

Tama Samoa, Tama Aotearoa

*Fāgogo, Talanoa, Vā, Photography, and the
diasporic Samoan reference in Aotearoa.*

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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, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma or a university or institution of higher learning.

Signed

Raymond Sagapolutele

11th October 2018

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I would like to dedicate this research to my late parents, Faiaiulu Puta Sagapolutele and Ruta Sagapolutele. Without their sacrifice, dedication and alofa to our aiga we would have nothing. I love and miss you.

Finally, Maria, **σ'αγαπώ**.

Abstract

This project takes the Samoan practice of *Fāgogo* (storytelling) as a central approach and frames it using the contexts of *Talanoa* (conversation), *Vā* (relational space) and photographic self-portraiture. My research questions what is it to be diasporic Samoan in Aotearoa? My own diasporic experiences provide the context and narrative for *Fāgogo*. My research explores through photographic self-portraiture, how this may challenge and evolve *Talanoa* and *Vā*. Through this process, I examine how these Samoan concepts are shaped and understood through my lived experience outside of Samoa and within Aotearoa as part of the diaspora.

Introduction

The research undertaken in this thesis develops photographic methods that reflect on and respond to questions that arise from what it is to be diasporic Samoan in Aotearoa? Through my photographic practice, I utilise the Samoan concept of *Fāgogo*, a culturally valued practice of telling fairy tales by the elderly to the young to help them sleep at night. It is the process of weaning, of nurturing, of sharing stories, values, rituals, beliefs, practices, and language (Efi 2018, 95). My photographs represent different time periods of my life and utilise the Samoan concepts of *Vā* and *Talanoa*. These concepts structure my approach to forming a response to my research question of ‘what is it to be diasporic Samoan in Aotearoa?’

In the first chapter of this exegesis, I discuss how the *Vā*, a relational space, is presented within my photographic work. I filter this discussion through the writings of Albert Wendt, *Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body* (1999), Albert Refiti, *Mavae and Tofīga* (2014), Melanie Anae, *Teu le Vā, A Samoan Perspective* (2010), Karlo Mila, *Vā centered Social Work* (2006), Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi Tupuola Tufuga Efi, *Su’esu’e Manogi* (2009), Hufunga Okusitino Mahina, *Tā, Vā and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality and Idigineity* (2010), and the (2016) paper *A Body of VA’rt* by Rosanna Raymond. I utilise this writing to establish the foundation of the philosophy that forms my vision of the *Vā* within my work.

I discuss the work of photographers and painters, specifically Lisa Reihana, *Ngā Hau e Whā* (2010), Greg Semu, *Crucifixion of Christ with Tatau* (1999), Mark Adams, *Mr Salati Fiu* (1978), Christine Webster, *Black Carnival* (1993-1997), Omar Victor Diop, *Diaspora Self-Portraits* (2014), Pati Solomona Tyrell, *Fāgogo* (2017), Yuki Kihara, *Velvet Dreams* (2014), Andy Leleisi’uao and Michel Tuffrey, *Tianagi* (1989). I examine and compare how my methodology situates itself with the themes and contexts these artists present in their work by focusing on portraiture.

In the second chapter, I consider the context of diaspora, as it situates itself within Aotearoa and among Pacific Island communities. I refer to the writing of Epeli Hau’ofa, *Ocean in Us* (1994), Albert Wendt, *Towards a New Oceania* (1976), Apo Aporosa, *The New Kava User: Diasporic identity formation in reverse* (2015), Deborah Colleen Gough, *Cultural Transformation and Modernity: A Samoan Case Study* and Lana Lopesi’s book *False Divides* (2018). Here I discuss the influence of growing up in Aotearoa as the son of Samoan migrants. I expand on how interactions between Pacific and European cultures effect how I see and communicate through my photographic practice.

In the last chapter, I discuss the concepts of *Fāgogo* and *Talanoa* alongside the work of John Vea, specifically his Masters exegesis, *The Emic Avenue: Art Through Talanoa* (2015). I define and discuss each of these concepts along with how they function within the narratives of my work. I discuss how the self-portraits I produce with this research, their role as place markers in time, how they represent moments of my lived experiences in Aotearoa, and how this relates to my diasporic Samoan community. *Fāgogo* and *Talanoa* are key to the creation and execution of the work, without the discussion and narrative as well as the intent of the work to add to the identity of the diasporic Samoan community these will just be photographs of me looking at a camera.

