



Koreans
A Tradition
Alexis Nea

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Between the Folds

New Work by Dagmar Dyck

ANE TONGA

Dagmar Dyck is a pioneer for myriad reasons. In 1995, she was the first woman of Tongan descent to graduate from Elam School of Fine Arts and it seems only fitting that she held her solo exhibition, *Kofukofu Koloa*, at the gallery of her alma mater, Gus Fisher Gallery.¹ Since the early 1990s, Dyck has explored *koloa* (tangible and intangible heritage of textile and material wealth), drawing heavily on patterns and symbols from Tongan textiles such as *ngatu* (decorated barkcloth) and *kie* (woven mats) to develop multiple bodies of work. Her unique pictorial language has brought aspects of Tongan cultural heritage from the fringes to the centre of contemporary New Zealand art.

Kofukofu Koloa is not a survey exhibition, although, with a career that spans almost 23 years, a retrospective in the near future is certainly not out of the question. Instead, *Kofukofu Koloa* marks a shift in the artist's practice, presenting new works that move beyond the decorative nature of *koloa* to become an articulated palimpsest of her German-Tongan ancestry. Her exhibition retains the collective nature of *koloa* production as a space for women by drawing on her own *koka'anga* (group of women) of aunts, cousins and close friends to shape different elements of the exhibition. The title is inspired by a conversation the artist had with prominent Tongan weaver Lesieli Katokakala Tohi Tupou, who explained that the term *kofukofu koloa* alludes to the way in which *koloa* was stacked in the rafters of each fale in order to protect from pests and vermin. Dyck comments, 'When the *mohenga* [bed] arrived it became not only a status symbol but also provided a raised platform to which they could store their *koloa*. So it shifted from the rafters to the bed.'²

Placed front and centre of the gallery foyer is *Aunty Ungatea's Bed*, a domestically inspired installation which encapsulates the essence of *Kofukofu Koloa* and launches Dyck's renewed imaginings and experiences of Tonga. This remarkable installation speaks to early childhood memories of time spent in Tonga with her Aunt Ungatea and a fascination with her four poster bed. These memories are brought to life through a Victorian-style metal bedframe and mattress which is adorned with a white hand-embroidered *monomono* (bedspread) that proudly displays the *Sila 'o Tonga* (Coat of Arms of the Kingdom of Tonga) and colourful floral designs. Additional accoutrements are scattered on the bed such as a Tongan *himi* (hymn book), *kiekie* (female waist garment), and a pandanus leaf *i* (fan).

(opposite) Dagmar Dyck's *Kofukofu Koloa* at Gus Fisher Gallery, March 2016.

(right) DAGMAR DYCK *Aunty Ungatea's Bed*—detail 2016
Mixed media, dimensions variable.

Completing the installation is a circular mosquito net that is suspended from the ceiling and flows over the bed.

One of the most captivating elements of *Aunty Ungatea's Bed* is the collection of *koloa* that have been lovingly pressed and folded under the mattress. Here, Dyck has enlisted knowledgeable female relatives, Lesieli Tukuniu and 'Ana Hemaloto, to fold the *koloa* under the bed. The order of the fold is critical; first *fala* (finely plaited floor mats) are laid down, on top of which are *ngatu*; then *kie tonga* (the smaller mats decorated with yarn fringes) and *ta'ovala* (waist mats) are placed on top of those, with *monomono* and *kiekie* added as the topmost layer.³ The production of making *koloa*, and by extension the process of maintaining and storing it, become opportunities for women to regenerate and share their knowledge.⁴

Aunty Ungatea's Bed daringly toys with the notion of the readymade by re-presenting sourced objects and *koloa* within the gallery context. Each carefully placed object highlights how memory is created and embodied in material culture. One such memory is associated with the *monomono* which was gifted to Dyck's mother for her wedding, from her Aunty Luvu who was taught embroidery by French nuns at a convent in the village of Neiafu.⁵ The fabric is most likely sourced from Germany, imported through her German ancestors—the Wolfgramm family—who settled in Vava'u and imported textiles. The connection to cloth is deeply personal and extends to her paternal German ancestry too. In her artist's talk, Dyck shared the compelling story of her Oma (grandma) and Opa (grandpa) who were textile merchants selling cloth in Gdańsk. Her grandparents fled the city during World War II and when told to pack a bag, her Oma packed only her most prized possession: bolts of cloth.⁶

Presented on the foyer wall is *String Skirt*, a large-scale work that explores distinctly Tongan modes of dress. It is made from printed Hahnemühle paper which has been woven and sewn to take on the form of a *kiekie*. *Kiekie* is an ornamental waist garment





(left above & below) The family *koloa* is carefully folded and stacked on the base of the *mohenga* by Dyck's cousins Lesieli Tukuniu and 'Ana Hemaloto, Gus Fisher Gallery, March 2016

(opposite above) DAGMAR DYCK
Treasured Cloth 2016
Acrylics, Indian ink, dye, oil sticks & pastels on hand-pressed paper, 4550 x 3550 mm.

(opposite below) DAGMAR DYCK, assisted by LESIELI TUKUNIUI & MELE HEMALOTO
Fringe Skirts 2016
Acrylic paint on builder's paper with pandanus and wool, 3000 x 2250 mm.



ideals: it embodies neatness, respect for rank and dignity, all constitutive of *anga faka-Tonga*, that is, the Tongan way.⁸

The artist shifts from sculptural to painted manifestations of Tongan female dress in the mixed-media work *Treasured Cloth* (2016). The work encompasses the entrance wall of the gallery space and comprises 35 hand-pressed works on paper which are installed in seven rows that visually form one *ngatu*. Each rectangular print resembles a *langanga*, a measurement used to assess the length of *ngatu*, which typically appears as numbers painted on the outer edges.

