

Adorning Shared Spaces

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Adorning **Shared** Spaces:
self-reflexive approach to crafting the
performative object - the *ilan* dress

By Juliana Satchell Deo

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ABSTRACT

This work pursues an interest in the protocols of my own cultural traditions of the Torres Strait Islands specifically Pacific adornment and customary ritualistic practices. The scope of this work is limited to an exploration of the *ilan* dress and its performativity as an object. The dress is mapped as a two-dimensional object, yet to be worn. Through iterative making it is deconstructed, re-constructed and performed as an ancestral re-telling through my grandmothers, mother, aunties, sister and my own daughters. Throughout this project I have explored many ritual practices and ancestral stories that have been passed down to me through the maternal lines in my family. I have learned to question the origins and the purpose of these traditions. Many of the answers I gathered sitting respectfully in my mother's kitchen listening to the stories, songs and dance that began this project. What I imagined to be a straightforward study and a rite of passage turned out to be one of the most humbling experiences of my academic journey. This exegesis is the story of that journey.

READER DISCRETION: CULTURAL ADVICE

Readers should be aware that this documentation may include names and images of deceased people that may cause sadness or distress to Daru Island and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is my intention to tell these stories and use imagery with good faith and with respect.

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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 acknowledgments), nor material to which substantial extent has been submitted for award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution for learning.

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To my friends, you have all been the most perfect people to share this journey with – I am so blessed!

Daryl. *Madi auwo* your patience, understanding and love underpinned this journey.

Eso Rai



INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Prior to this masters project my cultural background was a strong reference point in my work. I explored the many ritual practices and ancestral stories that were passed down to me. This method of practice allowed me to learn beyond what was already embodied in my cultural knowledge and understanding. I discovered that there was a reoccurring theme in my spatial investigation. Threshold spaces that are both ritual and cultural performance; played out in a multi-layered domestic space.

As a child I would be fascinated by the multi-layered conditions of my domestic space, my surroundings were contingent upon the experiences and spatial conditions of occupancy. This project has offered an opportunity to further explore these reoccurring themes and allow for a process that looks beyond the stories that have been told to me and deepen my understanding of the ritual, songs and dances of my origins.

The aim of this research project is to explore Torres Strait Island adornment and the shared space of traditional performance. This project asks '*how can explorations of Torres Strait Island storytelling through embodied performance support the design of a performative object – the ilan dress?*' The scope of this research is limited to the exploration of the ilan dress of Torres Strait Island women and its performativity as an object. An analysis of the cultural adornment of the dress is mapped within an object inquiry and an iterative process is pursued to collect explore, deconstruct and re-construct the ilan dress.

This Practice-led masters project was structured through qualitative and social-science methodology. A bricolage approach of phenomenological exploration and an auto-ethnographic position was used where the self-narrative approach was embraced. The understanding of self-narrative offers a sense of cultural self-discovery that is intimately related to an understanding of 'others'.¹

In my research the 'others' relates to the Torres Strait Island peoples. Through this study I am not suggesting that I know all there is to know about the Torres Strait Island peoples and their history, culture and traditions but instead deepen the understanding of my own culture – where I stand as a spatial practitioner, researcher and mixed race Torres Strait Island woman living far from her place of origin. The iterative design process of making and crafting benefited from a heuristic process of enquiry that supported the self-reflexive nature of the project.

¹ Heewon Chang, "Self-Narratives," in *Autoethnography as a Method* (California: Left Coast Press, 2008), p34.

In chapter one it is important to locate the place where my cultural identity originates from and to draw attention to the significance of what this cultural identity looks like. I will discuss the drawings and makings that contributed to the exploration of my own cultural stories, singing and dancing. I will also introduce five women from my family and their importance in the nurturing of my own cultural identity. Chapter one also discusses the constraints that were revealed through cultural protocols and restrictions. These constraints were negotiated and resolved in the following chapters.

Chapter two discusses a significant turning point in my research. I explore the significance of a family ring given to me by my sister and the connection it holds to the five important women in my life, specifically my grandmothers. I was interested in the memories contained within this tiny object and intrigued by the spatial transactions that the ring offered.

In Chapter three I discuss the pursuit of a transformative dance machine, the *sik*, often used in Torres Strait Island performances. I used an analogue to digital drawing method to further explore the recollected stories of the ring and five women. My expectation was to craft and make a *sik* so it would assist in the storytelling performance for the final work. A patterned cloth resulted and led to the construction of my own dress that embody the patterns of the ring and women in my story.

Chapter three ends with the documentation of my journey back to Fiji Islands to perform the dress with the women in my family; my mother, aunty, sisters and my own daughters. This process of enquiry gave recognition to the unfolding of my cultural identity through practiced spatial rituals. I sat amongst women in my family and our culture in a space adorned with rich stories, songs and dance.

The purpose of this research project is to explore Torres Strait Island adornment and the shared space of traditional performance. I learned so much from the micro-macro approach of research by looking in from an 'others' perspective in the initial stages of research then immersing myself into the exploration as an 'insider' at the making and performing stage. Throughout the process I practiced a self-reflexive role to analyse and appreciate the research outcome. I discovered that I did not know everything about my culture however along the process of enquiry I learned to not only appreciate what was embedded in my cultural knowledge but also appreciate the space I practiced these cultural lessons in - the multi-layered domestic space.





CHAPTER ONE

In this chapter it is important for me to locate the place where my cultural identity originates from and secondly, to highlight the significance of what this cultural identity looks like.

I was brought up in Papua New Guinea, Australia, Fiji and now New Zealand and I am of Torres Strait (Australia) and Daru Island (Papua New Guinea) descent. (Fig. 1) Living a long distance from my birthplace, I have always felt a sense of belonging to my indigenous culture. This is nurtured and mediated through my female family members including my grandmother, mother, aunts and sisters. I am interested in the customary practices of my culture and the specific spatial relationships that are built and nurtured within these customs and rituals.



Figure 1. Noelene Bechu, *Juliana with her Kundu drum*, (2004).

Part of the initial processes to this research has led to a series of cultural constraints that have allowed for a more self-reflexive practice and given me the opportunity to reassess this work through a deeper cultural awareness. In this self-reflexive phase, I will discuss my drawing, making and explorative process to share what I have learned through cultural stories, singing and dancing.

PLACE: DARU AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS

The Torres Strait Islands are located in the waterway that parts the Australian landmass at Cape York from Papua New Guinea. (Fig. 2) The Torres Straits were named after Spanish explorer Luis Vaez de Torres in 1606.² By 1879 the Torres Strait was annexed as part of the state of Queensland, Australia.³ There are over a hundred islands in the strait of which only seventeen are inhabited by twenty communities.⁴ The traditional people of Torres Strait Islands are mainly of Melanesian origin and have occupied the islands for many thousands of years.

It is important to mention that Daru Island shares many similarities with the Torres Strait Islands because of their geographical position, inter-island-marriages and traditions in oral histories and dance. Daru Island is the capital of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea and the islanders are also of

² Lindsay Wilson, *Kerkar Lu Contemporary Artefacts of the Torres Strait Islanders* (Queensland, Australia: Department of Education, 1993). p3.

³ "History | Torres Strait Island Regional Council," Torres Strait Island Regional Council, <http://www.tsirc.qld.gov.au/%3Cfront%3E/history>, accessed 12 Aug. 2013.

⁴ Stan Florek, "The Torres Strait Islands Collection at the Australian Museum," in *Technical Reports of The Australian Museum*, ed. Shane F McEvey (Sydney: The Australian Museum, 2005). p12. http://australianmuseum.net.au/Uploads/Journals/18021/1464_complete.pdf, (accessed August 12, 2013).



Figure 2. Map showing borderline between Australia and Papua New Guinea. Leah Lui, *Cultural Identity and Development in the Torres Strait Islands*, (New Delhi, India: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1996).

Melanesian origin with a population of around 16,000.⁵ In 1975 a borderline between PNG and Australia severed a line between the Islands making a separation between families, bonds and kinship.

I remember living on Daru Island and traveling in a hand crafted boat – *moto-moto* to visit family in the Torres Strait islands.⁶ At the time this was all I knew myself to be, a Daru and Torres Strait islander. It was hard to imagine anything beyond this. I was nick named *kopo daragi* in *Kiwai* language, which translated as 'white horse' and I imagined this to be a name they gave to children born with my skin – the 'white horse' skin – a less darker complexion to that of my cousins.⁷ My understanding was almost accurate because they were referring to my half-caste identity.

⁵ International Council for Open and Distance Learning, "Country Profile: Papua New Guinea," http://www.icde.org/projects/regulatory_frameworks_for_distance_education/country_profiles/papua_new_guinea/, (accessed 12 August, 2013).

⁶ *Motomoto* is the *Kiwai* word for a large canoe with double outriggers and a large platform for long distance travel. David Lawrence, "Collecting and Documenting the *Kiwai*," Gunnar Landtman in Papua 1910 to 1912 (Canberra, Australia: ANU E Press, 2010), <http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Gunnar+Landtman+in+Papua%3A+1910+to+1912/4641/ch04.xhtml#toc-anchor-l1.p139-140>, (accessed August 17, 2014).

⁷ *Kiwai* is the author's mother's tongue and it is a Papuan language, of southern Papua New Guinea.

POSITION: BEGINNINGS

Surrounded by women passionate about their cultural traditions has been a strong influence in the nurturing of my own cultural identity. Cultural traditions have been passed down orally through story telling, singing and dancing. For example, my *Abere* would tell me stories on the *motomoto* as we traveled to Yam Island from Daru Island.⁸ (Fig. 3) She would tell me how my *Nogere* would navigate our journey using the stars and I would look up at the dark sky as I lay in her lap.⁹ (Fig. 4) *Abere* would stoke the fire in the *momogo* as the waves danced with the boat and she would tell me of the legends and cultural heroes that guided us – she would tell me in songs and hand gestures that move with the rhythm of the fire.¹⁰ (Fig. 5) I looked up at those brave men who have become like stars and they twinkled down at me. *Abere* told me that these are the stories passed down and I too would tell my children.

Figure 3. This image portrays a visual discription of my *Nogere's motomoto*. Harry Hyndman, *Outrigger Canoes, Thursday Island* (C 1958 ~ Ti 178).



Figure 4. Olive Kotoisuva, *Abere and Nogere*, (1988).



Figure 5. Olive Kotoisuva, *Abere's Momogo*, (1988).

8 *Abere* - author's maternal grandmother from Daru Island, Papua New Guinea.

9 *Nogere* - author's maternal grandfather from Daru Island, Papua New Guinea.

10 In *Kiwai* language, the *momogo* means fireplace for cooking and on the *motomoto* my *Abere* had an old 40 gallon drum that was cut in half and constructed into a fire pit so she could cook with the fire and charcoal whilst we traveled on the sea.

I learnt from a young age the importance of cosmology in my culture and the expressive means of storytelling, singing and dancing to relay information. This ritual aspect of storytelling through singing and dance offered a space with connections to my ancestors.