Black and the *Vā*

Within my practice, I utilise black as a conduit between myself as the artist and the *Vā* as a relational space. This relational space informs the narrative of my *Fāgogo* and creates a space for *Talanoa* between the work, myself, my *aiga* (family), my practice, and viewers. Black is predominant in my images and it is the embodiment of the *Vā*, black sits in the background, and it is black that helps to center centre my portrait. It is not empty space in the image, it is *the* space where genealogical connections are confirmed, ideas are nurtured, knowledge is gained, *Talanoa* engaged, and time is conceptualised as a narrative conduit to connect viewers to my life experiences

Important to the Samoan view of reality is the Samoan concept of *Vā* or *Wa* in Māori and Japanese. *Vā* is the space between, the betweenness, not the empty space, not space that separates, but the space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships and the contexts change. A well-known Samoan expression is “Ia teu le *Vā*” – cherish, nurse, care for the *Vā*, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group unit more than individualism, that perceive the individual persons or creature, or thing in terms of group, in terms of *Vā*, relationships (Wendt 1999, 402).

I came across writer Albert Wendt’s analysis of *Vā* well after I began my photographic self-portraiture work. However, upon reading it, I was struck by how familiar it felt in relation to how I conduct myself as an artist and within my own *aiga* (family). Within my work, I create self-portraits that place myself as the subject at the center of the composition surrounded by a background of black. The *Vā* as a relational space is a concept I was vaguely familiar with; this vagueness is a result of me disconnecting from *Fa’a Samoa* (the Samoan way) in my early twenties. The relational space of *Vā*, along with its ability to nurture and to give meaning to my *Fāgogo* is important within my research in two ways. Firstly, through my photographic practice I try to understand where and how I fit within Aotearoa as a diasporic Samoan. Having the *Vā* concept, a context that allows me to connect my heritage and my birthplace gives me the safety and confidence to explore my life and present this within my practice. Secondly, I share experiences, *Fāgogo*, these connect to Aotearoa and my Samoan community, as the subject and artist I have control and agency.

The familial, cultural and social relationships I nurture within my work, are connected by this *Vā* across time, which includes past, present, and future. In this, it is an intersection of form and function. This view of the *Vā* is influenced in part by the *Tā-Vā* school of thought as per Tongan academic Hūfunga ‘Okusitino Māhina. Mahina describes *Tā-Vā* theory as a time and space theory of reality

based on Moana concepts and practices of *Tā* (time) and *Vā* (space). This thinking relates to my *Fāgogo* method of narrative and how I create the narrative bones that support the body of my image. Specifically, Mahina perceives time and space as:

The past has stood the test of time and space, and it must, therefore, be placed in front of people as a guidance in the present, and because the future has yet to happen, it must be placed to the back or behind people in the present, where both past and future are symmetrically negotiated in the process. (Māhina 2010, 170).

This concept of time and space offers another dimension to the established concept of *Vā* that Wendt referred to as relational space. The relational space that is the *Vā* now, for me, has the ability to be present in work I created around events as they affect me now. The *Vā* is a continuum, it is present in work that references events that have happened in my past and this *Vā* will continue to be present in my work in the future.

There is a likeness of the blackness in the work of Christine Webster's *Black Carnival* (1993-1996) (see installation image, figure 1) is similar to the figures in my work. In her photographs, the backdrops create striking portrait images. Black dominates and frames the sitter in her images but this black element is not a relational space. Within Webster's work the black is secondary to the narrative and the connection formed between her sitter and the viewer. With Cibachrome images the print is highly reflective, this reflection pulls the viewer in as part of the participants in the work. Her black is compositional and vital to the overall visceral effect of her portraiture.

Prior to commencing this research I produced a series of portraits (2015 – ongoing) that, documented my Pacific diasporic generation as well as Urban Māori who also shared similar stories relating to cultural disconnection. I created a montage of several of the sitters and my compositions employed multiple layers that were dominated by black that formed the spaces between the portrait subjects (see *VaNimoNimo* figure 2). This was the progenitor of the concept of black as the *Vā* within my present research. It is in here that I could see the application the concept of *Vā*, or as Wendt puts it, the space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that is-all.

It is here that the *Vā* - the black - becomes a relational space that is inclusive of Pacific cultures and not just within the context of my Samoan heritage but those islands connected to the Pacific Ocean. Karlo Mila states in her 2006 paper that the *Vā* has commonalities among Pacific people (Mila-Schaaf, 2006,9). This commonality allows for a shared understanding of the concept of *Vā* that takes from Samoan and Tongan contexts. This concept of shared understanding gives me the comfort of

being able to create work that is not purely Samoan in tradition, but work that is inclusive of my lived experience outside of Samoa.

With all of this in mind, how does the work I create keep a foot in one culture that is Samoan and another that is firmly Aotearoan? For some guidance in this I refer to theorist Albert Refiti who states:

To make art in a Samoan context or in a wider Pacific context is always a relational act that activates some aspect of the *Vā* relationships. It is an act of respect (between us/this place/who-in-you that is more-than-you/and a future to come); it is property of what is proper; the possession to be cherished to protect and to actively attend to. This is best described by the Samoan motto '*Ia teu le Vā*' (A. L. Refiti 2008, 99).

