

**Evolving Patterns of Identity:  
A visual response to observations of Cook Islands'  
women and their adornment.**

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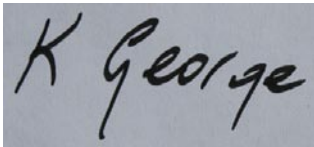
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**Attestation of authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light blue background. The signature reads "K George" in a cursive, slightly slanted script. The "K" is large and prominent, followed by "George" in a more fluid, connected style.

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I would like to dedicate this project with much love to Kim Thompson and Ramana Ina George.

## **Abstract**

### **Evolving Patterns of Identity:**

#### ***A visual response to observations of Cook Islands' women and their adornment***

This multimedia visual arts project investigates, from a personal perspective, changes in the context of Cook Islands' women's adornment. In a modern world, changes in adornment have become disconnected from cultural traditions and so this study explores how over time evolving patterns of adornment are employed by women to identify their place in society.

Observations have been drawn from the developing relationship between the researcher and the women in Rarotonga, the Cook Islands' community where this project took place. These observations are documented explored and articulated primarily through the medium of photography, and principally by way of the snapshot and the portrait. This examination of Cook Islands' women and their adornment from traditional adornment to the contemporary influences of modern day fashion has further been explored through a visual response to the relationships between the women and the layers of their adornment.

This visual arts project is compromised of an exegesis with a value of 20% and a practical component of 80%.

## Introduction

The Cook Islands is made up of 15 islands scattered over 2.25 million square kilometres of the Pacific and is a four hour flight from Auckland, New Zealand. The islands are divided into two groups; the Southern Cook Islands made up of Aitutaki, Atiu, Mangaia, Mauke, Mitiaro, Manuae, Palmerston, Rarotonga and Takutea and the Northern Cook Islands, made up of Manihiki, Nasau, Penrhyn, Pukapuka, Rakahanga and Suvarrow. Rarotonga is the capital of the Cook Islands'.

I am a multi media artist with a studio/gallery on Rarotonga. For the past twenty two years I have painted and screen printed textiles to be used in clothing, soft furnishings and large wall hangings as well as created acrylic paintings on canvas and wood, mainly producing for the tourist market. Much of the work I have produced has been in response to the environment, culture and society in which I live.

Being of European descent and married to a Cook Islander I am in a unique position of an outsider with direct access into the Cook Islands' way of life. Since arriving on Rarotonga in 1988, I have been able to observe the many societal changes that have taken place. This project explores, from an outsider's observation, Cook Islands' women's adornment in every day life and the changes taking place over time. American arts writer, Lucy Lippard, in her book '*The Lure of the Local*' (1997) discusses the importance of place in relation to the physical location, connections and identity and how places influence us throughout our lives. Central to this project is place and identity which I see as central elements for a community.

Most of my life I have had a passion for taking photographic snapshots of family, friends and the wider community. A catalyst for my project is a simple black and white photograph taken of my father and mother who is pregnant with me, photographed as they walked down a street in Rotorua, New Zealand (refer fig. 0:1 p.11). Looking at the photo I can see by the cars, clothes, hairstyles and shoes that it is another era. Immediately it evokes a memory of days long-gone and provides a document to reflect on societal change over time.



(fig.0:1). Collection of Kay George. Circa 1953. *My mother and father*. [Photograph].

Over the years spent in the Cook Islands I have kept boxes of photographs that I have taken which I continually look at and compare elements of the past to the present day. Using my photographic snapshots has been a means of keeping a documentation of the changes I have witnessed since living in Rarotonga. Within this project the reader will recognize that the perspective is from a papa'a (Cook Islands' term for European) married to a local and it is through those eyes this project has evolved.

During the 1960's artist Andy Warhol, famous for his repetitive screen printed photographic images likened his works to a production line. In the article *Andy Warhol: the Artist as Machine*, Paul Bergin (1976), states: "It is art stripped of personality and emotion and concerned only with the image, the obvious. It is the art of the machine, not about it" (p. 359). Unlike Andy Warhol's mechanical and potentially unemotional productions, this project relied on forming relationships, friendships, and gaining trust in order to have the privilege of photographing Cook Islands' women as a means of portraying them and their adornment. Similar to Warhol, this project utilizes the tools of manipulating photographic

technologies and layering of images of women and their adornment to create new meanings.



(fig.0:2). George, K. January 2009. *My box of photographs*. [Digital Photograph].

The first chapter of the exegesis discusses Cook Islands' women's body adornment and accessories along with the outside influences of the early missionaries. Here a new code of dress and adornment was introduced that impacted on the lives of the women. The changes in formal and everyday adornment have been discussed as women embraced and adapted to new ways of using cloth for adornment although some of the traditional forms of adornment have remained. Accessories as a means of adornment have also played a major part in the lives of the Cook Islands' women.

The purpose of this chapter is to position my art work in the context of women's adornment to reflect on its relationship to their individual and collective identity. The reason for this broad historical discussion is as Anthony Seeger argues 'instead of lifting a single strand out of a society for examination – one looks for structures of interrelated symbols' (Steiner, 1990, p. 431-445).

Chapter Two addresses the methodology of the project through a discussion of methods and created works, and why and how decisions were arrived at. A trial of experiments investigates ways of portraying and responding to my observation of the changes of Cook Islands' women's adornment from the early 1800's to the modern codes seen in the Cook

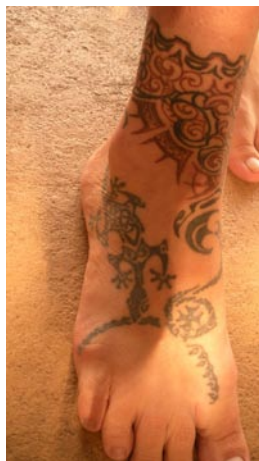
Islands today. The project's methods have evolved from intuitively exploring layers of fabrics, paints and screen prints of photographic portraits of women and their adornment. As the project developed and by taking a more analytical approach to my methods rather than solely by intuition I was able to make use of digital technology which parallels the changes occurring both in society and technologically, on Rarotonga today.