Samoan scholar Albert Refiti, refers to a similar time, body and space identity in the Samoan world view in *'The Forked Centre: Duality & Privacy in Polynesian Spaces & Architecture.'* Refiti highlights the belief that *'Architecture of the Pacific is an art that serves to adorn, and embellish the va relationships between families, communities, people and environment; it allows the housing between past, present, future to appear.'*¹¹ Refiti describes this place as one that is *'inhabited by the va or sacred in-between space that allows entities/time/space to collapse together in an interconnectedness.'*¹²

The body becomes the intertwining space between the visible and the invisible; a woven trace that weaves descendants and ancestors together.¹³

My own work titled *'Thresholds'*, 2010 explored an imaginary threshold that connected both my spiritual and domestic space. (Fig. 6) The spiritual realm is a space where the spirits of my ancestors dwell and the ritual is the symbolic threshold that intertwines them. Customary rituals did not allow me to carelessly discard or burn my fallen hair yet instead, involved a ritual of cleanliness that treated the hair as a broken piece of my spiritual being. My spirit is connected to my ancestors and so this ritual was a mark of respect to that connection. In this ritual I saw my hair as an object between life and non-life, hair was treated as an extension of not only my body but also my spirit and detached hair was to be buried with respect to my spirit.

In my hand I had a physical object (my dead hair) and I was performing an act of ritualistic purification to adhere to a respected custom. Shifts between reality, the imaginary and the spiritual of my surroundings are influenced by these practiced rituals. Reflecting on my own rituals permits certain types of experiences that connect my own spiritual and domestic realms.

11 The term va in Samoan world view means *'the sacred in-between space'*. As a verb it means to have a space between; as a prefix it denotes distance; as a noun it describes the space itself; it is also the word for relationships. Albert L Refiti, "The Forked Centre: Duality and Limit in Polynesian Spaces and Architecture," *ALTERNATIVE: An International Journal of Indigenous Scholarship*, no. Special Issue (2008), https://www.academia.edu/1847151/The_forked_centre_Duality_and_limit_in_Polynesian_spaces_and_architecture, (accessed September 16, 2014).

12 Ibid

13 Ibid

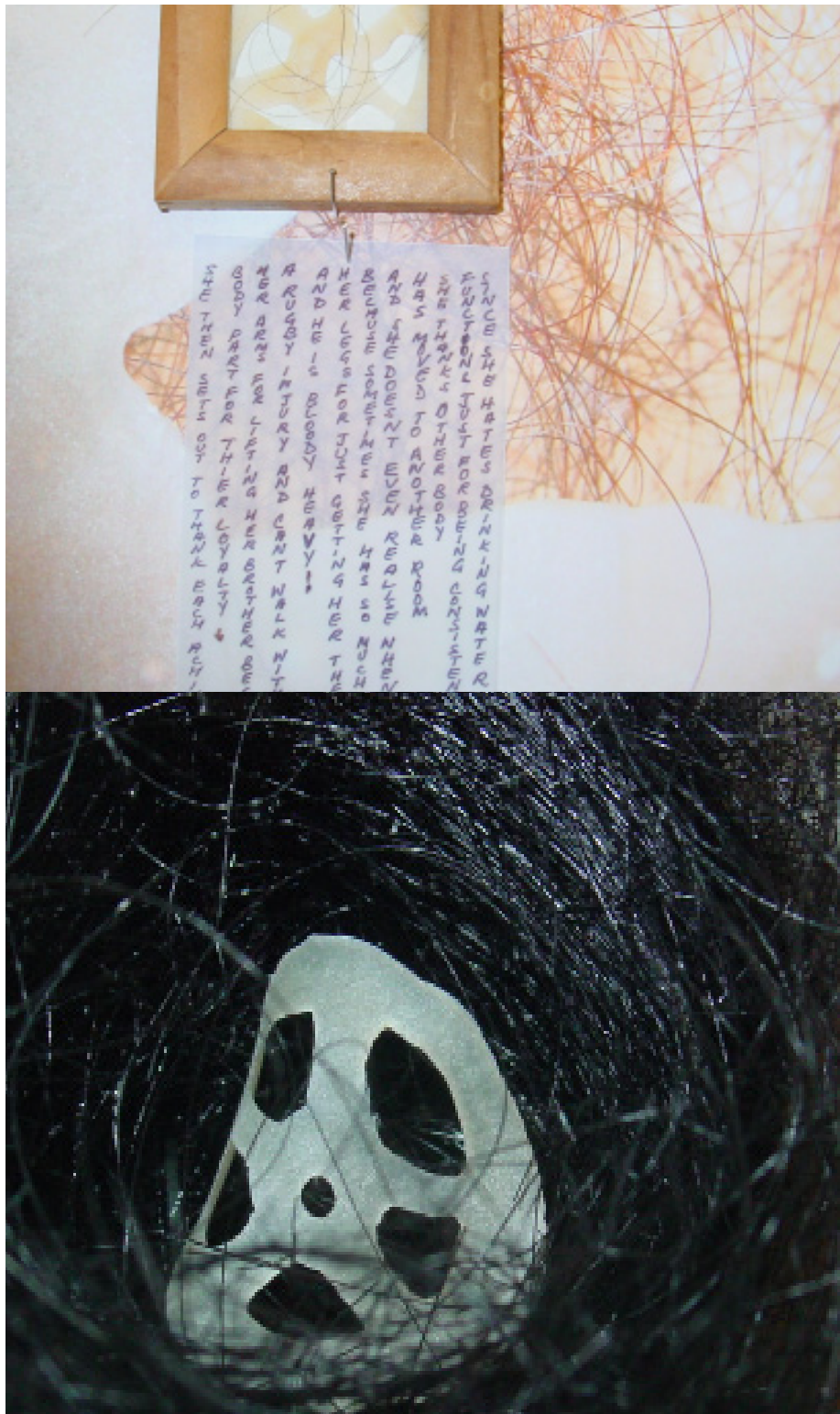


Figure 6. Latex, wax, hair and bathroom sink. This project offered fascinating insights into human behaviour in context to rituals of sacredness and uncleanness identified through pollution. In the work 'Thresholds' I was trying to express a personal cultural ritual through my explorations and conceptual designs and place my work in perspective to other ideas of ritual and cultural taboos. Author's work. Thresholds, (2010).

LAP-LAP: CONSTRAINED BODY AND SPACE

Figure 7. James Davidson, *Gab Titui Cultural Centre*,
(Queensland, Australia: James Davidson Architect, 2014).

Earlier in the project I planned to visit the Gab Titui Cultural Centre on Thursday Island, Torres Strait, Australia.¹⁴ (Fig. 7) The site was officially opened in 2004 and it was selected because of the cultural significance of the *Gab Titui* building and its connection to Torres Strait Island migration, cosmology and diaspora. The site designed by the architectural firm Mike Ferris Partners, Cairns symbolised Torres Strait history, geography and culture. Ferris described the inspiration for his design by highlighting that:

*"The dhari is a traditional headdress in Torres Strait and has a distinctive shape. This shape became the inspiration for the building's roof design."*¹⁵

During the pearling industry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, many Torres Strait Islanders were employed as pearl divers or crewmembers on wooden sailboats called pearl luggers¹⁶. (Fig. 8) *Gab Titui's* architecture attempted to reflect the pearl luggers history in the Torres Strait Islands displayed through the salient aspects of the façade.¹⁷ (Fig. 7) The local artists and craftspeople commissioned many of the internal elements, however, in my opinion the building lacked an identifiable space for the community to gather and perform their oral histories through traditional dance.

¹⁴ The *Gab Titui* conveys both Eastern and Western languages of the Torres Strait and the region's maritime history. 'Gab' is from *Miriam Mer* (Eastern Islands) and translates as journey or pathway. 'Titui' is from *Kala Lagar Ya* (Western Islands), meaning stars. These together communicate as the 'Journey of the Stars'. The centre's name denotes the importance placed on the Torres Strait people's upholding of their navigational skills, traditions and culture. Jude Philp and Leilani Bin Juda Anita Herle, "The Journey of the Stars: Gab Titui, a Cultural Centre for the Torres Strait," in *The Future of Indigenous Museums: Perspectives from the Southwest Pacific*, ed. Nick Stanley (New York: Berghahn Books 2008). p93-116.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ A small sailing ship with two or three masts and a lugsail on each. Definition of Lugger in English, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/lugger>, (accessed September 18, 2014)

¹⁷ "The Journey of the Stars: Gab Titui, a Cultural Centre for the Torres Strait." p93-116.

Figure 8. An example of a Pearl Lugger in the Torres Strait Islands. Mike Smith. 2013 in *FNQ: A Visual Review*. 2013.

My intent was to design a performance space based on the Torres Strait Island traditional headdress – *dhari*.¹⁸ The *dhari* generally adorns male performers and is made by men with each design varying from individual design aesthetics to community based symbolism.¹⁹ (Fig. 9) The performance aspect of the *dhari* allows the wearer to exaggerate the movement of the head to cause a flickering effect, described as being like “the glint of the pearl shell dropped in water”.²⁰ The adornment becomes activated through performance and the *dhari* becomes a ‘dance machine’ that translates the story being performed (Fig. 10).

As I attempted to design and make a *dhari* to explore connections and traditional crafting and making skills, I sought cultural guidance from my Aunty. I informed her of my *dhari* making exploration and intentions. Her response was very stern as she reminded me of my *Meriam Mir* descent and told me that I was prohibited by cultural protocols as a woman to make a *dhari* or wear one.²¹

In addition to this restriction due to unforeseen circumstances and communication issues I could not visit my site nor access any plans of the building. This phase of my research was summed up in what I called the ‘waiting weeks’. I produced a series of hand drawings that represented the drawn out process of

18 *Dhari* is the *Meriam Mir* (Eastern Island's language) word for headdress and in the Central and Western Islands where *Kala Lagaw Ya* is spoken, the headdress is called *Dheori*. The *dhari* is the central image on Torres Strait Island flag and the *dhari* symbol is placed on government institutions, local newspapers and everything culturally important to the people of the Torres Strait Islands. Queensland Museum, “Dhari,” Queensland Museum, <http://www.qm.qld.gov.au/Events+and+Exhibitions/Exhibitions/Permanent/Dandiiri+Maiwar/Ailan+kastom+bilong+Torres+Strait/Dhari#.VEOs6Es6JFY>, (accessed April 11, 2013)

19 Descriptions of the *dhari* are presented on the Queensland Museum website and describes the *dhari* as “[...] traditionally made from Frigate Bird and Torres Strait Pigeon feathers but recently dharis have been constructed with, cardboard, plywood, chicken feathers and cane to achieve a more contemporary look”. Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 *Meriam Mir* is the Language of the Eastern Islands of the Torres Strait Islands, Australia *Meriam Mir*, is also part of the Papuan language family.

Figure 9. (Right) *Dhari* ABC, George Nona - Ceremonial *Dhoeri*, 2008., (Australia: Australian Broadcasting Commision (abc), 2011).

Figure 10. (Below) Olive Kotoisuva, *Uncle Livingston Performing Traditional Dance with Dhari*, (1982).



this journey, of seeking information and failing to get it. Long intervals of space and time spent between emailing and phone calls – each drawing representing a sense of direction and others a sense of helplessness and defeat. (Fig. 11) The emails were printed out and transferred to calico fabric, each date hand stitched to emphasize time that had passed (Fig. 12). Finally I wrapped the calico around my legs, the frustration manifesting itself as a physical constraint.

As a child my living space would change when different members of my mother's family would visit. When we were alone, my sister and I would occupy the living area as we wished. Yet, as soon as my mother's older brothers and sisters would visit the furniture positions would change, I would have to cover my legs in a long *lap-lap* and cast my eyes down and excuse myself as I used the living area to get to the kitchen.²²

In an instant, the atmosphere and spatial dynamics of my family living area would change to cater to the traditions of my mother's culture. My mother's older family members brought with them invisible spatial boundaries that I could not see but I knew existed transforming my childhood home into a dwelling that embraced both the past and the present and restricting my movements to accept the changes.

