PACIFIC ARTS LEGACY PROJECT 17.09.21

An Umbilical Cord that was Never Cut

South Sea Island artist Jasmine Togo-Brisby reflects on growing up a descendant of ‘people-stealing boats’, the vessels that have become artistic material.

By JASMINE TOGO-BRISBY
Read Time: 11 mins

AA → AA

Posted on
17.09.21

We’re collaborating with Creative New Zealand to bring you the groundbreaking Pacific Arts Legacy Project. Curated by Lana Lopesi as project Editor-in-Chief, it’s a foundational history of Pacific arts in Aotearoa as told from the perspective of the artists who were there.

CW: South Sea Island readers are advised that this article contains images and voices of deceased persons. Readers are warned that there may be words and descriptions that could be culturally sensitive and which might not normally be used in certain public or community contexts.

Earlier this year I took my daughter Eden on a three-hour glass-bottomed-boat tour at Te Whanganui-A-Hei (Cathedral Cove) Marine Reserve. Pathetically, I got seasick from looking down at the marine life through the glass window in the bottom of the boat. It was a particularly rough day – we had been booked to go the day

throw up, trying not to let Eden see that I was in absolute misery. I forced my eyes to the horizon and wished the time away.

I thought of my ancestors.

Three months

Darkness

Movement

Sickness

Stench

It's inconceivable. The ship packed full of damaged and sick bodies, strangers from different regions, sharing in the suffering together, language muted, *thrown into a melting pot* in the belly of a ship. The ship is an *abyss*, the initial space of rupture, the bringing together of many nations and tribal groups, which would otherwise be disconnected, now into a new, shared entity. In that bondage birthed a new culture, a collision of cultures – some aspects adopted, others lost – that would ripple down the generations.

Like many other creation stories, ours started in darkness, but it's different when your genesis is at the bottom of a ship. My mother says, "we are floating", adrift… in both time and space. We are Australian South Sea Islanders, the Australian-born descendants of the Pacific slave trade; the movement of our people is a jarring juxtaposition to the free migration of other Pacific peoples, most of which is centred on fearless ancestors navigating sophisticated voyages across vast stretches of open sea on waka, not restrained on colonial ships.

Our South Sea identity is complex and often difficult to understand: we identify as Blak, in a part of the world where Blakness often means Indigeneity, and while we have a kinship and intermarriages with our First Nations brothers and sisters our South Sea bloodlines are not Indigenous to Australia, nor are we often regarded as Indigenous to our island homelands either. We are a Pacific slave diaspora, formed in the holds and on plantations, an identity often too alien to comprehend. Displaced and disenfranchised, for those of us in the afterlives of slavery, the journey is genesis.

THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

'Centre Flower no. 335', 2020. Backlit film, aluminium lightbox 1250 x 1250 x 150mm. pc. Ryan McCauley.

The late Auntie Faith Bandler speaks on the stories she grew up hearing from her father about his abduction at the age of 13, in 1883:

> When he was kidnapped and taken in the boat by the slavers and what it was like in the boat coming over from his island Ambrym, in the New Hebrides and how rough it was. And how they were all held in the hull and how sick they were, and those who died were thrown overboard … another world, another world.

Another world. A nonworld. The middle passage, a world of gratuitous violence, of transportation and transformation, the unimaginable and unknown. The ruptures caused by the vessels are held in our collective memory, for both those who disappeared