Chapter Three discusses my final thesis exhibition and how the space was utilized to present the final images selected for the exhibition. Each of the five images chosen has been discussed with an analytical approach as well as the choice of medium used for printing. Photos are presented of the five images along with photos of the artist talk with local college students appearing in front of the images to give an indication of size.

## Chapter 1 Adornment

The Collins Dictionary (2004) defines adornment as ‘to decorate or increase the beauty of’ (p. 11). In this project the word adornment refers to the decorating of the body. This can relate to natural or manufactured materials covering the body and to the actual marking of the body by cutting or puncturing. It also includes accessories that are added to the body such as jewellery, head wear, hairstyles and footwear, although not all these aspects are specifically addressed in the project.

In his book *The Decorated Body*, the anthropologist Robert Brain (1979), discusses how the body can be a canvas to be decorated. Decoration can be achieved in many ways from the painted, tattooed, scarred, or clothed and is often a means of expressing one’s identity whether that be cultural or personal or both. The tattoo (refer Fig 1:3) is an example of how young Cook Islands’ women personally express not only their own Pacific identity but also create specific designs that represent their children or may mark a special occasion (refer to p. 25 for further discussion on tattoo as a means of adornment).



(fig.1:3). George, K. October 2009.  
*Tattoo on young women’s foot and leg.* [Digital photograph].

The anthropologist Marianne Hulsbosch states; ‘Manipulation of clothing and adornment is not only intended to decorate the body, but this action simultaneously informs society through shaping and defining personal and collective identities’ (Hulsbosch, 2006, p. 2). A specific example of this in the Cook Islands is when the outer islanders or tere tere

(travelling party) come to Rarotonga, each are dressed in uniforms. Women in the islands collaborate on the fabrics and design of the uniform and the accessories that will go with them before sewing begins. Upon arrival in Rarotonga there is a sense of pride and identity relating them to their home island.



(fig.1:4). George, K. September 2009.  
*Young women from the outer island of Pukapuka in their uniforms.* [Digital photograph].



(fig.1:5). George, K. September 2009.  
*Hand woven bag from pandanus leave from the island of Mangaia.* [Digital photograph].



(fig.1:6). George, K. September 2009.  
*Hand woven bag with pearl shell from the island of Penrhyn.* [Digital photograph].

## 1.1 Influences of Christianity and Colonialism

According to anthropologist Dale Idiens (1990) the London Missionary Society (LMS) settled in Rarotonga in 1827. Under the influence of the London Missionary Society, Cook Islands' women were introduced to a new code of morality. There was insistence on the covering of the body. The adornment of what the Missionaries referred to as a 'primitive society' consisted of Cook Islands' people using materials available in their local environment to beautify their bodies. Other forms of adornment used in the early 1800's according to Idiens (1990 p. 46-49), were breast plates made of pearl shells with braids of human hair, pendants of whale bone, and head dresses with feathers of native birds.

Adornment of the Cook Islands' women has been influenced by contacts outside of their home islands. The impact of new religion, colonial customs and traditions, trading of new materials, the trappings of migration and immigration, have all played a major part in the evolving patterns of adornment. According to Gill (1894), in pre-European times men and women in Cook Islands' society wore very little because of the heat. Clothing at that time consisted of natural fibres from the environment such as tapa, kiriau (bark of the wild hibiscus tree), leaves and woven mats.

A major change for the women was the Mother Hubbard dress or Mu'umu'u (refer Fig 1.1:7, p. 17), which according to Cook Islands' curator Jean Mason, were 'designed by early missionaries to be loose-fitting, so that it was comfortable to wear in a tropical climate' (Mason, 2008 p. 58). Most Cook Islands' women would wear a pareu (Cook Islands term for sarong) as an undergarment as opposed to the undergarments the missionary women wore (refer p. 17 for further discussion on the pareu).



(fig.1.1:7). George Crummer Collection – *Mama in Mother Hubbard dress*. Circa 1900's Library Museum Society, Cook Islands'.



(fig.1.1:8). George Crummer Collection. *Mama in Mother Hubbard dress*. Circa 1900's – Library Museum Society, Cook Islands'.

Susanne Kuchler and Graham Were (2003) point out that what induced Pacific Islands' women to adopt clothing were the patterns and texture of the cloth. As a result of the missionary influence social relationships and communal links were reinforced for the women in the formation of collaborative sewing groups known as Vainetini, which are still so named to this day.

Over a period of time Cook Islands' women have modified the Mu'umu'u by making them shorter and more fitting to the body. With influences from the neighbouring island of Tahiti the women have made their Mu'umu'u of today more decorative and colourful by using lace, ribbon and frills. Wardrobes now contain Mu'umu'u for special occasions and for everyday use (refer fig 1.1:9, p. 18).



(fig.1.1:9). George, K. September 2009. *Mama in modern Mu'umu'u*. [Digital photograph].



(fig.1.1:10). George, K. September 2009. *Mama in white Mu'umu'u and Rito hat for church*. [Digital photograph].



(fig.1.1:11). George, K. January 2008. *Rito Fan and pearl shell*. [Digital Photograph].

## 1.2 The Pareu

Despite the new code of dress introduced by the LMS, some women continued wearing bark cloth with a pareu wrapped around the outside, thus retaining some traditions. In Mangaia, carved staff gods were wrapped in patterned bark cloth. When the missionaries destroyed what they regarded as heathen gods the need for bark cloth wrappings declined.



(fig.1.2:12). Source unknown. (Circa 1944), *Pareu wrap over tapa*. [Photograph].



(fig.1.2:13). George, K. March 2009. *Plain tapa or bark cloth*. [Digital Photograph].

Kuchler and Were (2003, p. 5) expressed the view that the destruction of the bark cloth liberated women to use European ready-made cloth. The pareu, as a decorative cloth, has been adapted over time. Pareu now bear patterns ranging from Cook Islands' / Pacific patterns printed in Asia, to Cook Islands' block or screen prints, to locally hand painted patterns on silk. However, the role of the pareu has remained the same. Catherine Allerton in *The Secret Life of Sarongs* (2007) discusses how the pareu can be used to wrap, protect and therefore act as a super skin. For Cook Islands' women the pareu is exactly this, a second skin, and can be quickly picked up and wrapped around them. In addition, the pareu can be an indicator of status. The more hand crafted the pareu, the greater the cost, the higher the status acquired by the wearer.