Whilst wearing the *lap-lap* I felt constrained by the layer of cloth around me, even though in my studio I had moved furniture to create a large and open room it was the *lap-lap* that determined what condition I would spatially inhabit. I found that this reading also supported my recollections of moving furniture as a child to cater to my mother's family to form a respectful thoroughfare. The *lap-lap* would restrict our movements, we would walk slower and we were consciously aware of our movements within the space because of the constraints placed on and around our bodies.

Time, restriction, cultural taboos and my wavering confidence in understanding my own culture made the research difficult to progress. The work needed to find its resolutions in forms and places other than the Torres Strait Islands. The transformation of unanswered e-mails into a wearable *lap-lap* offered a response that reflected distance and disorientation. As equally, I could remember stories and experiences and a sense of belonging to my culture. This sense of belonging was always nurtured and mediated through strong women. I set out on a journey to loosen the *lap-lap* and unfold my cultural identity. The next chapter discusses the process undertaken in order to release my constrained body.

²² *Lap-lap* resembles a sarong and it is similar in use and style to the Polynesian term *lava-lava*. A *lap-lap* is rectangular in shape and is worn around the waist like a skirt.

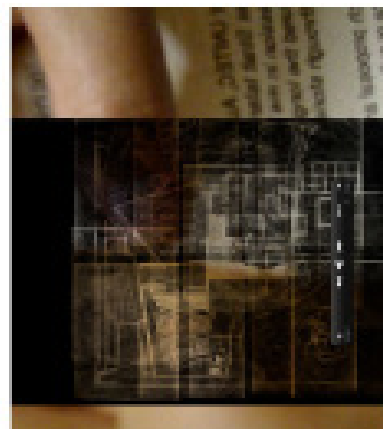
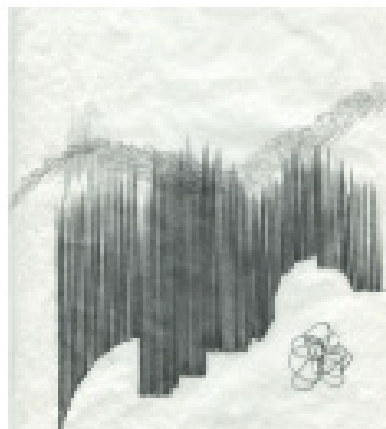
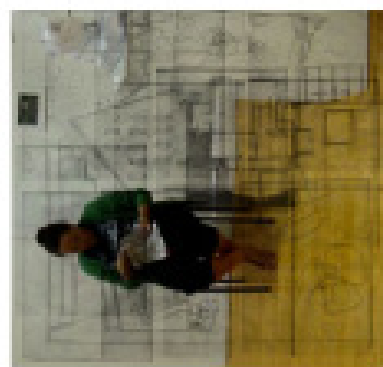
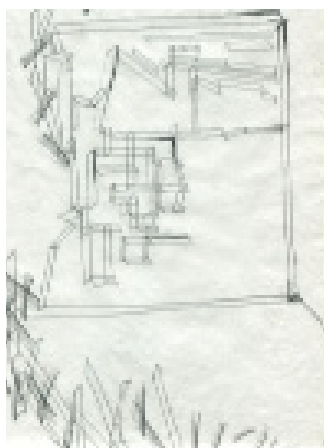
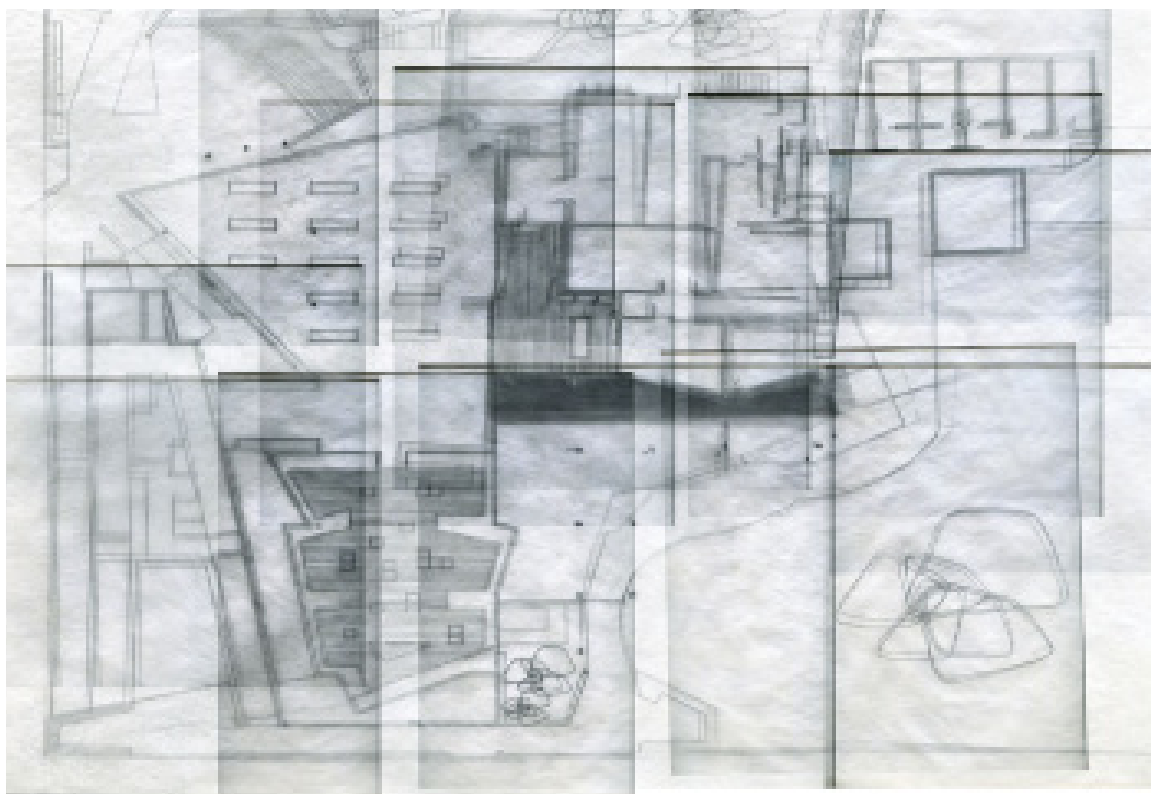


Figure 11. Author's multi-media work, *Drawing out the 'Waiting Weeks'*, (2012-13).



Figure 12. Author's Photograph, Calico Laplap, (2013).



CHAPTER TWO

In the previous chapter I discussed the constraints of the project thus far and as a result I was left questioning my authenticity as a researcher of Torres Strait Island culture. I had never encountered such constraints when practicing my cultural identity in previous projects. I spoke to my mother and expressed my disappointment and she reminded me of the lessons she taught me. She made me aware that I was not raised amongst male cultural influences and everything I possess in the form of cultural knowledge was mediated through her, my grandmothers and aunties. My Aunt Maria informed me of the cultural constraints of this project, my mother nurtured my desire to persist beyond those constraints.

This became a turning point in my research and highlighted the importance of how my culture has been mediated through five women in my family. This chapter discusses a ring that was given to me and its significance to my master's project. I was interested in the value of memories contained in an object. I was intrigued by the spatial transactions the ring offered and my intentions were to explore how an object can be both an adornment and also performative - offering a spatial transformation. This story begins with a ring that belonged to my Nana and was given to me by my sister. The ring was crafted in the shape of a *Kundu* drum that quintessentially relayed memories of the drums my Abere would beat during traditional performances.²³

As I persevered to unfold my cultural identity I did so through story telling, song and dance of my Torres Strait Island culture. In the following chapter I intend to discuss further the *dhari* to *sik* dance machine connection and how I used an analogue to digital drawing method to further explore the *sik* and make one based on the recollected stories of the ring and five women. This iterative process enabled me to regain confidence that I had lost in the previous stage of research and gave me insight into unfolding my cultural identity.

The Object and I

"We're in a room alone.

The object and I.

The object consumes my heart.

I possess it.

It's a form of love.

It's a form of hunger.

*It's a spiritual yearning."*²⁴

²³ *Kundu* is a Papua New Guinean word for a type of drum. The *Kundu* drum is used in traditional performance and celebrations. *Kundu* styles and designs differ between various regions but the hollowed out wood and lizard skin beating part remains the same.

²⁴ Poet Peter McLeavey's poem describes a kind of desire for an object. Lara Strongman, Neil Pardington, Christina Barton, *Behind Closed Doors* (Wellington, New Zealand: Adam Art Gallery, 2011), p5.

THE OBJECT AND I



Figure 13. Author's Photograph, *Family Ring*, (2012).

My sister visited me from Australia and with her she brought a ring belonging to my grandmother who had recently passed away. (Fig. 13) It was the first thing she placed in my hand when meeting me at the airport. As I stood in the busy airport the memories unraveled as the object sat warmly in the palm of my hand. The precious moments of the time spent with my grandmothers began to dissolve my surroundings. The ring held intimate memories that transcended the object's structure and overwhelmed my surroundings. I traveled to moments of my childhood where I could smell the baking of my Nana's apple pie and then I remembered the taste of my *Abere's dampar*.²⁵

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard in *Poetics of Space* refers to the concept of 'intimate immensity', that he sees as an insightful awareness of spaces that are both bodily and spiritual.²⁶ Intimate immensity is perceived as a process of being where "a relaxed spirit mediates and dreams, immensity seems to expect images of immensity. The mind sees and continues to see objects, while the spirit finds the nest of immensity in an object."²⁷ The ring offered me a place of an in-between space; a hybrid space of displacement, that was dance and storytelling clothed in memories of places I belong to. I stood in a public place, clutching an object that held connections to my past. My awareness of space and time became blurred, both physical and spiritual.

My early childhood was filled with many rituals through stories told by my grandmothers and my family. My work enriched by this cultural grounding enabled me to learn beyond what was already embedded in my cultural knowledge and understanding. Five women and a ring focused my process.

²⁵ *Dampar* is bread that is traditionally cooked in the charcoal and ashes of the fire.

²⁶ Gaston Bachelard, "Intimate Immensity," in *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). p183-210.

²⁷ Ibid.

Memories of living in Papua New Guinea and Torres Strait Islands are limited to my early childhood. I was born in Papua New Guinea and lived with my *Abere* on Daru Island until I started elementary education in Port Moresby when I was between five and six years old.²⁸ My Nana, who is of Australian-European decent, also played an important role in my identity.²⁹ She introduced me to the European side of my family background and instilled in me an understanding that my identity was one of many strands and I would have to negotiate between the many complexities of a person of mixed race descent. I left Papua New Guinea when I was 12 years old, however my relationship to these places have been continuously mediated through my mother, grandmothers, aunts and sisters. I have carried with me the values, culture and traditions and not only practiced them but also share them with my own daughters. These intertwining threads extended that maternal connection.

THE DANCE MACHINE - *DHARI TO SIK*

Figure 14. Charles John, *Torres Strait Island Women Performing a Dance as Part of the Arpaka Dance Group, Thursday Island, Queensland, 2008* [Picture]. (Australia: National Library of Australia, 2008).

I explored where I could locate my research and what I could do as a woman and I began to understand that my identity was in a constant flux and my culture was inherently embodied in my identity. It moved with me as I traveled. I needed to express my culture as I have been doing since the age of 12 years old. I needed to tell the story of the five women in my life. This led to the suggestion that my research process would consist of a dance that would include the women of my family and tell the tale of place and connections to culture.

I learned of the *sik* dance machine and I discovered that women could perform with the *sik* dance machine and there were no cultural constraints denying me access to make this machine. (Fig. 14) The *sik* is one of many Torres Strait Island dance machines. Dance machines are used in a cultural performance setting at celebrations such as cultural festivals, weddings, tombstone ceremonies and other significant events in the Torres Strait Island calendar.