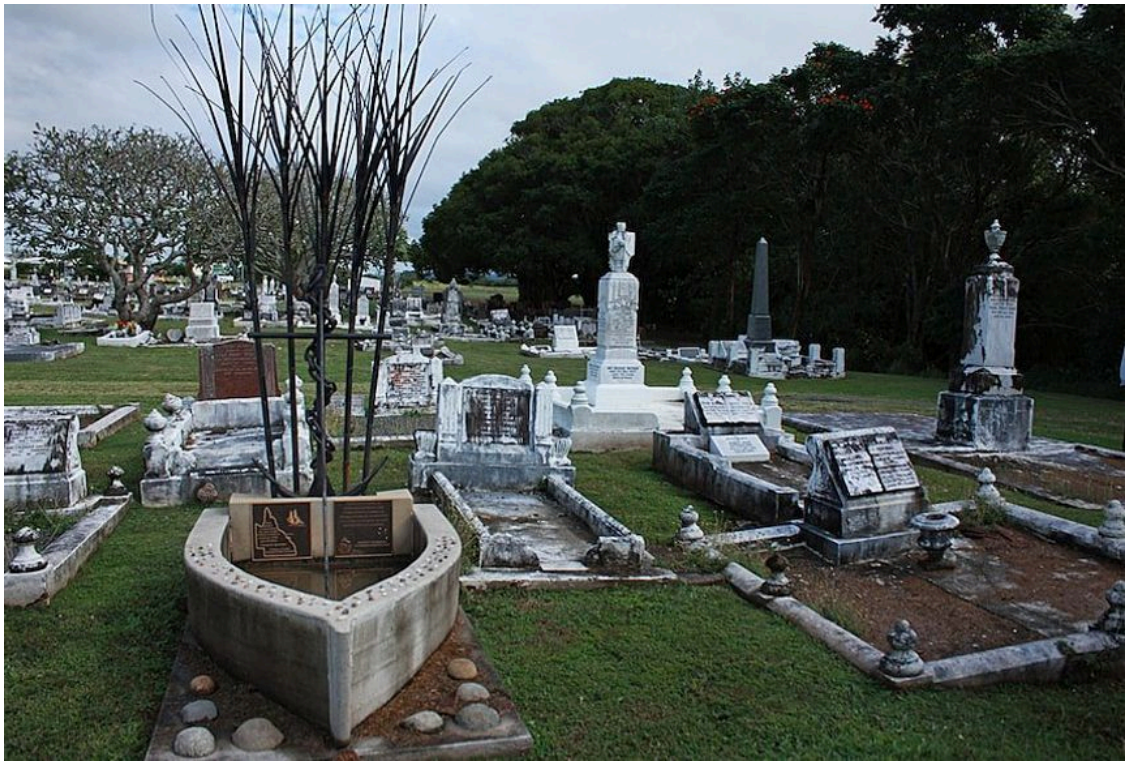
I think of Uncle Jack Marau, a South Sea man who handcrafted a model replica of the vessel that took him on the journey that he would never return from. Unfortunately, there is little to be found on his life; this image floats within a sea of numbers (our ancestors' bodies as figures), 'facts' and trade routes compiled by the historian who captured the image. All I can do is imagine what this act of making was like for him. How his body was compelled to expel and release the things that cannot be or haven't been spoken about, for which there aren't enough words or the right words or the right language. Uncle Jack's ship is a radical act of reclamation and resistance – in a time when Australia was trying to eradicate our people through mass deportations (the largest in Australian history), Uncle Jack made the intangible visible.

THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

Christie Fatnowna with a model ship made by Jack Marau, 1988. Jack Marau lived with Norman and Hazel Fatnowna in his old age; they inherited the model ship when he passed away. Source: Clive Moore Collection

The act of reclaiming the vessel can also be seen in our cemeteries; the Mackay, Queensland, cemetery in particular holds a headstone that takes shape as the hull of a large vessel. It is adorned with sugarcane and complete with a large anchor, said to be an original from the ship that transported them to Australia. In their departure from this world, they proudly insist on being seen.

monument and memorial for many. It reflects the Wantok (one talk) phrase “yu me two fella one scoon”, meaning both people shared the journey on the same schooner to Australia, and used as an expression of union beyond kinship.



Unmarked Australian South Sea Islander graves at the Mackay cemetery (ABC: Sophie Kesteven).