To expand this idea into my work and the black I represent as the *Vā* I look to theorist Melanie Anae's 2010 paper that offered the '*teu le Vā*' model as an indigenous methodology. Anae states that if one views all reciprocal relationships with others as sacred, then, the relationship will be more valued and nurtured more closely (Anae 2010, 13). Anae also refers to *Vā fealoa'i* (spaces between relational arrangements) and *Vā tapuia* (sacred spaces of relational arrangements) which work in connection with *teu le Vā* in the nurturing of good relationships. In my photographic work I can apply this to the black; the black in my work encompasses this trinity of Samoan concepts. Within this nurturing space my *Fāgogo* methodology can be tended to and evolved through images that sit confidently within a context carefully considered from my Samoan heritage and Aotearoan upbringing.

When it comes to work by artists that occupy dual cultural spaces I refer to the work of artist and curator Rosanna Raymond, who states:

I fabricate, articulate, activate, expanding the concept of va, by creating temporal and spatial connections through poetry, performance, body adornment, film, and photography. (Raymond 2016, 13).

Raymond references the *Vā* in her work as space activated by people, binding and forming reciprocal relationships. Within my work, I reference the black as the body that is the space that invites reciprocal relationships. I reference Raymond in this as her work evolves the concept of *Vā* in that her physical body, in my opinion, sits central to the narrative of her work. Her body becomes the conduit within the relational space that informs the narrative. When Raymond presented a paper at *Ka Haka! Empowering Performance – Māori and Indigenous Performance Studies Symposium* in 2016, here she discussed the activation of *Tā-Vā* within her own practice to demonstrate the power of the body as a vehicle to create works of *Vā* 'rt.

In the traditional art of Samoan *tatau* (tattooing), bodies are marked with black lines that denote status and responsibility. I make this reference to bring the discussion back to Wendt and his essay on the post-colonial body, he asserts that the body is ‘becoming’, defining itself and making room for itself alongside other bodies. He also refers to the body as a *blend*, not a hybrid (Wendt, 1999,410). I am utilising the black as a *blended* method to represent the *Vā*, it is not empty space, or the photographic concept of an absence of light. It is through this relational space that I enact *Fāgogo* to give my work a voice.

In discussing this chapter with my cousin, Vaimala Urale, there was an ease with which we understood concepts of *Vā* as relational space and the presence of black that related to my work. Knowing what this work meant to my practice she wished me well by saying *Good luck in the Anivā Uliuli* (black of space). A simple turn of phrase that seemed so common place in its use but with the added knowledge and weight of scholarship points to the stars and space as the ultimate embodiment of relational space — a space that is also reflected at night in our Pacific Ocean.



Figure 1 Black Carnival, 1993 - 1997 Installation view, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, 1996



Figure 2. VaNimoNimo 2015, digital collage

Black and the Self-Portrait

This chapter examines the role of portraiture within my research, by focusing on the early influences on my way of viewing portrait photography and how this works to bridge the cultural ideologies of Samoa, religious, familial and my context as a Samoan growing up in Aotearoa. This discussion leads into an analysis of the artists that influenced my research through their use of narrative. I also touch on the necessity of examining the role of agency in creating my work which is founded in my indigenous cultural context.

The earliest portraits of me are from the 1970s are taken with my mother Ruta Sagaploutele nee Reuelu. They represent a time before my brothers and my sister and time after my mother and I separated from my birth father and before I got to know the man that raised me, and I would come to see as my father. Those early portraits taken by friends and family are mine, they are my connection and they are my relationship to my *aiga*. These early representations of my younger days are vital in shaping the narrative that would inform my *Fāgogo*. From these images, I would build the context around my diasporic upbringing in Aotearoa. In contemplating the form of my work I find that the words of Tui Atua resonate.

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi states:

Samoans believe that through *moe manatunantu* and *anapogi* (i.e. practices of abstinence, meditation, and prayer), the soul is fed. Both invite self-reflection and re-assessment, not only of the contexts of today but of yesterday and tomorrow. (Efi 2018, 173).

I find this gels with my method of self-reflection, the act of looking back on events in my life to build the framework *Fāgogo* sits on. The re-assessment in relation to my recalled memories is a result of being '*older and wiser*', I know more about events surrounding my *aiga* through *Talanoa* with other *aiga* members. I can now see how this research adds to the narrative of the diasporic Samoan community. My awareness of the bigger picture requires respect, responsibility, and care when used to shape my narrative. On this, I found the words of Albert Wendt's in his essay on the post-colonial body with reference to *Vā* central, when he asserts,

Samoan expression is "Ia teu le *Vā*" – cherish, nurse, care for the *Vā*, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group unit more than individualism, that perceive the individual persons or creature, or thing in terms of group, in terms of *Vā*, relationships. (Wendt 1999, 402).