Cook Islands' women embraced and developed techniques associated with cloth that was introduced by the missionaries. Sewing and cloth adornment are a significant part of women's activities today, such as the Tivaevae (Cook Islands term for hand stitched quilts). With the advent of the tourist market Cook Islands' women have since begun to create and wear their own creations competing and creating designs, patterns and methods conducive to their own island environment.



(fig.1.2:14). George, K. March 2009.  
*Mamas in their pareu wraps.* [Digital  
photograph].

### 1.3 Cultural Changes

Cook Islanders are New Zealand citizens. Young Cook Islands' men and women, according to Morgan (2004), leave their home islands for New Zealand to find better employment. The young people are part of the normal global demographic in search of a better life, money, and education. They now move freely from New Zealand to Australia and back home, working and living with families and mixing in wider multi-cultural societies. As such, women are able to adapt their accessories and modes of dress and take on an eclectic mix of adornment influenced by other cultures.

In addition, the construction of the international airport in Rarotonga in 1975 saw the increase of tourism in the islands. Tourists brought new fashions, materials, creations and designs that changed Cook Islands' women's views of everyday adornment.



(fig.1.3:15). Collection of Christina Tatum Lewis. Circa 1956. *Women ready for the local dance.* [Photograph].

Examples of overseas' fashions began appearing in the Cook Islands (refer fig 1.3:15). Fine locally woven hats and bags were also influenced by the fashions from overseas (refer fig 1.3:16). The Mangaian woman is wearing a delicately fine woven hat made from local materials but adapted to reflect the 1950's fashion style found in New Zealand of the time.



(fig.1.3:16). Marshall, D.S. *Woven hat from the Island of Mangaia.* Circa 1950's. Collection of University of the South Pacific, Cook Islands. [Photograph].



(fig.1.3:17). Barraud, K. January 2008.  
*Examples of bright coloured fabrics available on the island for women's adornment.* [Digital photograph].

#### 1.4 Cultural Identity – The Flower (Tiare)

The use of the tiare (Cook Islands' term for flower) has always played a major part in women's adornment throughout the Cook Islands. Many women on the island rarely leave their homes without a flower placed behind their ear or within the hair. On the island of Mangaia, Crocombe, (1983) reported that at a church gathering during the first years of the arrival of the missionaries, children attended in what was termed by the missionaries as their heathen clothing. Cook Islanders had adorned themselves with long tresses of human hair tied around their arms and ankles, garlands around their necks and feather head – dresses.

Today the ritual on arrival at the Rarotongan international airport is to place a garland of flowers around the neck or on the head of the visitor or the person returning home. On the outer islands this ritual happens as you arrive and leave. This ritual is a sign of welcome and an indication that you will be looked after while you are here. In Cook Islands' terms, the garland for the neck is an ei and for the head an ei katu. The flowers are individually

handpicked and stitched with a lot of thought and pride put into each ei – the more beautiful or rare the flowers and the more ei's one is presented with, the higher the status of the recipient. As people fly in from the outer islands their island of origin can be identified by the flowers they are wearing.



(fig.1.4:18). George, K. September 2009. *Arrival at Rarotonga airport.* [Digital photograph].



(fig.1.4:19). George, K. August 2009. *Mama in ei katu.* [Digital photograph].



(fig.1.4:20). George, K. August 2009. *Mama wearing natural fibres ei katu.* [Digital photograph].

## 1.5 The Next Generation

In 2009, young Cook Islands' women have access to digital technology opening them to the influences of the global community. New brands and fashion labels, which today act as adornment and identity signifiers, are more accessible and appealing for the young women in Rarotonga. As Stevenson, (2008, p. 84) states; 'A Pacific Islands' cultural aesthetic has developed over the past millennia, changing as new materials and methods became available.' On observing young Cook Islands' woman of today, it is obvious that the impacts of global fashion trends and the wearing of internationally recognised labels have reached into their home islands (refer fig.1.5:21 p.25).

Transberg (2004) explains how the world of globalization and hyper-communications is creating a new world in dress. In the past, where cloth is used as wrappings, we now see the shift into manufactured garments. Coulchester (2003) confirms that globalization, technology and economy, have influenced women's adornment so that it is now based around economics. Adornment for women in the Cook Islands that used to be made within the family or the community is now bought from small local businesses and is either locally made or imported. Part of the reason is that women are now working in full time paid employment and do not have the time to make their families' clothing. The choices of adornment may be wider but the local, culturally specific patterns and styles are diminishing. Young women with access to greater education, technology and money, now prefer to dress as their counterparts in the rest of the world.

What is noticeable is the way in which the young women mix label clothing with a delicate fusion of adornment in that they wear the flower behind the ear or beads, eis or more recently have their bodies tattooed with Cook Islands' designs as a means of stating their identity (refer to Fig1.6:22 p. 26).



(fig.1.5: 21). George, K. September 2009.  
*Young Cook Islands' women in their label clothing.*  
 [Digital photograph].

## 1.6 Body Adornment

The anthropologist Mary Douglas from her work *Natural Symbols* (1970) as cited in Reischer (2004) stated: 'given this notion that the social situation is reproduced or "replicated" through bodily symbols, the body is viewed metaphorically as a text that can be "read" as a symbol or signifier of the social world that it inhabits.' Pre European tatau (tattoo) existed throughout the Cook Islands. Hiroa (1944) suggested that the tattoo patterns originated from wood carvings. Similar patterns from the environment were hand painted onto bark cloth as well.

Traditionally women were adorned with tattoo; for example on the island of Atiu some women of rank were tattooed from the knee to the heel. Families or tribes usually had a particular totem such as bird, fish, insect or plant that was sacred to that group and symbolized its unity and identity. The ritual association requires members of the clan to treat the totem with respect. Its supernatural help could also be sought in times of distress. In the village of Puaikura on Rarotonga, the Ariki Tinomana has the centipede as one of her spiritual guardians carved onto a board in front of her palace. On the island of Atiu the shark is the spiritual guardian of Ariki Rongo-ma-tane.