> When I was growing up, the village elders would talk about the sailing boats. They would call them ‘people stealing boats’ or ‘steal ships

I look to our islands, where the representations of the vessel can also be found in the kustom of repatriating South Sea families to our ancestral homelands. The South Sea family is wrapped between palm fronds, which create the shape of a ship; they then walk with the ship draped around them back into their village, where they are welcomed with singing and celebrations of their return. Both the tombstone and the ceremony can be viewed as modes of return, a hope that perhaps if we retrace our steps and reboard the vessel we may attempt recovery – to reclaim what was lost/stolen, either in this life or the afterlife, to make our way home to the motherland.

commemorative re-enactments of blackbirding abductions take place: a big truck is dressed in the appearance of a ship, it drives slowly through the main street and locals onboard play the role of slavers, grabbing young men and children off the street and pulling them onto the vessel, parents run after the ship screaming and crying for their abducted children. Ni Vanuatu political figure and poet, the late Grace Molisa, writes, “When I was growing up, the village elders would talk about the sailing boats. They would call them ‘people stealing boats’ or ‘steal ships’.” The memory and trauma of the slave trade is passed down through stories and songs on the impacted islands. The women of Pentecost perform a dance and song that laments the theft of our people. As part of the ritual the women hold wooden rods with miniature schooners on the ends, they dance and push the schooners in the air, chanting:

the ships stole our people

and we don’t know where they have gone

the ships stole our people

and they've disappeared

The image of a ship invokes fear and is used a warning sign, as an act of remembrance, yearning for those who were taken; it is a practice of care, a plea to not forget a past that has not yet passed.

The *Don Juan* was the first vessel, taking 67 of our people from Vanuatu to Queensland in 1863. While there are records of South Sea Islanders coming to Australia as early as 1847, the *Don Juan* triggered the influx of South Sea Islanders – the more than 62,000 labourers ‘contracted’ to work in Australia – that would continue until 1904. For South Sea Islanders, the *Don Juan* is the marker of our time in Australia, of our ancestors’ journeys and struggles, of our endurance, it is something we celebrate and commemorate.

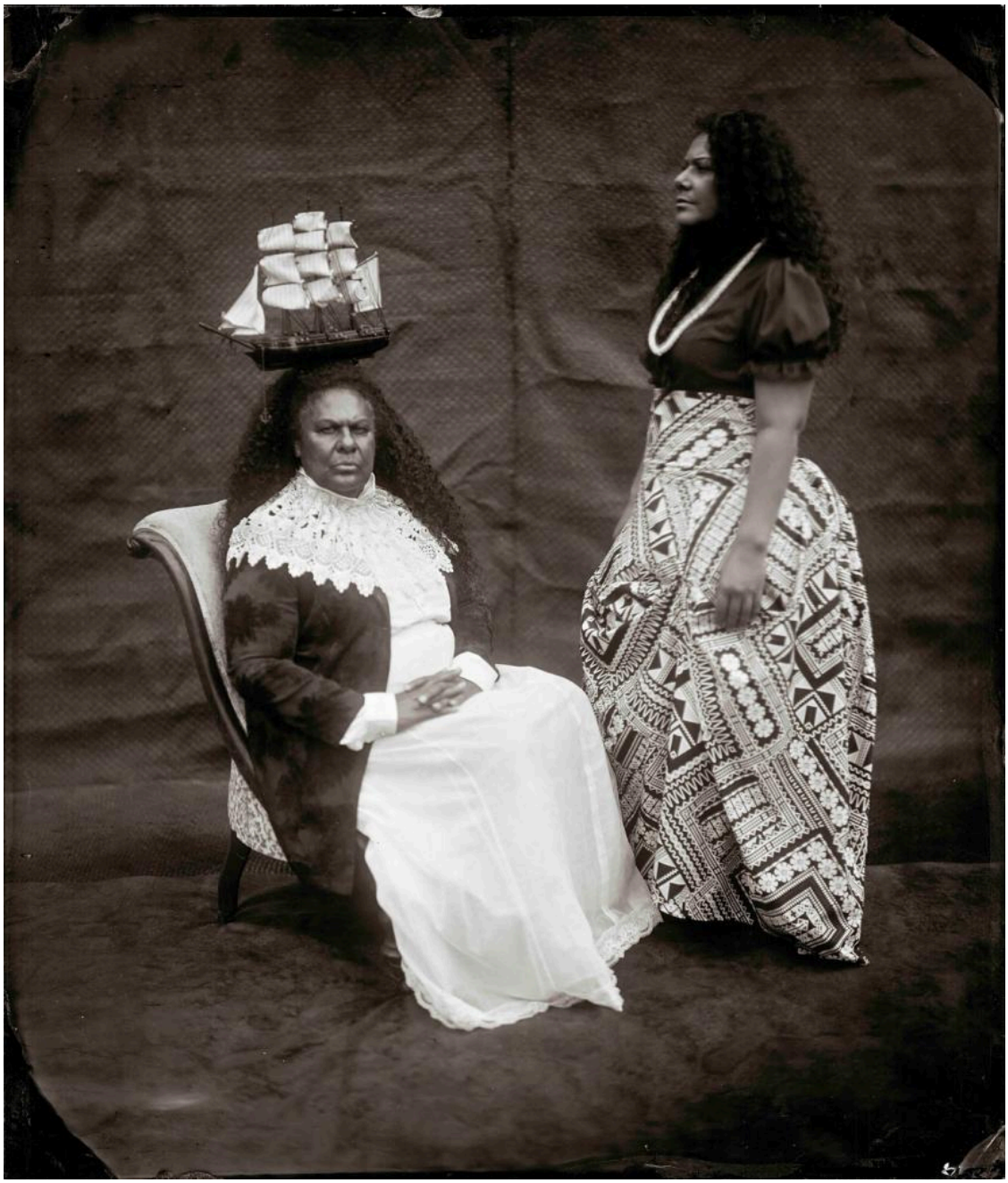
THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

