainvillean artist Taloi Havini. She was raised according to Buka cultural practices by parents dedicated to Bougainville, politically, culturally and socially. Accustomed to learning and responding to her Hakö cultural responsibilities through her Nakas clan ties, she seeks to arrest Australia's psychological and political disconnection with heavily impacted Moananui peoples, through art, relationships, and politics.¹¹

Half-shell porcelain coconuts sit atop a gleaming lightbox in Taloi's installation *The Coconut Revolution* (2012–14). Here she seeks to materialise the rarely interrogated labour, monocultural and economic dynamics that penetrated archipelagic societies across the Moananui through European-introduced cacao, copra and vanilla plantations.¹² Moananui peoples were forced into labour on their own lands for the capital advancement of Europeans. According to Taloi, 'The stoneware and porcelain firing of these forms irreversibly 'fixes' the complex race-relations made apparent by Western economic interests.'

Like Jasmine, Taloi's muted, poetic colour palette for the ceramic works, off-white, ink black, earthen brown, speaks to the harrowing human exporting practice of blackbirding. Meanwhile Australian colonial officials continued to force local labour on plantations as had the Germans,¹³ imposing monocultures on once virgin forest. The recent Bougainville

war (1990–97) saw the reclamation of the term ‘coconut revolution’ when the Papua New Guinean military blockade forced Bougainvilleans to teach themselves to be self-sufficient, including manufacturing coconut oil as fuel.¹⁴ Sculpted by hand to mimic opened coconuts the installation has filled an entire gallery, and in other iterations has been spread on a large lightbox. The spaced alignment of the opened coconuts resembles plantation lines of coconut palms. This is Taloi’s ode to the fallen slave workers, their restriction of movement and unpaid labour. Exploitative gain is rendered through cultivation of an unassuming organic food and building material as a means of enforcing inequitable Euro-American power relations upon Moananui peoples. Through *The Coconut Revolution* (2004–14) Taloi preferences Moananui ways of being and knowing, seeking reparations for ongoing traumas through the very objects of empire. She explains her strong commitment to self-determination and politics of place in this way: ‘Because the same British settlers that colonised this country had their intentions on the ‘Pacific rim’, and the Australian government that followed is in denial about its role in the Pacific, we as Indigenous peoples need to challenge the government about this idea of paternalistic behaviour. Just look at the inhumane treatment of refugees and of course Aboriginal First Nation communities. How else can I define my arts practice in this country without first recognising my position in this regionally?’

The dislocation and commodification of Moananui peoples is a focus of Tainui artist Kirsten Lyttle’s practice utilising photography, textiles and fibre. She grew up between Warrang Sydney and Te Whanganui a Tara Wellington before moving to Narrm Melbourne. This was prior to the widespread protests against the Springbok Tour, the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal and settlements process, Māori and Te Reo media channels, and concerted reo Māori development, which significantly reshaped Aotearoa New Zealand. A foundational sense of displacement from Māori cultural practice has seen her navigate the ‘elsewhere’, between times, countries and communities.¹⁵

Kirsten manifests the investigation and reconnection with Māori cultural practices in her interlaced photographic series *Maoris Weaving Baskets* (2012–13).¹⁶ The Koeaea, Karu Hapuku and twilled weaves are central to her examination of Māori representation in photography. The historical tourist industry images, identified through extensive archival research, are printed larger than the scanned original. Painstakingly hand-woven in red, black and white photographic layers, Kirsten contextualises the mana¹⁷ of the Māori women in the customary fibre work in contemporary photography. Her intention in this instance is to rework the tourist imagery in artwork ‘that respectfully acknowledges Māori ancestors, knowledge and concepts.’¹⁸ This approach sees the weaving and social practices learnt in the Pacific Women’s Weaving Circle applied in the creation of new representations.¹⁹

This year, Kirsten embarks on doctoral research at Deakin University into contemporary photography, digital imaging and representation in addressing the colonial tourist



Taloi Havini *The Coconut Revolution*, 2014, porcelain, stoneware, glaze, wood, acrylic, lightbox. Photo: Lisa Hilli

archive of Māori. Through her research-based practice, she is ‘creating a bridge of knowledge and connection from one generation of Māori weaver to another.’

