



Ngatu Led Me North

Reflections on *'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures*

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At the start of 2021, preparations were made for a *ngatu tāhina* and a *ngatu tapa'ingatu* (Tongan barkcloth), both in the collection of Canterbury Museum, to travel north. The two were to take part in *'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures*, an exhibition I knew little of until I arrived at the opening night to see both *ngatu* displayed in context, amongst other manifestations of Tongan knowledge, visual language, and social systems.

Ethnographic collection items are the skilful manifestations and innovations of a person's or people's political, social and economic systems and practices. The management of such items requires a level of care typically overlooked but is increasingly being practised; prompted by members of origin communities, including their transnational

whanaunga/aiga/family. Pacifica artists re-examining and re-contextualising museum objects, spaces and records is inevitably on the rise. Similarly, museums worldwide are unravelling not only stories of 'exploration' and 'great discoveries' to which their Pacific collections are attached; they are now systematically processing the unethical ways they have historically amassed their ethnographic hoards. Indigenous-led access to their heritage material has become a highlight for museums that today strive to shed the colonial-laden systems and practices regarding community access that have for too long seemed a permanent fixture within their shifting walls.

'Amui 'i Mu'a featured works by senior Tongan artists Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, alongside creations of Tongan manufacture carefully selected from museum collections across Aotearoa. It is the artistic outcome of a major five-year collaborative project in which a team consisting of scholars Billie Lythberg, Phyllis Herda, Melenaita Taumoefolau and Hilary L. Scothorn joined Tohi and Dyck, travelling worldwide to examine

Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck & Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi
'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures
Wallace Arts Centre, Pah Homestead, Auckland
12 March–2 May, curated by Nicholas Butler

(opposite) DAGMAR DYCK *M.A.P.S.* 2020
Acrylic and spray paint on wooden board, 1600 x 2000 mm.
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)

(right) FILIPE TOHI *Manuvaka* 2008
Taranaki andesite, 660 x 450 x 500 mm.
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)

(below) 'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures at Wallace Arts Trust
Pah Homestead, March 2021, with Filipe Tohi's *Haufakalava* in
foreground
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)



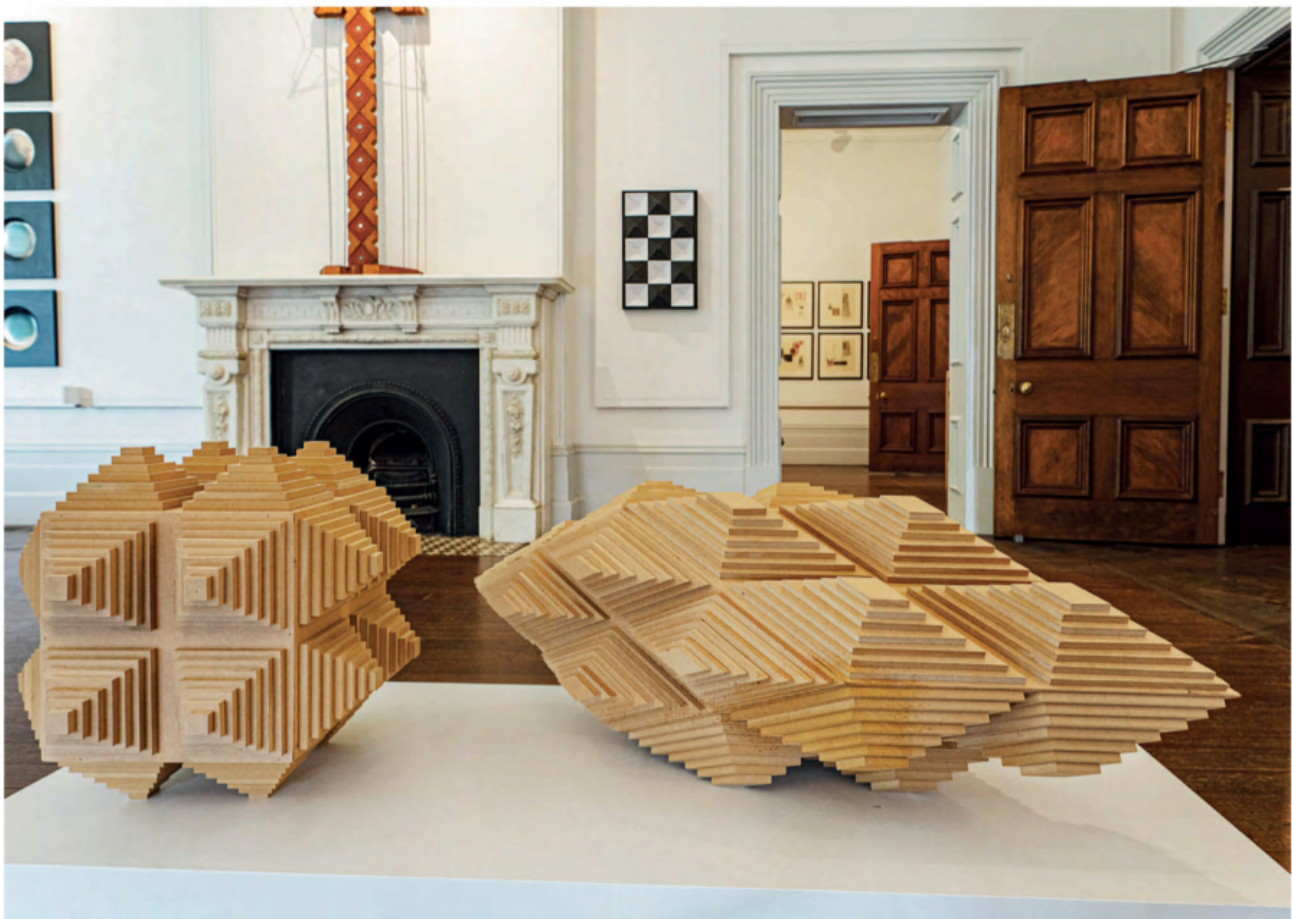
museum artefacts provenanced to the late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century encounters between Tongan islanders and Europeans.