Inheritance, 2019. Collodion on glass 258 x 305mm.

I had never given much thought to what happened to the ships that once carried our ancestors; in my subconscious I assumed they had all disappeared, sunk to the bottom of the ocean, burned, you know, things that happen in movies from a time that I have never lived. So to discover that the *Don Juan* still exists on this earth was beyond shocking, and furthermore it is just a short flight from my home here in Aotearoa. It sits just below the surface of the water in a small alcove on the coast of Kōpūtai (Port Chalmers). Just metres from the road – locals drive past daily – there is no plaque or signifier, it's seemingly deemed irrelevant.

On my first visit to the *Don Juan* I was (and still am) in disbelief. It is surreal, I shouldn't be able to see it, it should be further away from me in both time and in space. I thought, "This is a crime scene!

memory for us, and something that I truly cannot find adequate words to describe.



Tidal Transitions.

I was told that the ship was once a water playground for all the children in the area and that hundreds of pairs of shackles were retrieved from its hull. The nearby Maritime Museum holds one pair and the Auckland Museum has another, but most were taken by collectors from the region. The main audience for both the shackles and the *Don Juan* is tourists disembarking from cruise

The first time I took my mother to visit the *Don Juan* we stood on the edge of the road, looking out across the bay, in silence. We watched the surface of the water go from still, clear glass to what looked like tiny dancing ripples and swirls gliding across the bay – they danced into the shadows of the ship, where they stayed. My mum turned to me and said, "They're talking to us." We went back to silence, our bodies paralysed, and our eyes fixated on listening to a language that is not of this world.

These vessels are an ever-present part of our culture, we are tethered to them, and them to us, like an umbilical cord that was never cut.

Mother Tongue, 2020.

Editor-in-Chief of the project.

Series design by Shaun Naufahu, Alt group.

Header photograph supplied by Jasmine Togo-Brisby

NEWSLETTER

Want the best writing in your inbox each month?
Subscribe here:

Your email address SUBMIT

JASMINE TOGO-BRISBY
Kaituhi Tūtahi | Contributing Writer

READ ARTICLES

SHARE +

NEXT UP: TŪFUGA AND DAD, JOHNNY PENISULA

PACIFIC ARTS LEGACY PROJECT 13.08.21

THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

Tūfuga and dad, Johnny Penisula

From Sāmoa to Southland, Ioane (Johnny) Reuelu Penisula is a renowned master stone carver whose work and life has been dedicating to serving and empowering his aiga. Lyle Penisula writes on the legacy of tūfuga and dad, Johnny Penisula.