²⁸ Port Moresby is the capital city of Papua New Guinea and is located on the mainland.

²⁹ Author's paternal grandmother from Australia.



Figure 15. Queensland Art Gallery, *Kobupa Thoerapiese* 1999, Linocut on Paper Ed. 4/98 | 99 X 65.5cm (Queensland: Queensland Art Gallery, 2000).

Many of the stories told through the traditional performances are enactments of navigation with particular interests to cosmology, stars, winds, migration and the coming of light. Alick Tipoti is a celebrated Torres Strait Island artist. His creative practice as an artist is inspired by significant symbols, totems and culture heroes about the land, sea and sky of his Torres Strait Island culture and expressed through his work³⁰. (Fig. 15) Tipoti writes:

*"[...] songs I know has played a part in my using the sea and my finding way from place to place. There are songs about dugong and turtle hunting [...] there are also songs composed when families were journeying to visit relatives, like on the way to Top Western."*³¹

Song and dance is significant to the Torres Strait Islander way of life, they are not written but transmitted orally. The dance machine and other dance paraphernalia augment and animate the performance and story telling.

The dance machine's early developments are unclear but it was noted that the appeal for mechanical devices was taken from the observation of sailing gear on

30 Alick Tipoti, "Alick Tipoti - Torres Strait Artist/ Indigenous Artist/ Contemporary Sculpture," Auxillary, <http://www.allicktipoti.com/ABOUT4.0.html>, (accessed July 10, 2014).

31 Grace Koch, "We Have the Song, So We Have the Land: Song and Ceremony as Proof of Ownership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Claims," ed. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies: Native Title Research Unit, (2013), http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/_files/ntru/KochDP_web.pdf, p.37., (accessed February 6, 2014).

the vessels that visited Torres Strait Islands in the nineteenth century.³² It was my initial intention to look at the *dhari* dance machine and make one based on my explorations. (Fig. 16)

The constraints placed upon me were due to the fact that the *dhari* customarily adorns male performers and is made by men. Gender specific roles upheld within the making and wearing of the *dhari* insist that design and construction methods passed down orally from father to son.³³ Where there are no sons the sacred knowledge is passed onto the male leader or male performers of the dance team in which the *dhari* maker is involved.³⁴

SIK TO DRESS: TRANSFORMING THE OBJECT TO GARMENT

Using the dance machine I intended to use the story of the ring and the five women in my life to narrate a story through patterns and motifs. I wanted to make my own *sik*: I sketched recollected stories, a way of imagining these five women and the ring. I imagine them in their homes and of the cultural lessons they imparted and wove into my identity.

I drew my *Abere* sitting and weaving a traditional woven ball from coconut fronds. (Fig. 17) Surrounded by fishing nets and her hand made *hawa*, she kept her coconut-thatched windows braced open with pieces of wood.³⁵ Talking to the spirits for guidance, wisdom and sometimes out of frustration as the breeze swelled and filled the room my *Abere* wove together:

The ring and five women became the performers in my storytelling. Using pattern to map their movements and gestures across the page. I looked at the drawings as a means to inform the designing and crafting of the women's dance machine. I began to move away from making a *sik* dance machine as the body in the space of my stories became more important and needed to be celebrated. In my drawings I imagined footsteps, dancing bodies, crafting hands and working legs along with hopeful eyes, smiles and bursting laughter. (Fig. 18) I was adorning these memories with imagery projected through the adorned body and as a result I was adorning shared spaces.

32 Wilson, Kerkar Lu *Contemporary Artefacts of the Torres Strait Islanders*.

33 Cultural information mediated from Author's aunty in the Torres Strait Islands.

34 Brisbane Gallery of Modern Art, Australia, "Koranga Saibai Kodhal in-Conversation | the Torres Strait Islands: A Celebration," ed. John Francia (2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lwgsg3FEQUA&list=PLF8E391939DA732C6&index=15>, (accessed November 20 2013).

35 *Hawa* – mat woven from Pandanus tree leaves or sometimes Coconut palm leaves for domestic purposes such as flooring.

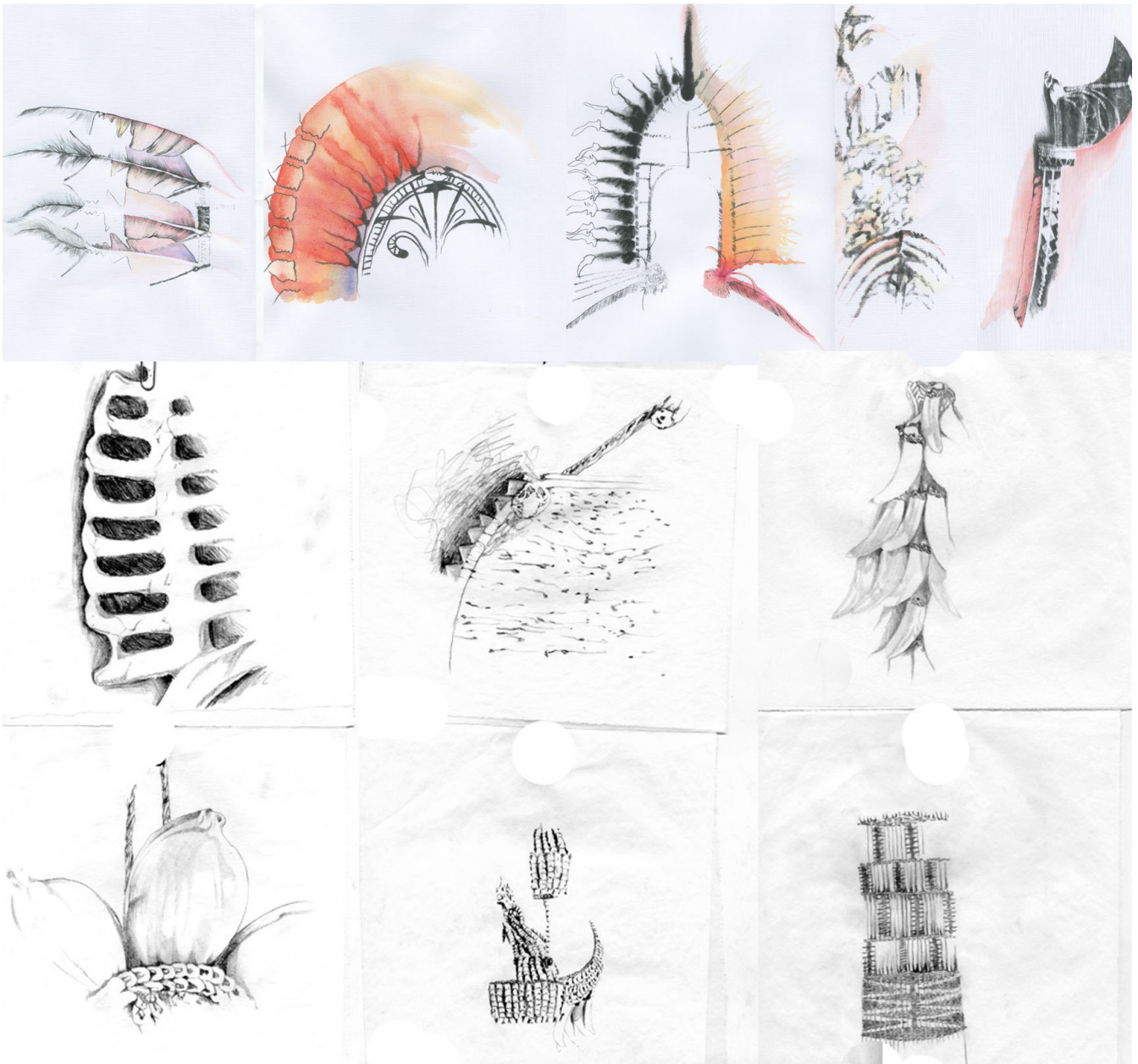


Figure 16. Looking at Dhari details, construction, pattern and materiality.
Author's work, *Dhari Explorations*, (2013-14).

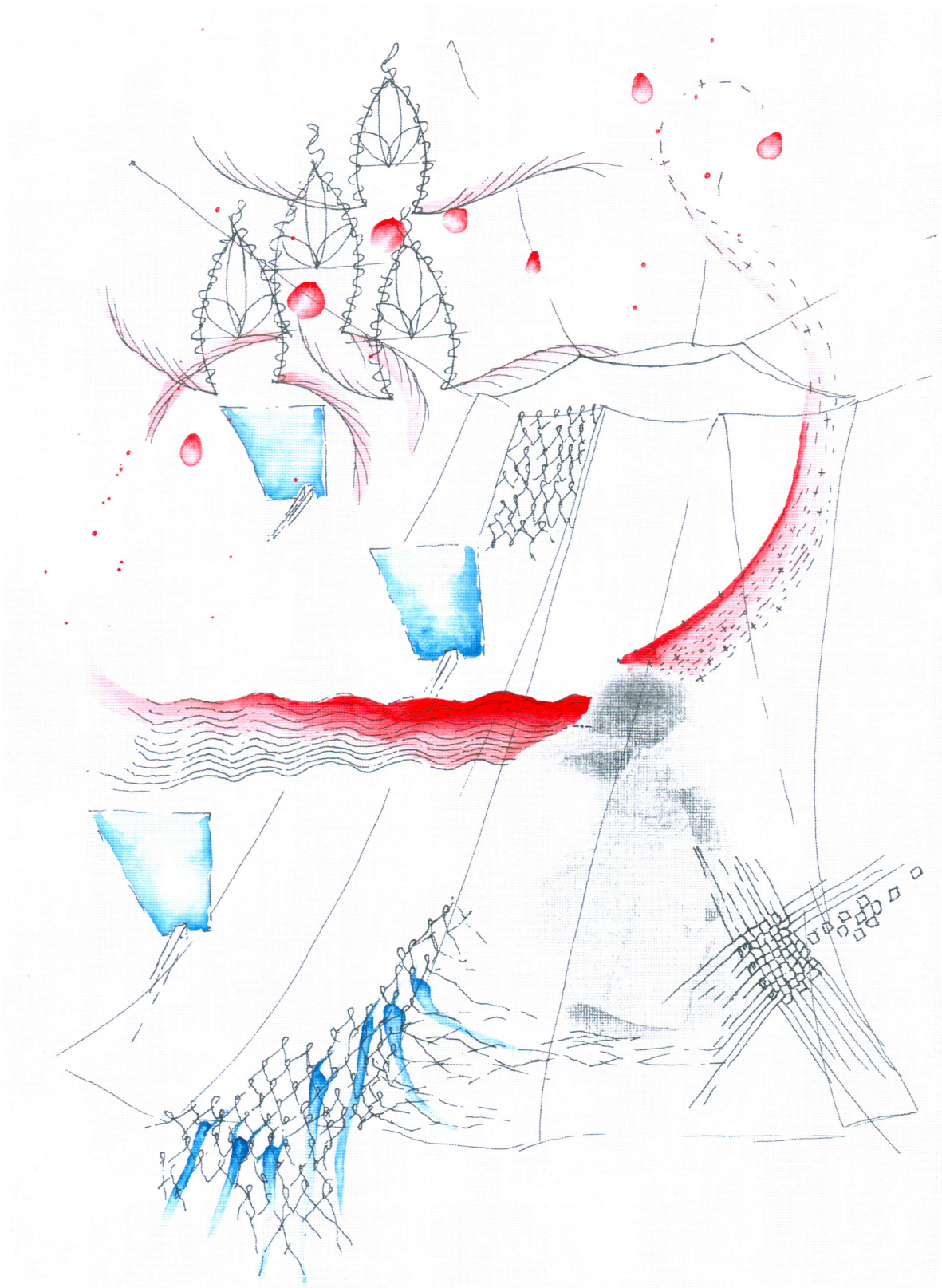


Figure 17. Author's work, *Aberé*, (2014).