Dyck returns to her strength as a printmaker and painter, using both mediums as a catalyst to 'refunction tradition'.⁹ Her innovative surface treatment builds on comparable types of hybrid cloth forms like *ngatu pepa*, a barkcloth made from synthetic fabric vylene, which is one of several textiles that include non-Tongan—that is Western—material elements that have been absorbed into *koloa*.¹⁰ The artist adheres *feta'aki* (strips of *ngatu*) she brought from Tonga onto Plexiglas plates to create a template. The *feta'aki* plate is put through the printing press with an archival Hahnemühle paper which is embossed with the colour and texture of *ngatu*.

The intricate *feta'aki* print creates a base layer, which can be seen upon closer inspection, and in some instances is still visible under layers of paint. Dyck builds upon this structure, using black Indian ink to outline a rectangle shape filled with brown colouring, vine and triangle motifs. The rectangles create three vertical dividing strips. The artist reduces the elements of design to give prominence to the *feta'aki* print and leitmotifs. This includes familiar *kupesii* (motifs) seen on traditional *ngatu* such as the group of three dots painted in black and brown known as *fo'i hea 'e tolu*.¹¹ However, she also departs from traditional

composed of a braided belt with numerous strands that dangle from it and is intended to decorate the waist-to-hip area. Worn over a matching ensemble of a short-sleeved top and ankle-length skirt called *puletaha*, this style of dress has become de rigueur on formal occasions.⁷ With the assistance of artists Alexis Neal and Rona Osbourne, Dyck delicately weaves the printed paper to create the strands of a large-scale *kiekie* which stretches across the foyer wall. This relatively simple, yet symbolic, work reiterates the way that Tongan clothing is associated to several



conventions by painting stylised strands of *kiekie* onto the *ngatu* which are repeated on a diagonal axis throughout the work.

Dyck's boldest manipulation of traditional cloth forms and technical processes is seen in *Fringe Skirts*. The triptych is made from acrylic paint on builder's paper with pandanus and wool. *Fringe Skirts* acknowledges the decorative innovation of Tongan women who, at the turn of the twentieth century, began to incorporate *kulasi* (bright coloured yarn) through the lower regions of *fala*, to create new cloth forms like *fala pati* (Tongan embroidered pandanus mats).¹² Similar treatment is given to Dyck's work by female family members Lesieli Tukuniu and Mele Hemaloto, who have adorned the lower section with pandanus and *kulasi* fringing. The ornate surface draws affinities between American painter Chuck Close's grid method and the square-shaped grid weave used in *fala*.¹³ Close's grid method is most recognizable in the peripheral panels which repeat the square weaving pattern of *fala*; however, the centre panel is the most experimental in line and colour. The artist uses a rich red base and an impression of a grid structure, which is punctuated with circular and square shapes and overlaid with black paint to create a stark contrast between the stylised designs.

The final work in the gallery is the site-specific installation *Seven Sisters*. The aptly titled work pays homage to female art forms and is a culmination of motifs and themes explored across the exhibition.¹⁴ In this work, lengths of hand-printed material are sewn together to create seven narrow paper works which cascade from the top of the wall and curve onto the gallery floor. The first 'sister' represents the grid weave of the *fala*; the second and fifth sisters

feature *kiekie* strands through stylised designs inspired by international designer Orla Kiely; the third and seventh sisters reference *ngatu*. The artist places herself in the centre as the fourth sister, soaking up the influence of all other sisters which are represented through lines of colour. Dyck opts for abstract lines over motifs which she believes more accurately symbolises her urban Tongan experiences.¹⁵ The wallpaper-like appearance of these works is certainly deliberate and is attributed to her early exposure to wallpapers through her father's painting business.¹⁶





Kofukofu Koloa taps into a nuanced examination of *koloa* that treads between collective and individual memory and between Dyck's German and Tongan heritage. She works from a traditional idiom outward to push *koloa* into a heterogeneous and hybrid realm. The confluence of ideas and materials explored in this exhibition begins with her domestic installation and springboards into a repertoire of responsive works on paper to present her most ambitious project to date. Out of a desire for wholeness, Dyck encompasses and addresses all parts of herself: her role as an artist, a woman, and her connection to *koloa*. Her collective approach shows a way forward for Tongan arts that is seen only by honouring a history of practitioners as we continue to move into the future.

1. *Kofukofu Koloa* was exhibited from 11 March–9 April and was presented alongside a solo exhibition by long-time friend and artist

(above) DAGMAR DYCK *Seven Sisters* 2016
Acrylic & Indian ink on archival paper, each 410 x 4200 mm.

Alexis Neal, *Korero Tuku Iho: A Traditional Narrative*.

2. Dagmar Dyck, in conversation with the author, April 2016.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Ping Ann Addo, *Creating a Nation with Cloth: Women, Wealth, and Tradition in the Tongan Diaspora*, Berghahn Books, New York 2013, p. 70.

5. Dagmar Dyck, in her artist's talk at Gus Fisher Gallery, 19 March 2016.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Niko Besnier, *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011, p. 73.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Sam Melser, *Dagmar Dyck: Kofukofu Koloa*, exhibition text, 2016.

10. Ping Ann Addo, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

11. Ping Ann Addo, 'Kinship Cloth and Community in Auckland, New Zealand: Commoner Tongan Women Navigate Transnational Identity using Traditionally-Styled Textile Wealth' (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 2004).

12. Phyllis Herda, 'The Changing Texture of Textiles in Tonga', *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol. 108, no. 2, 1999, p. 161.

13. Dagmar Dyck, in her artist's talk at Gus Fisher Gallery, 19 March 2016.

14. Dagmar Dyck, in conversation with the author, April 2016.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

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