‘As I was born in 1972, these images are of the age and type from my family’s photo albums. My mother is not dissimilar in age to some of the younger women shown in these photographs. In essence, even though the women in these photographs are unknown (to me), there is still a sense of the familiar; they signify the first link backwards in a long line of connected tissue of whakapapa. For me, to work with contemporary representations (i.e. photographs or postcards) of Māori women would not reflect this connected line as coherently.’²⁰

Well-versed in the ‘ethical implications that surround the appropriation of images, symbols and designs of Māori taonga’ through her recent studies and teaching, Kirsten navigates this complex terrain using Māori conceptual frameworks Te Whare Pora,²¹ and Whakapapa. The Māori kete basketry and mat patterns that Kirsten renews in photographic form are renderings of her transnational Māori cultural memory and practice. As it is for many Moananui artists, hers are Australian site-based narratives of Māori cultural practice, linking her to the wider generations of Māori who have built lives across the Moananui a Kiwa from Aotearoa New Zealand.

Where to for Moananui arts practice in Australia? Who is engaging with Moananui perspectives beyond the identity



Kirsten Lyttle *Twilled Weave*, 2012, handwoven archival inkjet print

political reductions of mainstream spaces, media and discourse? Yamatji curator Stephen Gilchrist critiques the struggle that lies ahead for First Nations peoples of Australia in decolonising and indigenising curatorial practice.²² Australia-based Moananui artists have the support of their curators and arts managers. But due to ongoing ignorance and Euro-American cultural centrality in the wider sector, these same artists require the support and corroboration of Anglo-Australian curators, writers, gallerists and collectors to progress at all. Therein lie the hard yards.

Does this responsibility to represent Moananui cultural practices, epistemologies and histories mean that artists are unable to navigate the Anglo-Australian arts ecology without giving in to universalising ignorance? It seems clear that for Moananui practitioners to create and exhibit their work in Australian contexts, there must be a significant shift in the sector. Alterity and lack of contextual understanding could mean that the Moananui artists who seek recognition within the Euro-American art system are wasting their time. Yet this alterity has also become the *modus operandi* for

the hard-working artists who are achieving notoriety. Not only are Moananui arts practitioners building the requisite momentum for visibility, criticality and development, Moananui-derived artistic and curatorial practice may yet be apprehended and interpreted differentially.²³

Euro-American centrality in thought and action in most arts spaces in this country does us all no favours, for we lose out on the specificity of Moananui, First Nations and Asian cultural practices. The significant contribution to Australian society of South Sea Islanders in particular sets the stage for the sustained critical engagement that is possible through reconciliation with imperialist histories in this part of the world. The Australian site-based narratives of more recent Moananui migrants take in the largest cities and towns. All our peoples, resting places, languages, knowledges and cultural practices are resilient and diverse. Today, Moananui peoples are in the throes of artistic, intellectual, political and spiritual resurgence in the face of contemporary challenges and opportunities.