I discovered fragments and connections in my drawings, I wanted the patterns to be printed onto fabric and to clothe myself with these stories. (Fig. 19) As I worked on the pattern to *lap-lap* model I listened to an interview with Rosie Barkus, a contemporary printmaker from the Torres Strait islands.³⁶ Barkus works with fabric as her main source of medium and uses the designed prints and marks on the fabric to re-tell stories and map out histories and culturally specific themes. (Fig. 20 and Fig. 21) Each piece of fabric embodies the maker's identity and shares the importance of her stories for others to appreciate and understand.

Once the *lap-lap* was printed I wrapped it around me - the fabric became a layer of space. The fabric layer of space on my body was an allegory for the culture I take with me. I brought back the individual patterns selected from each of the 'performers' in my story – the ring and five women and designed a dress concept. (Fig. 22)

The dress making process led to the merging of five patterned elements to be encapsulated in one dress. (Fig. 23) The ring and the importance of the five women signaled a point of return; the recollected stories, the ring and the culture I wrap myself in and take with me. This process enabled me to regain confidence in unfolding my cultural identity.

36 Brisbane Gallery of Modern Art, Australia, "Rosie Barkus Artist Talk | the Torres Strait Islands: A Celebration," (2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI4jOoTk3zE&index=9&list=PLF8E391939DA732C6>, (accessed November 20, 2013).

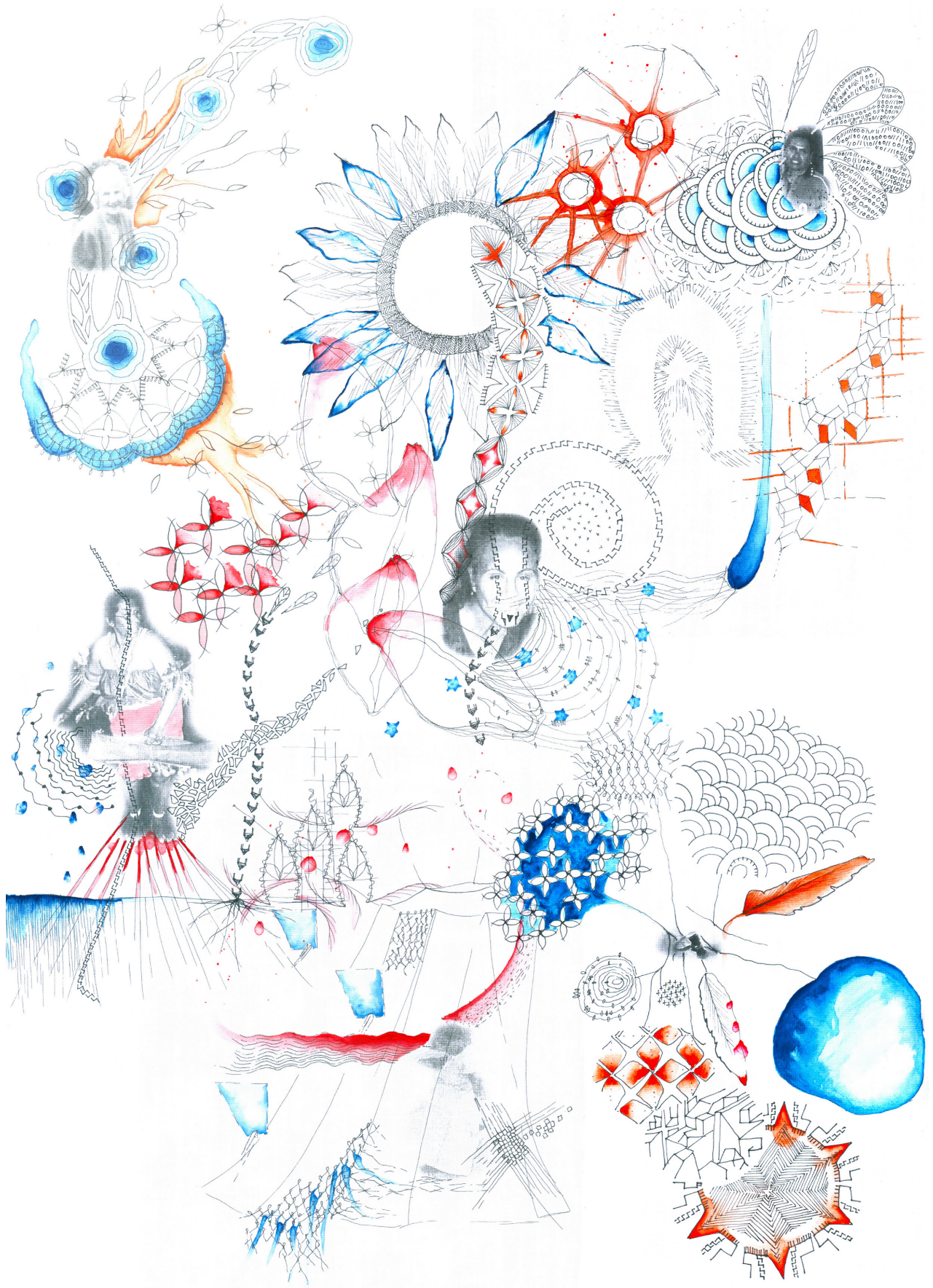


Figure 18. Author's work, *Five Women and Ring Pattern*, (2014).

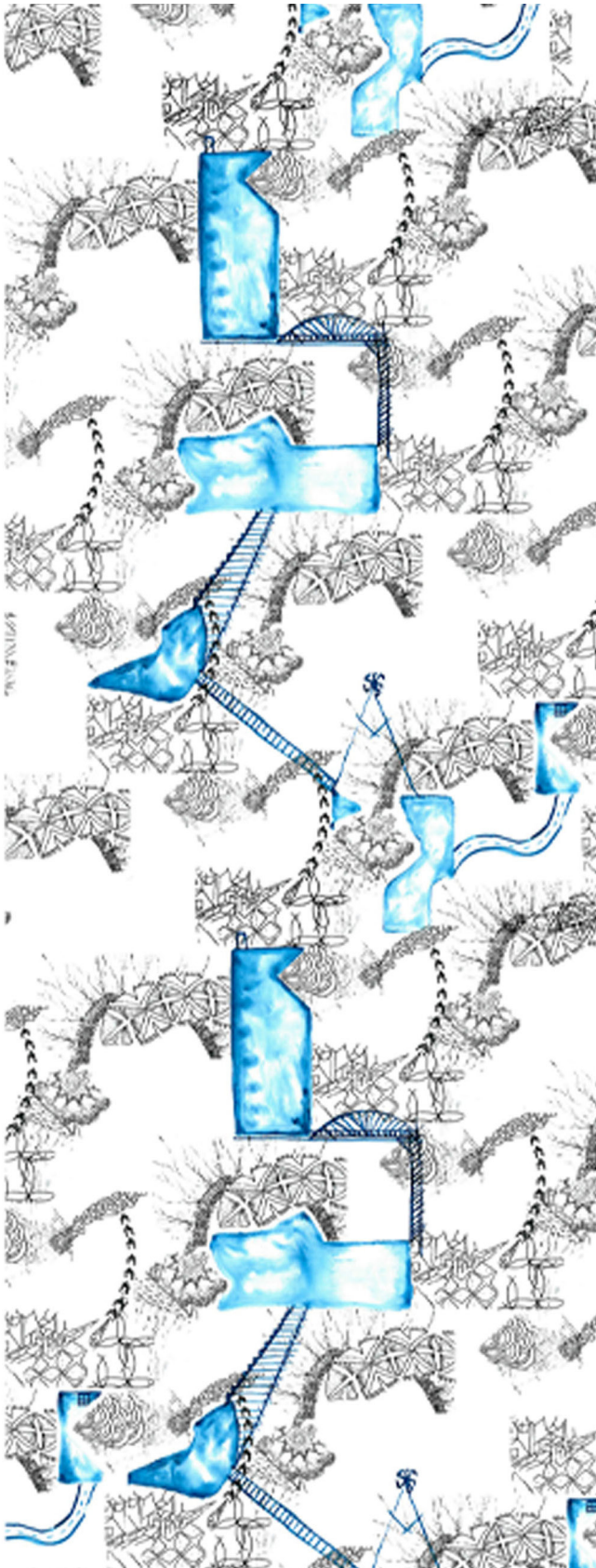


Figure 19. Author's work, *Pattern*, (2014).

Figure 20. David Rutledge, *Rosie Barkus - Textile Prints*, Torres Strait History and Culture, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 2011., (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2012).

Figure 21. Rosie Barkus, *Rosie Barkus Was Featured in an Article in the Booklet "Australia in Brief Published by the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, Canberra Act,"* (Queensland, Australia: <http://www.rosieware-designs.com>, 2010).Brisbane, October 2011., (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2012).