The Pacific Arts Festival held in the Cook Islands in 1992 was the catalyst in the revival of the art of tatau. Prior to the festival there were very few tattooed people in the Cook Islands. It became important for some Cook Islanders to be tattooed with Cook Islands'

patterns as a symbol of their identity. For young women the arm band became an acceptable even fashionable symbol of their Polynesian heritage.



(Fig.1.6:22). George, K. July 2009. *Tattoo arm band*. [Digital photograph].

## **Chapter 2 Methods and Processes**

### **2.1 Relationships**

Throughout this project, an integral element has been the development of existing, as well as the forming of new relationships with women in the community. Although I am a member of the local community, as a non Cook Islander, social connections are essential in order to gain trust so observations, dialogues and collaborations could take place with ease. Carine Ayele Durand, in the book *Pasifika Styles Artists Inside The Museum* (2008), comments that as a result of learning art practice after working alongside the Pacific artist Rosanna Raymond, “it became evident that the act of making integrally connected to those of story telling and of building social relationship.” (p. 79). Forming contact with various women, dialogue was created where memories of their past and present were discussed. In a number of my experiments, I utilised the practical skills of women within the community to further explore varying methods of adornment (refer fig.2.7:29 p. 33). Establishing ties with the women allowed me into their personal and public spaces enabling me to make observations of their adornment and gain knowledge of how and why they make their garments and accessories of adornment.

### **2.2 Visual Diary**

A visual diary was created in which to write notes, sketches, paint charts, and to place photocopies of the relevant works. The visual diary assisted in comparing various techniques used throughout this project. Processes were recorded along with colour charts, photocopies, postcards and discarded fabrics in order to perceive what materials and colours could be associated with the snapshots before the end result.

### **2.3 Observations**

My methods of observation are as a non participant. My observations can also be referred to as a snapshots or glimpses of what I observe. I do not intrude but casually sit and watch. I observe women individually and at other times as a collective within the community. I observe women and the way their identity is conveyed in their adornment, focusing on elements such as the type of flowers in their ei katu to the style of print upon their pareu. I observe the styles of adornment and the accompanying accessories, from woven handbags to shell necklaces. At other times I make myself known and will

participate in conversations whilst taking photographs and/or writing notes. I like to work in a way of observing where the setting is not calculated so preconceptions do not interfere with the situation. At times it is where I will be introduced to new ideas that will be utilized with my project.

## **2.4 Photographic Snapshots**

Photographer Marti Friedlander connects her photography to a personal view of life in that it also records the everyday. Wherever I may go within the community, I use my camera to collect and record my observations of the everyday. Whenever I take photographic snapshots within the community, generally speaking, they are not planned and therefore the photograph is capturing a snapshot, a spontaneous moment. The camera is a useful tool that allows me to revisit the image, the moment and further observe. Having collected and kept photographs over the years I have lived in Rarotonga has proven useful for this project, in that I am able to compare how women's adornment has evolved over the years. This is from the conservatively structured Mu'umu'u and handcrafted adornments to the mix of global brands with specific Cook Islands' accessorised adornment.

The French Philosopher Roland Barthes, from his book *Camera Lucida* (1981) suggests the analogue black and white photographic image is a moment in time that dies once the click of the camera has taken place. The snapshot communicates past stories or reflections of where, who and why. Questions arise as to the identity, relationships and personality of those captured in the image. The snapshot operates as a narrative of change in society here in Rarotonga, creating awareness or memory of what was.

Within my practice I utilise the photographic snapshots, portraits of women and their adornment. The portraits are then used in an investigation of layering of screen printed images, over transparencies and then photocopying. The photographic snapshot and its original portrait remain but by layering upon the original, a new image is created implying a relationship between the past and the present.

## **2.5 Screen Prints**

The method behind the screen prints was to produce works showing photographic portraits representing the women and their adornment. Using the silk screen enabled portraits to be manually manipulated using, for example, lighter inks and less pressure on the

squeegee in order to produce differing results. Over a period of time a variety of surfaces were experimented with to try and capture how the silk screen images could best be portrayed. Each image was repetitively printed. However, because of the manual manipulation of ink, each image of the person has an individual representation of their own. As a visual form of documentation the screen printed images were successful. Not only do they resemble photographic snapshots but they can be applied to various surfaces. The individuation of each image allows the viewer to understand that the screen printing process is a manual one, therefore a one-off which ensures that each image is an original one, as opposed to mechanized mass production.



(fig. 2.5:23). George, K. March 2009. *My silk screens*. [Digital photograph].

## 2.6 Collage

Colour and mixed media have always played an important role in my art practice. Therefore it was necessary to look at collage as another form of exploring the idea of Cook Islands' women's adornment. Ideas were to try and incorporate photographic snapshots of portraits of women and their adornment into my project. The role of the portrait offers an ability to examine at close range the adornment of the time. To reference the Cook Islands, collages were created using fabrics from local shops, newspaper clippings, my own quick sketches and screen prints to explore options of a visual representation of the vibrancy of the women and their adornment. This process worked quite effectively but it shifted the project away as often the experiments became too busy therefore the main focus of women, adornment, and identity was often lost. The experiments with collage did

reinforce the idea of using layering as a method, and that this could be retained and used with other media, for example both manually and digitally. Layering as a technique in this project seems effective to explore and represent notions of time and change through history.

## 2.7 A Chronology of Work

The work created in November 2008 (refer Fig 2.7.24 p.30) was an early experimentation employing the method of overlaying images by combining transparencies from my collected photographic snapshots with digital media and the photocopier. The transparency of a young woman has been laid on top of my own printed fabric to give the appearance of an image from which to explore the idea of the change in women's adornment over time. The pareu the young woman is wearing is 50 years old but it is laid over with printed fabric of today. The result of this layering gives the woman the appearance that she is tattooed. This image was printed as a glossy photograph but because of the brown colour of the fabric, it has a sepia tone to it, giving it a sense of past times. While this method had potential, it was not investigated until later – because of the limited technology available on the island.