Jasmine Togo-Brisby *Bitter-Sweet*, 2014–15, sugar and epoxy resin

1 Fanua denotes placenta/country/lands, Tagaloa is the central Oceanian name for supreme god amongst many others, and tupuga means ancestors in Sāmoan. 2 Ka Moananuiākea in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i denotes the great ocean linked to ancestor Kea. Te Moananui a Kiwa in reo Māori denotes the great ocean linked to ancestor Kiwa. I prefer Moananui to prevalent terms Pacific, Islander, Pasifika in order to most clearly align with millennial naming practices and the late Epele Hau'ofa's sea of islands vision, Oceania. 3 Interstitial space between people, and between people and objects, is delineated by social relations based on respect, honour and dignity. 4 I use First Nations to describe the 250 sovereign Nations described by prevalent introduced terms Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Indigenous. I recognise their inalienable rights and responsibilities to Country by preferring individual language terms such as Kulin Biik for the Kulin Nation's Country, Narrm Melbourne. 5 See studies by Development Policy Centre: <http://devpolicy.org/pacific-islanders-in-australia-where-are-the-melanesians-20140828/>, Australian South Sea Islander Secretariat: <http://www.assipj.com.au/australian-south-sea-islander-historical-chronology/>, and Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato University of Waikato: http://www.waikato.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/156831/2013-WP3-A-Demographic-Profile-of-Maori-living-in-Australia.pdf. 6 *Pacific Wave* held regularly in early 2000s, various venues, Warrang Sydney; *Pasifika* regularly in late 2000s, Powerhouse, Meanjin Brisbane; *Nesian Pride* annually since 2010s, Sunameke Presents, Garrmalang Darwin; *Pacifika Festival* annually since 2010s, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Warrang Sydney; *Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival* held annually since 2013, Footscray Community Arts Centre and satellite venues, Narrm Melbourne. 7 See www.cpaforum.com for details on past proceedings and publications. 8 Personal communications with Jasmine Togo-Brisby, 7 Hui-tanguru February 2015. 9 See recent ABC news reportage: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-23/call-for-any-south-sea-islander-quarry-graves/5542612>. 10 See Inside Story reportage: <http://insidestory.org.au/south-sea-islanders-unite-in-australia-and-ASSI-150-programme>: <http://www.assi150.com.au/sugar/>. 11 All quotes by the artist from personal communication with Taloi Havini, 9 Hui-tanguru February 2015. See taloihavini.com. 12 See Bougainvillean perspectives: <http://bougaintour.com/1800-2/>.

13 German New Guinea was taken by invading Australian troops near Rabaul in 1914, and was administered by Queensland as the British Trust Territory of Papua and New Guinea until independence in 1975. 14 See documentaries *An Evergreen Island* (2000) by Frontyard Films, and *The Coconut Revolution* (2001) by Stampede Films. 15 From personal communication with the artist, 6 Hui-tanguru February 2015. See her website: kirstenlyttle.com. 16 The series is titled according to colloquial naming of Māori outside the contemporary standard noun without a plural S and including the diacritical mark for long vowels. 17 Moananui concept in a number of cultures of a cumulative social and spiritual presence. 18 Artist statement, 'A Circle to Weave In', Blak Dot Gallery, *Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival 2014*. 19 Narrm Melbourne-based monthly meetings of the Pacific Women's Weaving Circle reinforce Moananui women's fibrework, song and cultural memory in a safe space in operation since 2011. Similar groups are thriving in Meanjin Brisbane and Warrang Sydney. 20 Artist statement, 'A Circle to Weave In', Blak Dot Gallery, *Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival 2014*. Whakapapa means genealogy, lineage, familial links in reo Māori. 21 The House of Weaving or Weaving School in reo Māori. 22 Stephen Gilchrist, 'Indigenising Curatorial Practice' in *The World is not a Foreign Place* catalogue, University of Melbourne Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2014, p. 55. 23 Gilchrist, p. 58.

Léuli Eshraghi is an artist, curator and doctoral candidate at MADA. He is curator of *Coconut Water* opening in Hakihea December at Caboolture Regional Art Gallery in Meanjin Brisbane. He was recently Artist in Residence at Tautai Pacific Arts Trust in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, and Guest Editor of *Oceania Now* for the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival. | leulieshraghi.com

Jasmine Togo-Brisby will exhibit in *Coconut Water* in Meanjin Brisbane in Hakihea December. | [Facebook.com/pages/Jasmine-Togo-Brisby-Art](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jasmine-Togo-Brisby-Art)

Taloi Havini will exhibit in APT8 at the Gallery of Modern Art in Meanjin Brisbane in Whiringa-ā-rangi November and in *Coconut Water*. | taloihavini.com

Kirsten Lyttle will undertake the Gushul Studio, University of Lethbridge artist residency in Blairmore, Canada, in Mahuru September, and exhibit in *Coconut Water*. | kirstenlyttle.com