By LYLE AND JOHNNY PENISULA

Read Time: 15 mins

AA → AA

Posted on
13.08.21

We're collaborating with Creative New Zealand to bring you the groundbreaking Pacific Arts Legacy Project. Curated by Lana Lopesi as project Editor-in-Chief, it's a foundational history of Pacific arts in Aotearoa as told from the perspective of the artists who were there.

Invercargill, our most southern city in Aotearoa is where I was born and bred and is where my father Johnny Penisula honed his craft as a master stone carver. Little did I understand this growing up, what I observed during this time was a hard-working Dad striving to make ends meet. Working faithfully at the freezing works for twenty plus years and in between seasons working as a fitter wielder for various local engineering firms.

It was in the early days in my Dad's spare time away from work, that I saw him painting, mostly local scenic works. Many of which he sold or gave away to family and friends. Some Southland scenes including of Mitre Peak in Milford Sound and the Purakaunui Falls in the Catlins Dad painted multiple times as his paintings (and these scenes) became popular.

Dad was a self-taught painter, his style was influenced by the scenic works of English artists, Joseph Mallord William Turner and John Constable. However, it was the Dutch master Rembrandt,

In the mid to late seventies while Dad studied fine arts by correspondence he was exposed to other mediums. It was through this course that Dad was introduced to sculpture. He discovered Picasso and his sculptures made with found objects. It was Picasso's *Bulls Head* of 1942, which inspired Dad to shift from 2D works to 3D. I think this piece gave Dad permission to be free, particularly to express his sense of humour and it was here that his engineering skills were put to creative use.

THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

Portrait of Johnny Penisula, courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele.

As he studied, he found the opportunity to show his work in Southland Art Society exhibitions. And it was in this environment that he found that he could be more himself through the medium of sculpture. The first sculpture Dad exhibited was titled *Sore Horse*,

exhibition, artists and viewers alike.

Southland being a Scottish settled region meant that having an artist of Sāmoan heritage involved in the local art scene was new. Dad was welcomed and accepted as a fellow artist, not categorised as a Sāmoan artist, as the modern Pacific arts movement was yet to be discovered.

Here is a question, are you a Samoan artist because of your Samoan heritage or because you use Samoan themes and motifs in your work? Can you separate the two? Up to this point Dad was not using any Sāmoan themes or symbols in his work. He simply considered himself an artist who just happened to be Sāmoan.

Are you a Samoan artist because of your Samoan heritage or because you use Samoan themes and motifs in your work? Can you separate the two?

The eighties was a decade of huge change for Dad. During this time his whole world was turned upside down. First, he had to endure incredible financial pressure while striking as a freezing worker through a turbulent time when Aotearoa was going through major economic change. When he finally got back to work, he had an accident where a huge freezer door was caught by a gust of wind and struck him in the back.

The injury was a blessing in disguise as it was a catalyst that shifted Dad on to a new trajectory where he couldn't return to the freezer but was forced by circumstances to try something new. It was a scary prospect for Dad as he was now in his mid to late-forties. He loved the arts but could he back himself to make a living from it and provide for his aiga?

In the end Dad took the leap of faith and chose to do further training in the visual arts. His skill in sculpture using materials like steel, aluminum, bone, wood, argillite, greenstone and limestone was made immediately apparent and quickly mastered. Before Dad even graduated in his training he was employed as a teacher to tutor new students. He was a natural and he loved what he was doing. Next was the rediscovery of his Sāmoan cultural roots.

Dad as he was now in his mid to late-forties. He loved the arts but could he back himself to make a living

It was around this time when I was studying at art school in Otago. I discovered my creative genes and was now exploring ideas of cultural identity. Having met fellow student Michel Tuffery, I began a journey of Polynesian discovery. I remember asking Dad a lot of questions, because up to this point in my upbringing Dad had kept me distant from a lot of Sāmoan culture, particularly the negative aspects of Fa'a Sāmoa here in Aotearoa. As I asked questions and we talked about the meaning of Sāmoan symbols and island practices we sparked inspiration for each other.