(fig. 2.7:24). George, K. November 2008.  
*Under the Veil of Paradise*. [Digital Photograph  
on paper.] 420mmx300mm.

In creating connections to Cook Islands' women's adornment through exploring other mediums, I investigated some of the common elements such as flowers and fabrics that women use to identify themselves. Using parts of mannequins to replicate the female body they were covered with bright colored fabrics that the women use on a daily basis and that are reflective of our local environment. In dressing the mannequin parts in the vibrant fabrics they appeared to have an instant connection with each other or resemblance of a women's uniform.



(fig.2.7:25). George, K. August 2009. *An Ei Katu*. [Digital photograph]



(fig. 2.7:26). George, K. March 2009. *Inside the Ei Katu*. [Digital photograph]

In further exploring the women's attire and the use of the mannequin parts, I made an ei katu for the head out of the fabric with pieces dangling representing the greenery used in the ei katu. Once placed on the mannequin head it became evident that this form of adornment could act as a mask both in physical terms and possibly as a security mask. In this way the personal identity is hidden behind the group or community.



(fig. 2.7:27). George, K. May 2009. *Body Talk1*. [Digital photograph.]



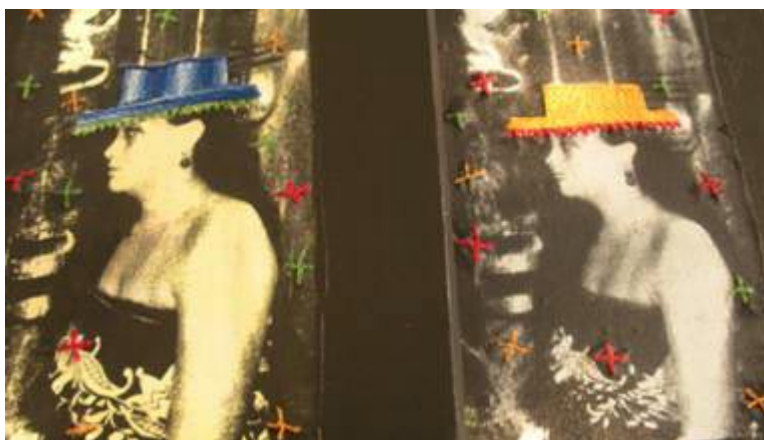
(fig.2.7:28). George, K. May 2009. *Body Talk 2*. [Digital photograph.]

Working with the torsos helped me to connect with patterns that may be inherent in connecting various groups of women. It also allowed the flexibility to explore patterns, making them interchangeable with the different groups and their adornment. From this point I decided to investigate other forms of media used by the women in creating their adornment.

Engaging in the Cook Islands' women's technique of embroidery frequently used in creating the tivaevae, I utilized the skills of women within my village. The idea was to link embroidery, fabric and colour onto repeated screen printed images of a Cook Islands' woman on canvas. The effect of the embroidery offered another texture and I felt that on a large scale this experiment would work successfully however not having been involved in the embroidery myself I felt I wanted to use a more hands on approach with the works.



(fig. 2.7:29). George, K. June 2009.  
*Embroidered Hats*. [Photographic screen print, fabric, cotton thread on canvas]. 500mm x 500mm. [Digital photograph].



(fig.2.7:30). George, K. June 2009.  
*Embroidered Hats 2*. [Photographic screen print, fabric, cotton thread on canvas]. 500xmm x 500mm. [Digital photograph].

As a departure from the method of embroidery, I went on to further explore the process of layering by incorporating more texture, colour and form seeking links between women, fabric and identity using photographic portraits.



(fig.2.7:31). George, K. June 2009.  
*Illusion of the Image*. Hand painted fabric, photographic screen print on canvas. 500mm x500mm. [Digital photograph].

In this experiment, pieces of printed fabrics were ripped and layered onto canvas with painting and a double silk screen printed image on top. The use of the black and white cutting a horizontal path through the middle refers to the old black and white photograph representative of the past, combined with coloured printed fabrics of today. This experiment was a starting point for ideas towards my final exhibition. The strong black and white portrait which appears as though it was taken in the past is aligned with the coloured graphic image and with the torn fabric, where the “tearing up” becomes relevant to youth or young women whose world view is often temporary and disposable reflecting their ideas of adornment that is constantly changing.

Cook Islands’ artist Ani O’Neill who grew up participating in her Cook Islands’ grandmother’s sewing circles is known both in the islands and internationally for her range of textile skills one of which includes crochet and embroidery. Observing women’s groups when they connect, sharing knowledge and skills creating something for a common purpose, led me to the idea of producing a large piece of adornment resembling the circle of women.



(fig. 2.7:32). George, K. June 2009.  
*Made for Pleasure*. Thread and printed  
fabric. [Digital photograph].



(fig. 2.7:33). George, K. June 2009.  
Detail of *Made for Pleasure*. [Digital  
photograph].

Once again connecting with women within the village we sat, rolled and stitched pieces of printed fabric together representing tiare (refer to chapter 1.4). They were then bound onto a white cloth which formed a circle with the placement of red threads dangling representing not only the energy of the women but the blood lines relating to their genealogy and thus their identity. I was satisfied with this experiment as metaphorically it also worked as a piece of adornment representing the *ei* of women. Each bundle had different colours relating to the women's colours of adornment and soft white cloth presenting a religious element. Although happy with the completed piece, I found it was still involved in the area of craft. Continuing to use my own printed fabrics I decided to further explore the images of the women but this time looking more closely at the adornment of their clothing, as I had not experimented with clothing in the project.

Researching the influence of the London Missionary Society and the way in which they changed the dress code for Cook Islands' women I returned to my screen prints with photographic images of portraits of women. Reflecting on the *Mu'umu'u* or Mother

Hubbard dresses, I decided to explore the idea of re-making a dress that would be inclusive of the missionary women and Cook Islands' women today. I styled the dress on that of the missionary women with fabric screen printed photographic images of young and old Cook Islands' women. This relates also to bridging the elements of the outsider/insider position by including both European and Maori women. Producing the screen printed dress with the images of women, was once another turning point for my project, in that I decided that I wanted to further explore the idea of photographs or snapshot as a principle medium.