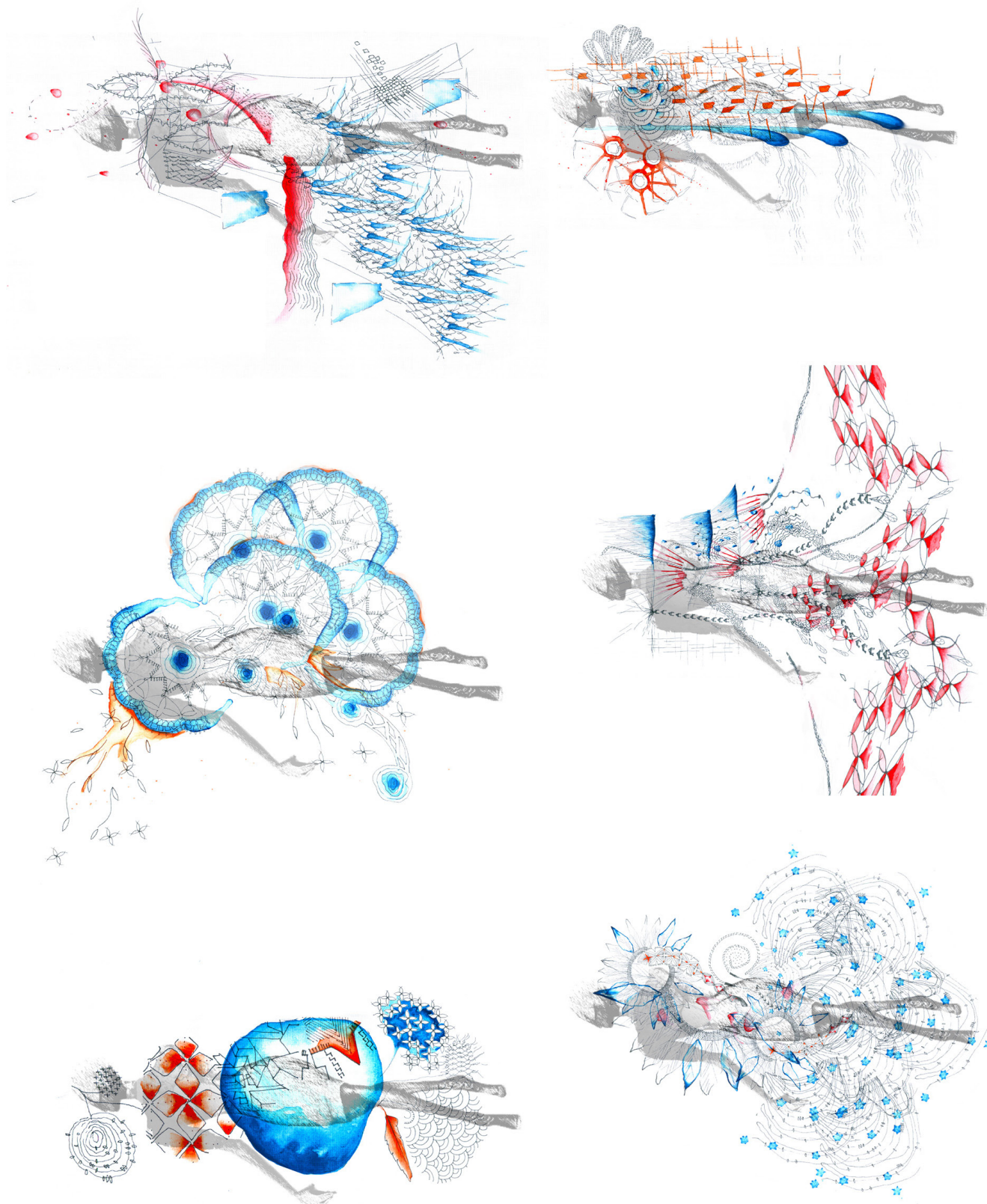
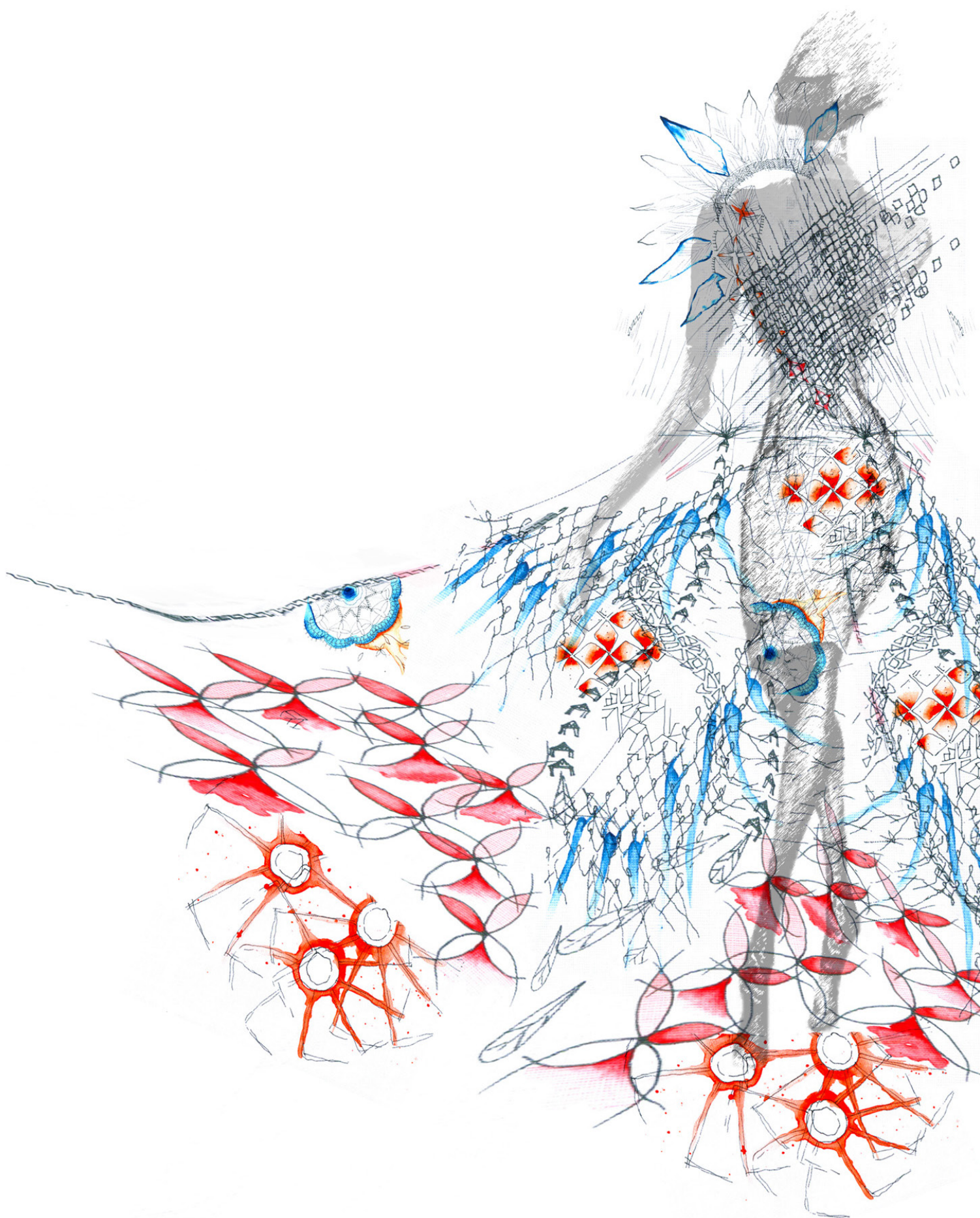
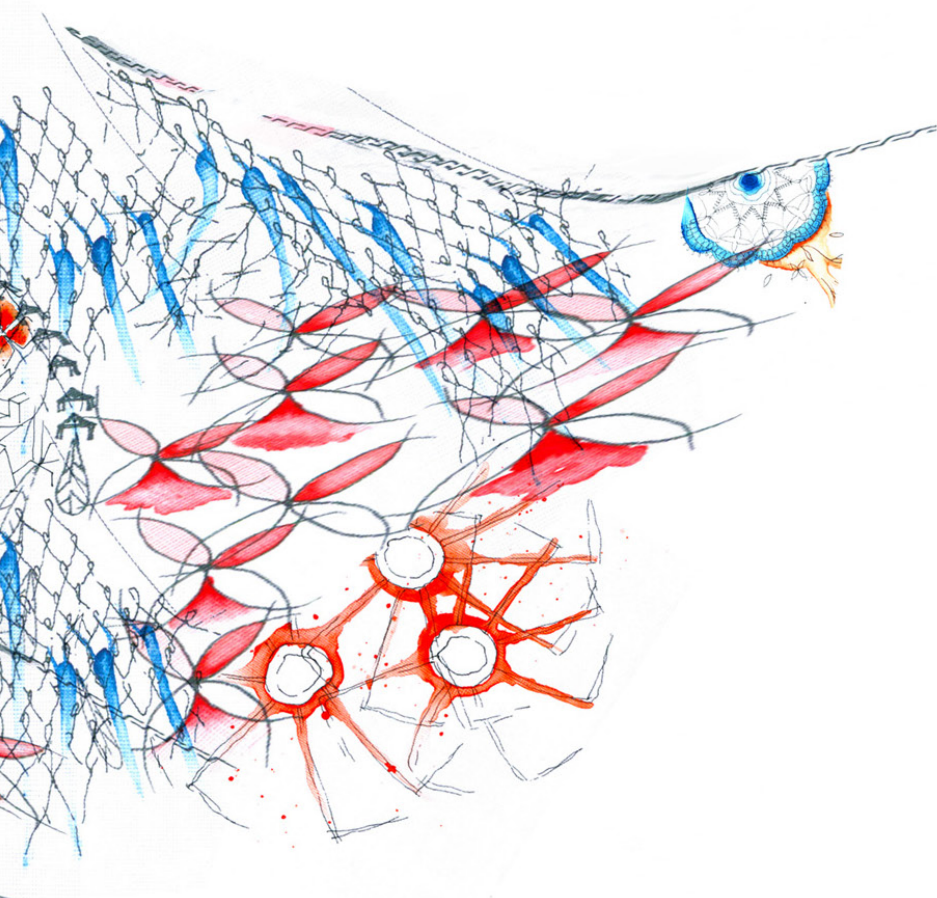


Figure 22. Author's work, *Dress Concepts / Sketches*, (2014).







CHAPTER THREE

In the previous chapter I introduced a ring that was given to me by my sister and I discussed the importance of my culture being mediated through family members in particular the women in my family who are strong practitioners of Papua New Guinean and Torres Strait Islander culture. I chose to look at the *sik* as a culturally appropriate dance machine for women. My expectation was to craft and make a *sik* so it would assist in the story telling performance for the final work.

Whilst gathering information about the *sik* dance machine, I discovered that my explorations and drawings led to making a patterned cloth. The fabric design soon transformed into the desire to make a dress that would embody the patterns of these cultural mediators in my narrative. Inspired by contemporary installation artist Ani O'Niell's installation work titled '*Mu'u Mu'u Mama*' (1995) I wanted to make my dress to exaggerate my body in space, to move and measure every step like a 'dress dance machine'.³⁷ (Fig. 24)

Shortly after my explorations I spoke with my mother on the progress of my project and informed her of my intentions to make a dress. I told her that I wanted to make a dress that was significant to Torres Strait Island women but also worn during cultural performances. My mother sent me a dress that belonged to my Aunt Mary. It was an *ilan* dress styled like the Mother Hubbard dress that missionaries introduced to the Torres Strait Islands during early colonisation. In this chapter I will talk about the making of my *ilan* dress and the performative aspect of the dress as object. I will also talk about returning to my mother's home in Fiji to make and perform the dress.

My mother, aunts, sisters and daughters all helped in the making of the *ilan* dress and they performed in the completed object. My journey back to Fiji to make and perform the dress is documented and shared as a process of unfolding cultural identity.

Figure 24. *Mu'u Mu'u Mama*, Ani O'Niell, 1995. Priscilla Pitts, *The Body*, in *Contemporary New Zealand Sculpture: Themes and Issues* (Auckland: David Bateman Ltd, 1998).

37 Priscilla Pitts, "The Body," in *Contemporary New Zealand Sculpture: Themes and Issues* (Auckland: David Bateman Ltd, 1998). p41.

ILAN DRESS

Up until now my dress design had moved into making the dress pattern at 1:1 scale. (Fig. 25) In support of the dress making process I looked at other precedent. I explored the context in which the dress was used in their work and identified what each person was trying to convey by using the dress as a medium of exploration. I began this process by looking at history of clothing and textiles in the Pacific. I discovered through anthropologist studies and explorations of the Pacific that pre-colonial Pacific people already knew the value of cloth and used cloth in rituals, adornment and as an object to be exchanged and collected.³⁸ However, the arrival of Europeans in the Pacific conveyed a significant change in clothing and textiles.³⁹

Ethnographic anthropologist Graeme Were suggests in *The Fabrication of Connections in Melanesia* that indigenous people of the Pacific did not merely conform to religious conversion but through introduced textiles new ways of making, learning and living developed.⁴⁰ Were also writes about the significance of calico in Melanesia where 'Melanesians selectively sought out printed garments of various types' which Were suggests 'implies that they were operating strategically' during the processes of exchange.⁴¹ Were discusses how Melanesians saw the fabric as a new surface to construct links to existing indigenous patterns, artifacts, traditional adornments and architecture.⁴²

During this significant change in clothing the missionaries introduced the Mother Hubbard dress as an appropriate body covering for indigenous women. (Fig. 26) Originally the dress resembled an 18th century cotton nightgown but were much shorter in length and made with tapered sleeves.⁴³ (Fig. 26) The dress has been slowly modified and now distinctively identifies which part of the Pacific the Mother Hubbard dress comes from.