Dad enjoyed being isolated in the deep south for many reasons. Some of those reasons he keeps close to heart, but I think for the best part it was because he was able to develop his own work in isolation without the distraction of others or particularly any cultural politics. Dad prefers to let his work to do all the talking.

Through a joint exhibition with Michael Tuffery in 1988, I was introduced to Fatu Feu'u, Lily Laita, Sale Jessop, Ioane Ioane and John Pule. Just a few of the artists who were beginning to gather, and who were to be instrumental in making history in Pacific arts. It was within the next couple of years that Dad now a master carver would come out of obscurity from the deep south, and add his weight behind a movement of Pacific artists that would bust open all sorts of doors for those who were following.

A master carver would come out of obscurity from the deep south, and add his weight behind a movement of Pacific artists that would bust open all sorts of doors for those who were following.

Dad was born Ioane Reuelu Penisula on April 8, 1941, while my grandfather Reuelu Penisula Fa'alavaau was training at the LMS (London Missionary Society) Theological College in Malua, on the island of Upolu, Sāmoa. When my grandparents completed their theological training in 1943 they began their church ministry in the village of Fatuvalu in the district of Safune, Savai'i.

Dad spent his formative years 1943-1956 in the small village of Fatuvalu and I believe it was here during this time that the subject matter for his many works are found. In particularly the two big reoccurring themes found in Dad's work, the coconut and the octopus.

THE OCTOPUS

Samoa.

The story as my Dad tells it, is that on the reef directly opposite the front doors of his family church in Fatuvalu, the ship carrying the missionary John Williams and his missionary party stopped and made contact with a woman from his village who was fishing for octopus on the reef. The woman offered John Williams a coconut for refreshment in which he responds with gratefulness and cheer through a prayer of thanks.

Dad attributes this moment as the time when the first Christian prayer was prayed in Sāmoa although formal history credits the village of Sapapali'i as the birthplace of Christianity in Sāmoa. His home village seem to agree with him as the name of their church confirms the story. It is also good to note that on a wall of this church, in his early teens Dad painted his first mural.

THE COCONUT

The fresh spring pool Mata o le Alelo in the village of Matavai, is found only a few hundred metres from Dad's village of Fatuvalu. It is this pool which is associated with the legend of Sinaand the Eel. The creation story of the coconut and the coconut tree.

I can see that these stories have made a significant impact on my father and have been a source of inspiration for his work, the octopus and coconut have evolved into a couple of his most personal symbols.

Dad moved to the village Fa'atoia in Apia to attend Sāmoa College from 1957-1960, and when he graduated he worked for the family moving between Savai'i and Apia as he was needed. It was in the daily lifestyle of traditional Sāmoan living, from the food, to fishing, tending to the plantation, the various crafts required to maintain village life, and particularly the village leadership structure (fa'a Matai) that Dad drew a lot of his source material for his work.

As an artist I have drawn inspiration and ideas from symbols and motifs found in my Sāmoan heritage as I searched them out. I discovered their meaning from a distance, almost second hand, like learning a second language. Dad applied cultural symbols and motifs to his works fluently and applied traditional skills like weaving and knot tying with ease. He lived these skills, worked

Matai, 1989, Australian Hardwood and Agilite.

that my Dad had my back.

Dad married my Mum in 1968. A palagi of Scottish decent. They had three children, one son and two daughters. In 1978 Dad took us home to his family village, Fatuvalu. I was young, only ten years old. But I can remember vividly the experience. I saw traditional village life in action. I observed my grandparents serving their community as ministers and how hands on they were with their people. A lot of what I experienced and saw as a ten-year-old, helps me to now as an adult contextualize some of Dad's work and thinking. That family holiday was 43 years ago, Dad hasn't been back to his home village since.

Dad was a son of a faife'au (minister). I was intrigued, why was there no obvious Christian influence in his work? As kids Dad sent us to the local (palagi) Church, though he didn't attend himself. I remember as a teenager asking Dad, 'Why don't you go to the Samoan Church?' Dad answered, 'This is New Zealand not Sāmoa.' And that was the end of that conversation. It was obvious there was more to it than what Dad was prepared to explain, it wasn't until some years later that I began to understand.