(fig. 2.7:34). George, K. July 2009.  
*They came to Change*. Silk Screen print,  
printing inks and fabric. [Digital photograph].

Working manually with screen printed images at times presented problems such as having to rely on materials arriving by boat. Therefore as an alternative the idea of investigating the possibility of digital printing which was recently available on the island, became an option.

Digital technology exposed a new area in terms of experimentation within my project. It enabled the continuation of using layers of imagery to explore representation of women's adornment and patterns of women's identity. Important in using imagery this way was how the photos are taken which involved close ups so I could capture the detail of the patterns in the images. Through researching the works of Andy Warhol and Karim Rashid, who worked in repetition and digital imaging respectively, I came to realise that a focus on

colour combinations, repetition and the overlaying of colours and images in digital printing would help me capture the various layers of women's adornment.

Utilising a photocopier, provided a new area for me to further develop my practical work in that I could lay images over each other and then scan and analyse the images before deciding which I would further use.



(fig.2.7:35). George, K. August 2009.  
*Island Stars*. [Photographic Digital Print].

A transparency of one of my photographic images was laid over a Gauguin print (refer fig 2.7.35 p.37). The Gauguin print was used as I have been interested in his visual response to the Pacific environment. The prints gave an indication of how colour formations could be used within layers of images. The resulting image was then scanned so that I was able to evaluate the detail of colours, image and design.

The success of the resulting printed image opened new possibilities for my project. This image revealed the formations of the combinations that I wanted to achieve which were colour, patterns, and designs of women and their adornment within a clear image. The overlay of images also suggested tattoo markings on the bodies of the mother and young girl which refer to how women today are now adorning their bodies. After experimentation

and evaluation, I have decided that I will only layer two images per print as the images convey a sense of the generations, as well as the colour and design of their adornment. This has proved to give the image of the women, especially on a larger scale, a stronger sense of identity.



(fig.2.7:36). George, K. September 2009.  
*Photograph of Digital printing machine.* [Digital photograph].

Embracing the new printing process available on the island, I decided to investigate different printing surfaces in order to convey the bright colours of Cook Islands' women's adornment which reflect their identity. Digitally printing onto canvas gave a mat surface so the decision was made to try a surface that produced a gloss finish. My next experiment was to print on vinyl. Vinyl proved to be the surface I needed to enhance the bright colours as its glossy surface help the images to stand out more than on a normal canvas. The printing machine prints up to two metres portrait size which is appropriate for the portraits of photographic images that I want to display in my final thesis exhibition. In testing one of my photographic images, I found that the large size gives the image power along with identity. The vinyl with its glossy attributes can now bring images into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



(fig.2.7:37). George, K. September 2009.  
*Test of image printed onto vinyl.*  
[Digital photograph].



(fig.2.7:38). George, K. September 2009. *Printing onto vinyl.* [Digital photograph].

### Chapter 3 Exhibition

My final thesis exhibition was held at the Art Studio Gallery in the village of Arorangi, Rarotonga. The size of the space is 12 x 6 metres with the white walled space being 3 metres high. The roof over the gallery space is A framed with exposed beams. The exhibition consisted of a sequence of five digital photographic images of portraits printed onto large 2 x 1.37 metre formats of vinyl. The first image was hung on its own on the back wall. The side wall which was longer was able to provide enough space for the next three images in the series. The fifth and last image was presented on the wall facing the first image.

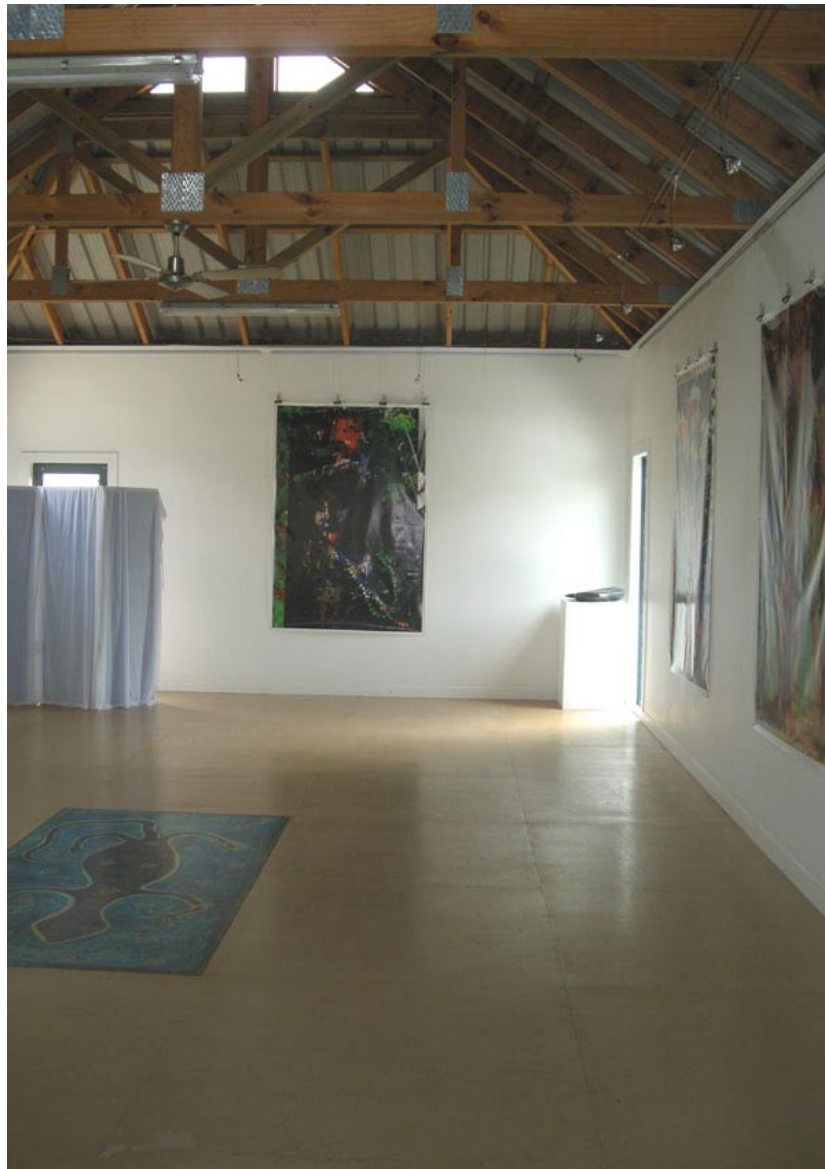
All images were constructed to depict a specific idea or convey a general theme in response to the ideas underpinning the project. Each vinyl print was created from the manipulation of images by layering a transparency on top of a coloured photograph. The layering also conveyed a sense of time of the shifts in Cook Islands women's adornment from the pre - European era until today. The vinyl material created a glossy and textural surface for the print. This along with the large format had an immediate impact on the viewer in that the images looked powerful and vibrant with each image suggesting a specific and individual identity of their own.