38 Nicholas Thomas, "Preface," in *The Art of Clothing: A Pacific Experience*, ed. Graeme Were Susanne Küchler (London: UCL Press, 2005).px.

39 Graeme Were was a Research Associate on Graeme Were Susanne Küchler, "Introduction," *ibid.*, ed. Graeme Were Susanne Küchler: Pxxi.

40 Graeme Were was a Research associate on 'Clothing the Pacific: A Study of the Nature of Innovation' at the British Museum and his research paths are in the ethnographic study of museum collections and material culture. *Ibid.* pviii.

41 Graeme Were, "The Fabrication of Connections in Melanesia," in *Clothing as Material Culture*, ed. Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005). p172. *Ibid.* p159.

42 *Ibid.* p172.

43 Nicholas Thomas Peter Blunt, Sean Mallon, Lissant Bolton, Diedre Brown, Damien Skinner and Susanne Küchler, "Clothing and Transformations," in *Art in Oceania: A New History*, ed. Peter Blunt and Nicholas Thomas (Londo: Thames and Hudson, 2012). p226.

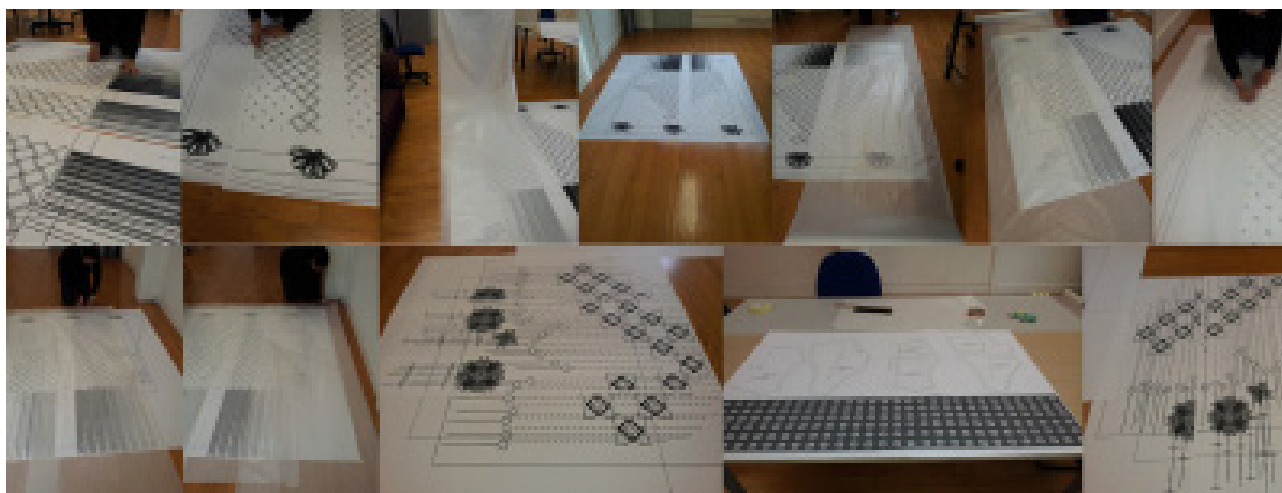


Figure 25. Author's work, *First Iteration of Dress*, (2014).

Figure 26. Wikipedia, *Tahitiennes En Robe Mission*, (1998).



Figure 27. Olive Kotoisuva, *Abere Kitty - Ilan Dresses*, (2014).

Figure 28. Jeanette Hoorn, *Island Paradise*, *Art & Australia* 39, no. 1 (2001).

Figure 30. John and Samantha, *Gab Titui 2nd Birthday Celebration*, (2006).

Figure 29. 'Mu'u Mu'u Mama' Ani O'Niell, 'Kolekesa Mahina-Tuai Ron Brownson, Albert L Refiti, Ema Tavola, Nina Tonga, *Ani O'niel*, in *Home Akl Artist of Pacific Heritage in Auckland*, ed. Clare McIntosh (Auckland, N.Z.: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki 2012).

In the Torres Strait Islands these modified Mother Hubbard dresses are called *ilan* dresses and they have a bodice, short puffed sleeves and a pleated or flowing skirt (Fig. 27). Some *ilan* dresses have a lace collar sewn in, as seen in Torres Strait island artist Ellen Jose's painting '*Guardian of My Memories*', 1998. (Fig. 28) The *ilan* dress is a celebrated motif in Jose's works and appears as an important characteristic in many of her paintings.⁴⁴

Similarly in artist Ani O'Niell's '*Mu'u Mu'u Mama*' (1995), I was interested in a dress that would highlight the patterns that represented the women in my family.⁴⁵ '*Mu'u Mu'u Mama*' (1995), consisted of three Mother Hubbard styled dresses made of white curtain material. In the original installation each dress hung in the windows of the gallery space and looked like ghostly figures. In my opinion, the dresses performed like curtains that filtered the view of the street below, affording the audience a restricted view of what lay beyond the dress. (Fig. 24) O'Niell made '*Mu'u Mu'u Mama*' (1995) to reference women in her Cook Island culture and she practiced craft skills that were taught to her by her Cook Islands grandmother.⁴⁶ I viewed O'Niell's '*Mu'u Mu'u Mama*' in Auckland Art Gallery where the three long delicate dresses hung in the gallery space.⁴⁷ (Fig. 29) The dresses swayed and danced over me like the spirits of the women O'Niell celebrated. O'Neill used the dresses to explore notions of the domestic and adornments in her own Cook Island culture.

The *ilan* dress that had been given to me once belonged to my Aunty Maria who performed at the *Gab Titui* Cultural Centre. (Fig. 30). The dress then journeyed from Torres Strait to Fiji where it was worn by my mother to a Papua New Guinean women's cultural event and then the dress was sent to me in Auckland.

RECONSTRUCTING THE ILAN DRESS

The *ilan* dress was preciously folded in a plastic bag and given to me by my brother who had returned from Fiji after visiting my mother. As I unfolded the *ilan* dress I was slightly nervous as to what I would do next. I needed to learn how to make the *ilan* dress and so I decided to deconstruct the dress and use the pattern to reconstruct my own. What started was a process of unpicking and then organising the separated parts for measuring and documenting. The reconstructed *ilan* dress was made from bleached calico and cut into parts. Initially, my idea was to be the only wearer of the dress and perform a traditional dance. This shifted to having one single dress made with all the patterns of the ring and five specific women in this project and asking other female members of my family to share the experience and perform.

44 Jeanette Hoon, "Island Paradise," *Art & Australia* 39, no. 1 (2001). p108.

45 Pitts, "The Body," p41.

46 Ibid.

47 '*Home AKL*', 2012 was an exhibition presenting works by Pacific artists, most of the artist lived in Auckland. Ani O'Niell's works was installed during this exhibition.



Figure 31. Author's image, *Cooking Area / Performance Space*, (2014).



Figure 32. Author's image, *Collective Sewing / Stitching and Sharing*, (2014).

My journey to Fiji to document the performance of the dress and reclaim my own cultural space was a highlight of this project and it is where I found great comfort in knowing that my passion for this journey and practice is based on the cultural mediations shared between the women in my family. I no longer felt constrained by cultural protocols but instead I felt a sense of belonging as I was there revisiting history, culture and cultural traditions as a means to explore my identity as a contemporary Torres Strait Island woman of multi-ethnic descent.

SITTING BY THE FIRE

I chose to use a domestic setting for the performance and included female family members in the choreography. The site for the performance was important because I chose to locate the performance in my mother's cooking area in her home. (Fig. 31).

This area is not a kitchen but one that has many layers of spatial occupation.⁴⁸ In the morning it is where we sit to put our shoes on as we leave for the day and where we sit and remove our shoes when we return home at the end of the day. On wet rainy days it is used as shelter to hang washed laundry. The area is used to prepare food; husk and scrape the coconut; use shells to scrape the skin of green bananas or peel cassava and taro. (Fig. 31) There are benches in this space and mats are layered on the floor if required for seating.

There is a *momogo* for cooking, dried coconut fronds for starting the fire and firewood. There are harvested root crops and my mother's palm trees, which she proudly grows and sells. The many fragrant plants in the yard perfume the space and the plants are indicative of the tropical climate the site belongs to.

This space held its own rituals, personal, shared rhythms and everyday practices. This space allowed me to sit and listen to stories about my culture and the histories of my ancestors. I would trace my way along these imagined paths of traditional identities, totems and discoveries to try and make sense of what I can offer to my culture. We sat in the space and hand stitched parts of the dress collectively; we practiced the dance performance and sang *Taba naba*. (Fig. 32)

48 Finnish Architect Juhani Pallasmaa writes on phenomenology and the body's role in our surroundings. Pallasmaa articulates how space can be used to measure the body by saying that: "The percept of the body and the image of the world turn into one single continuous existential experience; there is no body separate from its domicile in space, and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self. Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Body in the Centre," in *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Hoboken, NJ: Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005). p43-44.

TABA NABA



Figure 33. Author's image, *Learning the Taba Naba dance*, (2014).

'TABA NABA'

*'Taba naba naba norem,
Tugei pe neiser mi, dinghy ge nabatre,
Mi ko kei mi serer em nabawem,
Taba naba norem'.⁴⁹*

*Come let us go to the reef,
While morning low tide, let us go in the dinghy,
Let us wade to the edge of the reef,
Come let us go to the reef.⁵⁰*

⁴⁹ John Charles Singe, "The Sea," in *The Torres Strait* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1979). p139-152.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Not only do the Torres Strait Islanders have a special connection to the sea for food, totems and cultural heroes; they also value the sea as a means getting to other places – to islands, reefs and mainland. 'Taba naba' was chosen because of its familiarity and its narrative. The song talks about the sea and is a popular and lively island song written in Meriam Mir island language, Eastern Torres Strait Islands. The song is performed seated on the floor with legs crossed. The dance choreography consists of rhythmic hand movements and gesturing with the body swaying back and forth. My mother taught me 'Taba naba' when I was very young; she then went on to teach my daughters.

The performance of the 'Taba naba' began to test and spatially transform my experience and that of my daughters and sisters. My mother sat on the mats and practiced the dance movements with her daughters and grand daughters. My Aunt Maria sang, beat the drum to the lyrics of the song. My sisters and daughters asked questions about the hand gestures and why the body moved in such a way and why the song was important. Each question answered was a step in unfolding cultural identity. I used photography and video to record and mark out these explorations. (Fig. 33)

In her book *'Architecture, Animal, and Human: The Asymmetrical Condition'*, Prof Catherine Ingraham suggests that bodies occupy space so the space's meaning is contingent upon what is spatially conditioned and experienced through such occupancy.⁵¹ Ingraham writes:

*'Space can be, at the same time contingent – formed at the moment of its use, territorialised and the dissolved – homogenous for all practical purposes and at a large scale, and yet discontinuous and heterogeneous in its minute detailed operations [...]. Space can envelope bodies and objects but in order to do so, it must also depart from them – unaffected, indifferent.'*⁵²

The ilan dress is experienced through the adorned body and the spatial condition of the performative storytelling allows such occupancy to transform the gallery space. Signifying a transitional space where time and place are blurred and where memories and culture are shared.

The dress will be introduced as an object placed on a plinth and then removed to adorn my own body with the patterns and stories of the ring and five women in my family. Activated through dance and narrative the ilan will become the dress machine. (Fig. 34)

⁵¹ Catherine Ingraham, "Space: The Animal Field," in *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006). p 198-199.

⁵² Ibid.



Figure 34. Author's image, *Gallery Performance Concept*, (2014).

