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SITE SEER

Samuel Tupou

3 – 25 November 2017

Colour and Pattern/ Diaspora and Memory: *SITE SEER* by Samuel Tupou

It has been five years since Samuel Tupou exhibited in Brisbane, and although he unites diverse influences, from Pop and Op Art through to contemporary Pacific artists such as Michael Tuffery and John Pule, he admits that one aspect of his practice has remained the same: “colour and pattern”.¹ Indeed, Tupou explores his cultural and personal identity through his use of vivid colour and patterns in both Western and non-Western imagery, and by harnessing images that have relevance to his memories.



Samuel Tupou, *The Seeker*, 2016, serigraph, 120 x 160cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Tupou recounts of his earlier practice, “these works were me going through this process of questioning my identity and how I fit into my community and how I fit into my family in Australia and New Zealand and also my family in Tonga. And it’s one of those things; there wasn’t a definitive answer at the end of that.”

One method of questioning was his utilisation of tapa patterning. Tapa is a traditional form of design native to an area across the Pacific, including Tonga. These designs have strong geographical links to their countries of origin. Tupou observes how it is possible to pinpoint a tapa’s origin to countries such as Papua New Guinea or Fiji just by visually appraising the designs. Yet, his own tapa is a departure from these precursors “because these patterns are not based around a specific area, they are inspired by the Pacific in general, from Papua New Guinea down to New Zealand out to Hawaii, it’s not easily identifiable as ‘Oh these patterns are from this area.’”

That is, Tupou constructs a diasporic tapa pattern that is a visual representation of aspects of his personal identity: both his Tongan heritage and time spent in New Zealand and Australia. At the same time, his work has wider relevance to “migration—that idea of living in a new country, that idea of keeping traditions alive and also adapting things. You see that all the time. Culture is fluid.”

The other major strand of Tupou’s work is the way he combines this patterning with familiar images from Western popular culture. Within Tupou’s practice, ordinary items such as sunglasses and motorbikes are reimagined through dynamic visual tableaux as kernels of memory that have personal relevance to him. This invests them with a new temporality outside and beyond their origin in popular culture.

Tupou likes “to make art that is about stuff that I can relate to. Everyday stuff that’s happened to me, whether it’s sitting on the couch losing the remote control, or more serious things like family and community.” He reimagines the temporal boundaries of banal images by locating them within his memory. Images of pineapples or astronauts are no longer just signifiers of particular products or of particular moments in popular culture, but indicators of moments within the artist’s timeline.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are taken from an interview between Samuel Tupou and the author, 14 September 2017.

Their location within memory is reflected in their innovative juxtapositions and correlations with one another within Tupou's artworks. The images construct his identity, but in no particular order and with no particular method, because they reflect Tupou's own memories.

For example, memory plays a large part in *Valu's Concern: How to Maintain a Fashionable Hairdo* (2017). This work explores the shaping of identity that occurs with a simple haircut. In creating the work, Tupou considered how, as a young man, he would accompany his father to the hairdresser and the two would get the same haircut, "mainly flat tops or crew cuts."



Samuel Tupou, *Norman Park Station*, 2016, serigraph and acrylic on board, 120 x 120cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

As I grew older I experimented with different hairstyles which ran parallel with my varying interests in music/art/popular culture. The artwork uses identikit-mash-up-style collage to explore the fluid cultural marker of contemporary hairdo's and the external social pressures which shape them."²

Tupou's bitmap artworks—grid-like correlations of coloured and dark navy forms—continue this negotiation with memory. The artist subjects each image to a process of "stripping it back". As he puts it, "whilst in those pixelated works, there are images and forms in there, they're not immediately recognisable. It's just total colour and pattern." Each bitmap of a familiar object is hence rendered slightly unfamiliar.

"Migration—that idea of living in a new country, that idea of keeping traditions alive and also adapting things. You see that all the time. Culture is fluid."



Samuel Tupou, *The Life and Times of Scott Howard*, 2016, serigraph and acrylic on board, 120 x 120cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

The unfamiliarity of the image reflects how it is made anew within the temporality of Tupou's memory, and divorced from its original signification and appearance within contemporary culture.

This exploration of memory and identity is not clear-cut or linear though. As Tupou remarks, "being a visual artist, I'm really lucky in that I don't feel like I'm —tied down to any timeframe. I can continue to make works that are based on the past, the present, and the future. You're like a time traveller in a way. You can make works depending on where your head is at any given point in time." The artist and viewer are intertwined as sightseers within this exhibition, travelling across times, cultures, and places in defining Samuel Tupou and pinpointing the world they inhabit.

Simon Brigden

² Email exchange between Samuel Tupou and the author, October 2017.

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Samuel Tupou, *Red Sunnies*, 2016, serigraph and acrylic on board, 60 x 60cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Samuel Tupou

Born 1976, Dunedin, New Zealand. Lives and works in Brisbane.

In a quest to explore Pacific culture and identity in a rapidly changing Global environment, I produce artwork that explores themes of migration, culture clash, decoration and value, with particular focus on elements that unite the Pacific, such as recurring design motifs, traditional patterning and the convergence of cultures. I employ patterns inspired by traditional Pacific Island 'Tapa' or bark cloth, set against the stylized images and wildly artificial colours of western pop culture. My artwork utilises printed imagery salvaged from mass media and popular culture sources. Through the re-invention and repetition of these discarded remnants, I am attempting to create new narratives, which portray both personal and shared histories. Within my work I am looking at how imagery and patterns from our past can morph and adapt, taking on new meaning, gaining whole new value systems through re-contextualizing and splicing with present day realities and future aspirations.

Samuel Tupou's Curriculum Vitae can be viewed online at www.onespacegallery.com.au/exhibition/samuel-tupou/

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COVER: Samuel Tupou, *Valu's Concern: How to Maintain a Fashionable Hairdo #4*, (detail), 2017, serigraph and acrylic on board, 40 x 40cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



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