During their tour, the 'Amui 'i Mu'a project team encountered a sector-wide issue we deal with daily. Historic written records associated with indigenous objects are often sparse, if not biased or assumptive. Well prepared, the team acknowledged and practised Tongan values such as *faka'apa'apa* (respect). This created a shared sense of accountability, informing and guiding their multi-disciplinary, multi-sensory examination of Tongan artefacts or arts, *nima mea'a*.¹ The team's multi-sensory experiences led to an exchange that ensured Tongan material was sighted, handled and acknowledged once more under the gaze of their own. Knowledge was further exchanged as they worked with host museum staff to reinstate origin names, related terminologies, and visible applied construction techniques and practices.

Tohi and Dyck have long been captivated by Tongan forms of expression. Finding solace, challenge and realisation in the cosmos of *lalava* (systematic

lashing), the forms of *kali* (head rests), iconography within *akau* (clubs), and the texture and graphics of *ngatu* and *kiekie* (waist ornament/garment), much of their early reference points were restricted to images in catalogues and publications. The opportunity to uncover Tongan objects around the world and spend time participating in the care of them, can only have prompted an urge to create and share; to practise the continuum of Tongan visual language.

Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi was born in Ngele'ia on Tonga's main island, Tongatapu. He immigrated to Aotearoa in 1978 and in the 1990s started exhibiting, articulating a life philosophy through the practice of *lalava*. Tohi began developing *lalava* and its related aspects in sculpture, experimenting in stone and wood. He became increasingly curious about the possibilities of extending the mediums with which he could communicate the technological significance of





(left) NIMAFĀ COLLECTIVE (VEA MAFILE'O, EMILY MAFILE'O, LUANA DYCK & DAGMAR DYCK) *Sisi fale* 2021
Moving image installation, dimensions variable
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)

(below) 'Amui 'i Mu'a—*Ancient Futures* at Wallace Arts Trust Pah Homestead, March 2021, with three kiekie by Dagmar Dyck, clockwise from top left, *Worn to Imply* (2019), *Kiekie Pepa* (2017), *Worn to Suggest* (2019). For the making of each, Dyck was assisted by Alexis Neal and Nilesh Selwaswala
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)

(opposite above left) *Ngatu Tāhina: figures and trees* Tonga
Barkcloth & natural inks
(Reverend MA Rugby-Pratt Collection, Canterbury Museum E156.241)
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)

(opposite above right)
Ngatu Tapa'ingatu: gramophones and clocks Tonga
Barkcloth & natural inks
(Reverend MA Rugby-Pratt Collection, Canterbury Museum E156.236)
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)

(opposite below) FILIPE TOHI *Four Kali* 2021
Wood, sennit & bone, from left, 180 x 110 x 420 mm., 140 x 100 x 340 mm., 130 x 110 x 360 mm., 170 x 130 x 420 mm.
(Photograph: Raymond Sagapolutele)

lalava all around the Pacific. Other significant strands of inspiration for Tohi, reflected in his work, are the intricate *kupesi* (designs/patterns/formations) of *akau*. Carved to cover the entirety of paddles and clubs, *akau kupesi* reflect some visual components of *ngatu kupesi*. In either medium, an optical illusion is created by the highly ornate *kupesi* layer, a universe that cradles the suspended forms of animals such as birds and turtles, as well as people.





Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck was born and raised in Auckland although many of her summer holidays growing up were spent in Vava'u, Tonga, developing and maintaining village and family connections. Dyck's visual language draws on Tongan textiles, and fibre works. Her exploration has led to an unpacking of *ngatu kupesi*, *sisi fale* (ornamental openwork apron), textured *kiekie* and tightly woven and patterned *kato*, *fala* and *helu* (baskets, mats and combs). Her multimedia approach reflects the resourcefulness of Pacifica enriched by timeless Tongan references. For *'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures*, both artists extended their understanding and practices of Tongan visual language. They have compiled their worldwide experiences, conversations and discoveries into a formidable showing of Tongan ethos, knowledge systems and cultural continuity.

It is the opening night for *'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures*. Walking up to the Pah Homestead, I became preoccupied with the building's composure and its distinctive features: its green grounds and manicured foliage; the ample height of its multiple storeys; its irregular façade; its superficial trimmings. It projects the architectural tastes of its day, its relaxed Italianate style aware of, but unfazed by, aesthetic precepts of order and symmetry.

It is a fitting venue for this show; its mix of heritage and the contemporary mirrors the make-up of *'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures*. It is located firmly in the Pacific and celebrates the creative endeavours of Pacific peoples.

There is a queue on the steps at the main entrance. Inside, the noise of the crowd hits my sober ears and I start retreating. It is then, to my right, the blue and green hues of an ocean on canvas crash—Dagmar Dyck's *M.A.P.S.* (2020)—wave after wave until the rhythmically painted earthy lines align my senses enough to breathe.

Propelled forward to stand before the white expanse of Dyck's hanging 2015 *kiekie*, *Paper Strings*, the noise mutes to a blur. I allow its monochrome hue to wrap around me until my mind finds a stillness so rare nowadays and I smile. A handmade clean slate. Fantastic. The busy blurred mass of the crowd separates into faces, people unknown but smiling and welcoming. At ease now, the noise morphs into sounds of laughter, music and island conversations, beckoning me to explore *'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures*, so I do.

The morning room's feminine spread includes flowers no longer draped over picture frames as *lei* but let to float around moving images of preparations and creations, in Dyck's *Sisi fale* (2021). I move on along the same wall. Tentative but poignantly laid gouache and pencil lines are made sparse on papers framed in her *Untitled working drawings* from 1994. All are hanging like portraits of loved ones gone.

I turn to meet a stone bird—Tohi's 2008 andesite sculpture *Manuvaka*—installed quietly on the wooden floor, fat with a knowing of directions. Long surface cut lines enhance its stable stature and its precise beak, brimming full with much to tell, but I long for a drink,





(left) FILIPE TOHI *Pulefine* 2021
Acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 795 mm.

(below) DAGMAR DYCK *Reflection of an existing order* 2021
Acrylic & spray paint on collage, feta'aki & wooden board,
1600 x 1000 mm.

a trusted friend to help bolster my participation in the evening's celebratory event. And I am impatient to sight both *ngatu*. Even more so to see what else would be sharing the same space for the duration of the exhibition.

There is a layered silence about the spacious drawing room, each work anchored to the complexity of Tongan ontology. Tohi's sculpture *Haufakalava* (2001) sits so close to the wooden floor it is as if the floorboards have re-formed into layers of hardened fibres. However, looking around the room I see the *lalava* has taken many forms, revealed from different angles, abstracted and repeated in colour, resized and minimised under muted hues. This is a neutral place then. It says so in Dyck's *Where We Sit and Gather* (2020).

The warmth of the little drawing room emanated from beside the textured unlit fireplace. The glowing ambers from Dyck's 2021 *Reflection of an Existing Order* make me stay awhile here and warm up. There is much to get through, and I have yet even to glimpse the *ngatu*. While reflecting on the Tongan collection items I care for at mahi, and the significance of this exhibition in creating a platform to understand and represent them better, I came to stand at the ballroom doorway. Both *ngatu* are finally visible.

The *ngatu Tāhina: figures and trees* engulfs nearly the entire west wall of the ballroom. *Ngatu Tapa'ingatu: gramophones and clocks* hangs on the north wall. These two *ngatu* document the seven-towered Methodist Church at the village of Makave, as well as a prized gramophone, and the clock on the Royal Chapel in Tonga. These barkcloths left the islands in 1922, two of eleven, gifted to Reverend Major Albert Rugby Pratt.

The two travelled well I see and are in the right company here. The role of all artists, their ongoing practices and their considered knowledge-gathering and sharing has become a vital layer in how museums can better engage and include origin communities in the managing and interpretation of their cultural material.

'*Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures* has been a robust initiation into how senior Tongan artists are engaging with their cultural material. With the number of Tongan artists excelling in varying mediums and modes, I look forward to seeing the many more interpretations of Tongan ontology found in our local museums.



1. See Billie Lythberg, Phyllis Herda and Melenaite Taumoeofolau, 'Introduction: 'Amui 'i Mu'a: Ancient Futures in Context', in '*Amui 'i Mu'a Ancient Futures*, exhibition catalogue, Rim Books, Auckland 2021.