As I got older and found my own Christian faith, and themes from my faith began to emerge in my paintings. Dad was proud of the direction I was taking. We exhibited together a number of times and Dad often said to others that my work also spoke for him. In Ponsonby, Auckland, we had an incident while trying to secure a venue for an exhibition. The curator of the gallery asked to look at some photographs of our work and our credentials. He studied the photos for a bit and then said, 'I am happy to exhibit Samoan pieces, but it's a firm no on any Christian themed works.' Dad was highly offended by the ignorance and subjective bias of the curator, he asked him, 'Do you really understand what Samoan art is? You can't separate Christianity from being Samoan.' I knew the curator was keen on Dad's pieces but rejected mine. I'll never forget that day, it was the day that my Dad had my back.

THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

Father & Son at the AIGA Exhibition, 2019.

In 2001 I was ordained into pastoral ministry. I became a faife'au. My extended aiga was extremely proud, I was following my grandfather's footsteps. I remember when I embraced one of my aunties, she congratulated me and whispered in my ear, 'Well done son we are proud of you, now don't let us down, *be a good one*.' It was here where I began to understand more fully my Dad and some of the thinking of my uncles and aunties. It appears what they experienced in Sāmoa growing up was vastly different to what they saw in operation here in Aotearoa. Dad had the belief that the fa'a Matai system in Sāmoa was about the welfare and well-being of the extended aiga. And that the faife'au has a responsibility to represent God by serving the people. It is about serving, not your position or power. As our people migrated to Aotearoa and tried to

fa'a Matai has in a couple of his sculptures such as *Matai* 1989, *Fale Tele* 1998, *Fa'atau* 1999. He prefers to emphasize ideals than point out the failures.

> The faife'au has a responsibility to represent God by serving the people. It is about serving, not your position or power.

THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

Faʻatau, 1999.

In 1962, Dad migrated to New Zealand. He travelled from Sāmoa to Fiji, celebrating his 21st birthday on the ‘Banana Boat’ the MV Matua while on the journey. He then flew from Fiji and landed at Whenuapai, Auckland in April 1962. He worked in a plastic factory

in late July of 1962.

Sina's Seed No.1, Southland argillite, 1995.

That was a lifetime ago. Dad is now 80 years old and a believer that art should reflect who you are, what you are and where you are. He has spent more years in Aotearoa than he has in his birth country. Don't be fooled, his work might be full of Sāmoan themes and symbols but his underlying message is relevant for today's viewers in any context. I recently had the honour to be part of an unveiling of one of Dad's sculptures carved from Southland Argillite in 1995 called *Sina's Seed No1* at ILT Stadium Southland. It was bought and gifted to the City of Invercargill. It was appropriate that this particular sculpture was chosen. Sina's seed, a coconut, found its way from Sāmoa to Murihiku, Aotearoa. That seed took root and went on to produce a harvest, it left a legacy. The carving from my observation has a form of a Paua which is found in abundance on the southern coast as opposed to a coconut. Maybe that represents Dad's personal journey and evolution.

Dad is a proud Southlander and has served his region with passion and pride. He is a patron of the arts and culture in our region. Highly respected and honoured by the southern community. A man

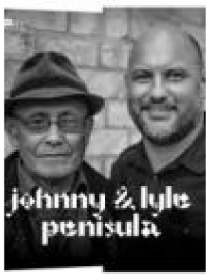
THE PANTOGRAPH PUNCH

creative nz
ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEARO

This piece is published in collaboration with Creative New Zealand as part of the Pacific Arts Legacy Project, an initiative under Creative New Zealand's Pacific Arts Strategy. Lana Lopesi is Editor-in-Chief of the project.

Series design by Shaun Naufahu, Alt group.

Header photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele.



Your email address Submit

TWITTER

INSTAGRAM

FACEBOOK

Site by 1/1

TERMS