(fig.3:39). George, K. February 2010. *Exhibition Invitation*. [Digital photograph printed on vinyl].

To reflect the nature of the exhibition the invitations were printed on vinyl which was given out rolled with a piece of fabric tied around it.

The following figures 3:40 – 3:43 show the gallery space with images along with students at the artist talk session.



(fig.3:40). George, K. February 2010.  
*Image on Back Wall*. [Digital photograph].



(fig.3:41). George, K. February 2010. *Part of Right Side Wall*. [Digital photograph].



(fig.3:42). O'Neill, A. February 2010. *College students listening to artist talk*. [Digital photograph].



(fig.3:43). George, K. February, 2010. *Image on front wall of gallery.* [Digital photograph].

Image 1 (refer fig 3:43. p.47) portrays a reconstruction of a European woman from the missionary society in Rarotonga in the early 1800's wearing a missionary dress which depicts the style of that time. The missionary woman was an outsider in the local community and her face carries a look of hardship as she visualizes the work that is needed over a period of time. The woman would also have felt alienation, disorientation and cultural dislocation. Surrounding the woman is the flora and fauna of the local environment which is symbolic of the life cycle. An image overlaying the missionary woman is of a young woman from today's island community wearing a pandanus hat with the sides pinned up mimicking the style of a cowboy hat that is the trend for young women on the island today. The young woman appears to be glancing to one side with a look of confidence contrary to that of the missionary woman. Emerging through the younger woman's face are parts of the missionary woman's blue dress. The design and colour appearing on the young woman's face can also be associated with tribal face markings from the past. The colour blue depicts the connection with the "blue laws" that restricted the social interaction in the missionary time. The 'blue laws' were a list of laws that the missionaries imposed on the local communities. The dark hues surrounding the younger woman are suggestive of coming out of the dark ages, a time of repression in the Cook Islands due to the influence of the Missionary society at that time.

The second image (refer 3:45. p.48) portrays a young woman wearing a Mu'umu'u that has a Tahitian flavour to it. The one shoulder strap and the large frill around the bottom edge are highlighted with ribbon. Accessories such as lace, ribbons, and frills accentuated the sophistication of the Tahitian inspired Mu'umu'u'. The young woman has a smile on her face suggesting she is in a time of happiness, with her hand on her hip, head turned to one side and stepping forward. The symbolism is of moving confidently ahead in a new direction. The rito hat adds an air of sophistication; it also alludes to a more formal setting such as an official function or church service. The photographic transparency is layered over a 23 year old Rarotongan painted fabric that is covered in vivid Pacific motifs which also expresses a busy look that was consistent with the Tahitian Mu'umu'u. Within the painted fabric is a hand emerging to the bottom right appearing to pull the dress of the woman forward. Black and white patterned motifs run across the face of the woman adding to the sense of her being indigenous, tattooed and with the added irony that today being tattooed can be fashionable. The top quarter of the image is also in black and white

relating to the black and white snapshot of the past. The border is designed to relate to the theme of the snap shot along with designs of the Pacific.

A Cook Islands' woman (refer 3:46. p.49) posed in all her refinement which she has acquired from overseas. With extensive travel and access to the internet there has been a plethora of imported forms of adornment. The young woman is photographed in a classic black dress she brought from overseas. The pose is one that is generic of a model in a fashion magazine. The black high heel shoes are particularly noticeable because of the lack of footwear in the other four images. The rito hat has been replaced with a hat that infers haute couture. The woman sits on a chaise lounge which adds to the sophistication of the constructed pose even though the young woman is sitting on a coloured Tivaevae. The image has been layered over a photograph of two older Cook Islands' women decorated with shells and dyed fabrics of Cook Islands designs. As the viewer is drawn into the image, the combination of the locally produced dress and the imported becomes apparent. As one views the image one has the ability to peel away the layers to see the various colours, designs and other forms of embellishment such as jewellery, bags, and shoes. The woman in black is clearly contrasted with the warm tropical colours of the Pacific. Her glove becomes a "play" on the hand sewn patterned quilt, the tivaevae. The image is one of sophistication where the wearer presents a style influenced by other countries and cultures.

Young Cook Islands women (refer 3:47. p.50) from urban society of New Zealand and Cook Islands are photographed as they casually stand and lounge or pose. All are wearing top label surf brand clothing now popular with the young in the Cook Islands with two in sun glasses and one wearing the mandatory baseball cap. On closer observation the image also reveals the girls wearing locally produced shell leis around their necks and one with her rito hat turned up 'cowboy' style. The image depicts the women in their overseas clothing however complemented with their island jewellery and hat, keeping the connection with their Cook Islands' home. The teenager today networks socially with today's technology such as mobiles, I pods and cameras, all of which are disposable. In this constructed pose there has been an overlay of a second image, a young woman wearing a T- shirt that has a woman's face with a big smile on it. The T- shirt is one of the latest trends the younger women back from overseas wear today. The colours used in this digital image have been intensified to highlight the modern in-your-face times of the young women. In many ways they could be in NZ or Australia which is relevant as it is the preferred destination of the majority of young Cook Islands women. The image size and

colours refer to the 'billboard' advertising in major cities internationally used to attract the younger generation.