In a similar spectacle, *Thaiwa Dancers* (Iama/Cairns) performed during the 'The Torres Strait Islands: A Celebration 2011', exhibition in the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA)⁵³ and took the dance machines off the wall to perform with. (Fig. 35 and Fig. 36) In my understanding it was done so as to imply that once placed on the wall the dance machines remain an object, however; by removing them from the wall the object becomes a means to narrating and supporting the traditional dance it was uniquely made for and it serves its purpose as a dance machine.

In this chapter I have I discussed the importance of using the *ilan* dress in my process of inquiry and the making of my *ilan* dress. I explored the performative aspect of the dress as object, garment and dance machine and I proposed to present this at my final examination (See Appendix: A).

Figure 35. Brisbane Gallery of Modern Art, Australia, *Thaiwa Dancers* (Iama/Cairns) 1 of 2 | the Torres Strait Islands: A Celebration, (2011).

Figure 36. Linda Fairbairn, *Torres Strait Dance Machines*, (journeyjottings.com, 2011).

⁵³ Brisbane Gallery of Modern Art, Australia, "Thaiwa Dancers (Iama/Cairns) 1 of 2 | the Torres Strait Islands: A Celebration," (2011). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgQ4Nx4krj0&index=4&list=PLF8E391939DA732C6>, (accessed November 20, 2013).

My journey back to Fiji to perform the dress was documented and shared as a process of unfolding cultural identity through this process I practiced what my mother and my *Abere* and her mother before her practiced.

We were mediating our culture in a space adorned with rich stories and songs and dance and as a result I unfolded my cultural space by actively engaging in traditional rituals and practices. This caused a ripple effect in the spatial atmosphere for my younger sisters and daughters and they were sustaining a cultural identity that belonged to them and felt proud to feel a descendant of the Torres Strait Islands. (Fig. 37).



Figure 37. Performing the *Tabanaba* in the *ilan* dress. My mother - Olive, sisters - Ginate and Maryann and daughters Angelle and Jolenna. Author's image, *Unfolding Cultural Identity*, (2014).



CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION: ADORNING SHARED SPACES

*'Shared studio space adorned with our stories, academic literature and drawing.
In the studio space I shared with masters students and supervisors.
We shared stories, we read and we articulated our stories in
drawings and large format printing.
This process was about my cultural identity.
Shared studio space was adorned with OUR stories.*

*Shared domestic space adorned with her stories, songs and dance.
In the domestic space I shared with my family, my mother, aunty, sisters and my own
daughters.
We shared stories, we sang and danced as we stitched our stories onto fabric.
This process was about my cultural mediators and unfolding cultural identity.
Shared domestic space was adorned with HER stories.'*

*Shared gallery space adorned with my story, ilan dress and
performance.
In the gallery space I will share with my audience, my examiners and my supporters.
I will share stories, I will wear my ilan dress and I will perform the stories through
dance.
This process is about my ilan dress and unfolding cultural space.
Shared gallery space will be adorned with MY story.'*⁵⁴

This project asked 'how can explorations of Torres Strait Island storytelling through embodied performance support the design of a performative object – the ilan dress?' The scope of this research was limited to the exploration of the ilan dress of Torres Strait Island women and its performativity as an object. I discovered through this research and self-reflexive process that the study of cultural mediators, unfolding cultural identity and cultural space to be one of the most meaningful experiences of my academic journey. I began this project and found many restrictions placed on my research and in the end I was rewarded with a deeper and more meaningful appreciation of my own culture.

I located the importance of what my cultural identity consisted of and discovered constraints revealed through cultural protocols and restrictions. These discoveries stirred a desire in me to expand my understanding and further explore the stories passed down to me from the women in my family. In my journey to unfold my own cultural identity, a family ring was given to me by my sister. This significant turning point strengthened a connection to the five important women in my life specifically my grandmothers. I was interested in the memories contained within this tiny object and I was intrigued by the spatial transactions that the ring offered.

My interests in how an object could be both an adornment and also performa-

⁵⁴ Author's work, *Adorning Shared Space*, 2014.

tive led to the exploration of the *sik*, often used in Torres Island Strait performances. Patterned cloth and the construction of my own dress embodied the ring and women in my story. I completed the dress in Fiji Islands with my mother, aunty, sisters and my own daughters. In the beginning of this research project the family ring symbolised my grandmothers – it was a reminder of the past as equally the dress and the women who performed in it, represent my future.

The multi-layered domestic space of my childhood became a re-occurring theme in my previous works. In this research project it became a means to explore the spatial conditions of the my mother's cooking area. In my youth I wore a lap-lap in my home as a sign of respect not only to my mother's family but also for the space I occupied. The lap-lap became an allegory for the spatial rituals I performed. I clothed myself in the domestic space of my mother's cooking area and the patterns on the dress to tell the stories of my family members.

In summation, this research was meaningful and useful not only to me but also to my family. During my stay in Fiji Islands, my mother told me that I reminded her of my *Abere*. I was slightly bemused by my mother's comment until I noticed that I was sitting on a hand woven mat made from *pandanus* leaves, stitching the *ilan* dress and sharing with my family what I was doing and why it was important to me and also important to them. I was sharing my stories with my daughters. This research offered me the conviction to position myself with confidence as a spatial practitioner and researcher of mixed race Torres Strait Island woman. The processes used in this project were significant in setting a foundation for further research and study. My self-reflective process does not end with a definitive conclusion about the outcome of the research but rather with possibilities for enhancing my interest in cultural rituals and spaces, specifically the multi-layered domestic space of my own heritage.

I realised that I have been academically influenced by the writings of male scholars within the field of Pacific studies. The voices of these men were strong and my voice was lost. This led to the process of developing a research based on highlighting the gender roles in societies outside of the Western view. I hope to form a scholarly conversation around Pacific studies with regard to the domestic culture and most importantly iterate the value of finding your voice in issues that view the researcher as both 'insider' and 'other'. I entered this conversation by listening, exploring and locating myself as a spatial practitioner, researcher and mixed race Torres Strait Island woman I now offer my research to the conversa-



tion and I will step back to allow the conversation to continue.

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APPENDIX A:

*IMAGES OF FINAL EXAMINATION / EXHIBITION /
PERFORMANCE*















ADDENDUM



Fig 1.



Fig 2.

Fig 1. and Fig 2. Author's Photograph. Introductory Images on gallery wall - the display of Process and working drawings, Process of de-construction and re-construction of *ilan* dress, Process of pattern exploration, 2014.

ADDENDUM

Addendum to the Adorning Shared Spaces Exegesis
November 2014

Adorning Shared Spaces: self-reflexive approach to crafting the performative object - the ilan dress

Auckland University of Technology, 2014.

There was four weeks between the submissions of my exegesis on the 6th of November 2014 to my examination on the 4th of December 2014. (Appendix A) I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on what was proposed in the exegesis before the final examination and what eventuated during the four week process of gallery layout, editing of the moving image and the final performance. There are three main themes that I wish to discuss including 'Cultural and identity', 'Cultural mediators and unfolding cultural identity' and 'Ilan dress and unfolding cultural space: *taba naba*'.

I. CULTURE AND IDENTITY

In my exegesis it was proposed that I would perform the *Taba Naba* with a projected image of my family members performing behind me. However, I did not anticipate that placing my drawings and images within the gallery space would be as testing and time consuming as it turned out to be. Each time I placed a set of images up on the gallery wall I would sit quietly in the space and allow the work to either tell the story or I would receive feedback from supervisors and invited critics offering guidance and direction as to how best to position my images and work. My main concern was with regard to the placing of images of my family respectfully and at the same time allowing the narrative of the work to be read by the audience. I wanted my drawings, work and images to enhance the gestural movements of the words, song and dance in my performance.

I positioned the images, drawings and dress patterns on the wall as I introduced myself and the project. (Fig 1 and Fig 2) I then spoke about the first part of my research and explorations. This part of the presentation gave me the space to talk about the constraints I encountered and the methods I used to navigate beyond these constraints. The placement of the introductory images allowed for the examiners and viewers to follow the narrative and map out the paths taken from drawings, concepts, patterns to cloth, dress pattern and dress iterations.

2. CULTURAL MEDIATORS AND UNFOLDING CULTURAL IDENTITY

After introducing the *ilan* dress I moved across the room and turned the audience view to the second wall of images and the *ilan* dress placed on the mannequin. (Fig 3) The images on the wall talked about the journey back to Fiji to make the *ilan* dress and the collective support I got from my family members to make and complete the dress and also practice and perform the *Taba Naba* dance. (Fig 4) As I described the outcomes of this stage of the research I embraced the notion that I had truthfully found my voice in this research and I was proud of the insights that were revealed to me through the journey of unfolding my cultural identity as a Torres Strait Islander. It is one thing to share my research in the written exegesis, but to share it to a live audience and hear your own voice echoing in the gallery space about research that I am passionate about is such a moving experience.

I concluded this part of the presentation with an introduction to the performance and directed the audience to sit on the mats while I performed the *Taba Naba* with my mother, sisters and my daughters. It was at this stage that I removed the *ilan* dress from the mannequin and adorned myself with the patterns of the women and cultural mediators within my family. I moved slowly to the mats and in the background played the audio of my Aunty Maria singing *Taba Naba* and beating the *gama* (drum). As the audience moved with me they were greeted by the photographs of the five performers in my choreography. (Fig 5)



Fig 3. Author's photograph. The final *ilan* dress is on display beside images documenting the journey back to Fiji, 2014.



Fig 4. Author's photograph. Images on wall about the journey back to Fiji to make the *ilan* dress and the collective support I got from my family members, 2014.



Fig 5. Author's photograph. Images of female family members performing the *Tabu Naba* dance placed on wall with mats placed on the floor – Images of Mother; sisters and my daughters (Olive, Maryann, Ginat, Angelle and Olive), 2014.

3. ILAN DRESS AND UNFOLDING CULTURAL SPACE: TABA NABA

During my slow walk to the mat - the moving image projected on the wall was playing and the performers in the video were still and waiting for me to join them. (Fig 6) As I sat on the mats, the performance began and we all danced to *Taba Naba*. (Fig 7) The editing of the videos and voice recording was achieved through much editing and seeking advice on layout, framing and length of footage. I needed to address the issues of the time and space taken to complete this project. I took the five separate recordings of my mother, sisters and my daughters and placed them beside each other to form a single row of performers. As the performers are placed side by side the viewer is made aware that throughout the performance hand gestures and body movements are not synchronised and each performer moves to their own pace of the song. There is a pause in some movements and at other times there is a fast paced action. The viewer can also see that the fire lit in the *momogo* (fireplace) is either fully ablaze, smoking or turning to charcoal – this too is another indication of the time being played out in the moving image. The projector was placed on the floor; the examiners and audience were asked to sit on the mats while I performed the seated dance. (Fig 8) This was suggestive of the process of this project as many of the answers were gathered sitting respectfully and listening to the stories, songs and dances that began this work.

My cultural identity continues to grow – and it should. I have explored where I could locate my research and what I could do as a woman of multi-ethnic descent. I began to understand that my identity was in a constant flux and my culture was inherently embodied in my identity. I hope to further examine my findings and even expand upon my explorations to look in detail at the inhabitation of the multi-layered domestic space of my culture.



Fig 6. Author's photograph. Projected moving image - performers in the video were still and waiting for me to join them. (Olive, Maryann, Ginate, Angelle and Olive), 2014.



Fig 7. Author's photograph. Performing the *Taba Naba* - the *ilan* dress as 'dance machine', 2014.



Fig 8. Author's photograph. Examiners and audience were on the mats/floor while I performed the seated dance, 2014.