The last image (refer 3:48. p.51) symbolises the tying of the past to the present with the completion of a full cycle. Two women in the background have been dressed in pre European adornment with natural fibre headwear and au skirts. Behind them is woven pandanus which was used as walls in that era. The women have a certain severity about their appearance as they gaze at the camera reflecting how women might have appeared in that time when most tasks were time consuming and monotonous. The image layered on top is of two younger women clothed in their latest imported label surf wear with Polynesian tattoo designs on their bodies that identify them as being Pacific Islands' women. Symbols of migration appear on painted tapa on the left of the image which also symbolizes the connection between the past to the present as the young women in the front of the image continually leave and return to the island. Across the face of the woman on the top right are markings from the rito hat of the younger women below her. The markings suggest tribal tattoo possibly worn by women in the pre European age and are in contrast of the tattoo designs of the younger women of today. In the centre, on the arm of one of the younger women is a large square watch, a signifier of time and change.



(fig.3:44). George, K. February 2010. *Image 1*. [Digital photographic print on vinyl]. 2 x 1.37metres.



(fig.3:45). George, K. February 2010. *Image 2*. [Digital photograph printed on vinyl]. 2 x 1.37 metres.



(fig.3:46). George, K. February 2010. *Image 3*.  
[Digital photograph printed on vinyl].  
2 x 1.37 metres.



(fig.3:47). George, K. February 2010. *Image 4*. [Digital photograph printed on vinyl]. 2 x 1.37 metres.



(fig.3:48) George, K. February 2010. *Image 5*. [Digital photograph printed on vinyl]. 2 x 1.37 metres.

In evaluating my exhibition I have responded from a personal perspective to aspects of Cook Islands women's adornment from the past to the present and to how with culture changing over time, adornment plays a part in the dynamism of culture. The works in the exhibition also raised further relevant issues relating to ideas of the insider/outsider within a community, the influence of the missionaries, the potential and impact of new technology, the influences of the wider global world on Cook Islands adornments and sense of identity and the ways in which the younger women are now impacted by a modern global culture.

The global community and technology are intertwined. Technology has changed the global context. The network is vast and is accessible to most in the wider community in the Cook Islands and the Western world. With improved regularity of travel there are changed demographics with many Cook Islanders now living in other parts of the world. Children from those families still have a connection to their parent's/grandparent's home island but on return here they feel more like outsiders and are not at all familiar with the culture. So to the younger generation of Cook Islanders now have the ability to frequent other countries and the influence of other cultures helps play a large part in the changing patterns of young women's adornment.

Reflecting on the individual works in my exhibition I felt that *Image 3*, which was to convey the influence of women's adornment from Tahiti did not work as well as I had hoped. "The idea was to show the style of the Mu'u'mu'u and how ornately they were embellished with frills, ribbons and colour". On reflection I felt that the resulting image could perhaps be young women anywhere in the world as the vibrant cloth seemed to be the more dominant factor and did not necessarily convey the Tahitian influence combined with that of the Cook Islands. Similarly, in *Image 4*, a few symbols of the young women's Cook Islands adornment were highlighted, such as beads and flowers but I felt there could have been more consideration given to the background colours of the image so that one would more clearly recognize the emphasis of a Cook Islands environment. However, the research did reveal that Cook Islands women of today, both young and older, are tending to re-establish a sense of their cultural identity through their adornment. The research project highlighted a number of issues this has now inspired me to further explore these issues continuing with the medium of photography.

## Conclusion

This visual arts research project has been both challenging and rewarding. Through my observations as an outsider/insider in the Cook Island community, I have become aware of Cook Islands' women and their adornment and how one can see a sense of identity not only in the individual woman but also in the collective group.

In my project I researched the pre European traditional culture of women's adornment, which was later influenced by the arrival of the London Missionary Society in the early 1800's. In researching this period, despite the profound impact of the LMS, Cook Islands' women still retained elements of their traditional adornment. The adornment of this time indicated an openness to change by the Cook Islands' women. Later influences to their adornment came from neighbouring countries such as Tahiti and New Zealand whilst they still continue to use their own symbols of patterns, designs and colours reflective of their own environment.

The opening of an international airport saw the advent of tourism and further outside influences to the adornment of the Cook Islands' women. The introduction of digital technology such as the internet in the Cook Islands saw women no longer isolated from trends and fashions of the more developed world. The younger generation of women are now influenced by international clothing labels, although they are still keen to link the overseas' clothing with an element from the Cook Islands' adornment such as jewellery, the flower behind the ear or the markings of the tattoo, which identifies them as being from the Cook Islands.

Through my investigations for this project I discovered how some elements of the women's adornment can provide a mask as a form of security and identity both for the individual women and women in a collective group. An example of this is the ei katu which the women wear proudly identifying them as a part of the Cook Islands' culture. As a collective group an example is the many women working at the markets whom all wear their bright coloured adornment reflective of their environment along with their flowers in their hair and their Cook Islands made jewellery. Another is the women who belong to the church organisations or the women involved in the tere parties. I also observed how the individual women daily wear a flower in their hair as a form of connection to their Cook Islands' culture.

The layers of the Cook Islands' women adornment today vary in that with the older women there is a revival of the Mu'u'mu as a means of holding onto their past. Even though the Mu'u'mu is now modified to comply with climatic conditions and styled more suited to the body the women are proud to wear them on a daily basis with a wardrobe of Mu'u'mu for special occasions. The Mu'u'mu today contains layers of bright coloured and much patterned fabrics with borders of frills and lace. The garments are normally layered with accessories of jewellery such as the black pearls and garlands of flowers with wraps around the shoulders in the evenings. Increasingly some of the younger women are now layering their skin with the tattoo of Cook Islands designs which they are proud to expose.

My art practice in this project started off as an intuitive response of my observations of Cook Islands' women's adornment by taking quick photographic snapshots of women and their adornment. Utilizing the screen print method helped with printing the photographic snapshots of the women and adornment however by using a more analytical approach and the investigation of new mediums my practice evolved from photographic snapshots into digital prints. The shift to a more elaborate and defined print produced a visual, energetic formula that relates to vibrancy consistent with the colours of the Cook Islands' women's adornment.

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