One of the earliest images of a Samoan body as a work of art that I can recall seeing was *Tianigi* (1989)(fig3) by Michel Tuffrey. It was part of a graduate show at Samoa house and depicted a Samoan Jesus Christ with a *pe'a*, the traditional male tattoo splayed across his crucified torso. Beside him are the bodies of two others, one male again with the *pe'a* and female figure wearing *malu*, the traditional female tattoo, which marks her thighs. All three figures are framed by black. This appropriation of Christian imagery and reconstitution with Samoan motifs by an artist from my generation struck a chord with me, I read it as a decolonisation of religion in its affirmation of Pacific identity. This is a diasporic approach to religious iconography that would potentially be frowned upon by conservative Samoan parents. I saw this image repeated a decade later in *Crucifixion of Christ with Tatau, A Classical Study* (1999) (fig4) by Greg Semu. This staged work that centered on Semu as Christ, complete with *pe'a*, evolves what Tuffrey had created in 1989. It places an actual Samoan in the role of Messiah, as opposed to the depiction of a stylised figure with Samoan iconography that was Tuffrey's work.

Art and culture theorist Caroline Vercoe makes the comparison between Tuffrey and Semu stating that they both rework and blend cultural and historical representations (Vercoe 2017, 138). Greg Semu utilises self-portraiture to place himself at the center of many of his images, his *pe'a* often features predominantly in what curator Ron Brownson refers to as 'Semu as a body transformed, visually, culturally, spiritually' (S. & Mallon 2018, 162). This ability to utilise the body as a conduit to the narrative, a body that belongs to the artist, speaks to me of the honouring of indigenous agency. I find Semu's *Self-Portrait with pe'a, Basque Road, Newton Gully* (1995), *Self-portrait with pe'a, Sentinel Road, Herne Bay* (2012) and *Earning My Stripes* (2015) effective as they focus on the relationship between himself, his culture and himself as an element of Samoan culture, the *sogā'imiti* (tattooed man). The black of his ink lends itself naturally to the narrative and to the photography, an interplay between the indigenous and contemporary photographic portrayal of *pe'a*.

In my examination and execution of the diasporic approach to my photographic art, I have looked at the practice of African photographer Omar Victor Diop. His series *Diaspora* (2014), where he places himself at the center of the images, examines identity politics, and agency in work that explores relationships between Africa and Europe. I found commonality in the intent and thematic staging that features in this work. Diop's use of classical troupes in European art to depict notable historic African figures helps to convey the feeling of otherness that comes from diasporic communities being situated in a land that is not their own. This is a narrative context I explore in *The Only Time* (2016) (fig5) which is an exploration of the disconnection I have with *Fa'aSamoa* (the Samoan way). In this work, I place myself in traditional Samoan formal dress, a style of clothing I do not normally associate with or wear in my diasporic lifestyle. The work comments on my need to address my heritage with

clothing associated with Samoan custom but I do so only because the occasion demands it. The occasions in question are the funerals of my parents, and White Sunday as a participant with little choice during my youth. The work identifies me directly in the image as Samoan but the internal politics at play are grounded in the desire to not be seen in clothing that acknowledges two conflicts, the passing of my parents, and my resentment of the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa.

The work of Tuffery, Semu, and Diop as diasporic creatives offer me insight and reflection on narratives I shape in my research. In examining how they contextualise their position in society and how they reframe this from the inside as outsiders I find a connection. There is an agency in their work that I respond to, the narrative applied through the context of their experiences and conveyed through their work.

The black that I wrap my self-portraits in, the *Vā* of my work, occupies large areas of space. There are potential comparisons between my work and Christine Webster and in particular to her *Black Carnival* (1993 - 1997). Lisa Reihana's *Native Portraits* (1997) and her laser etched *Granite Portraits* (2003) utilise this convention of heavy black in the background, with Reihana's work I am drawn to her use of these images as embodiments of memory, a way to represent her *whakapapa* (genealogy) and a process that claims agency.

The case could also be made that similarities also exist with the work of Yuki Kihara with her series *Faleaitu: House of Spirits* (2003) and *Vavau: Tales of Ancient Samoa* (2004) and later, her video work *Siva in Motion* (2012). Pati Solomona Tyrell, *Fāgogo* (2016) continues this approach.

In the work of these four the artists, I see more in common with the practices of Reihana, Kihara, and Tyrell with regards to our heritage connection as people of the Pacific. In the case of Tyrell though there is a kinship not only in the fact that the title of his work, *Fāgogo*, is the methodology I apply to my own. It is in the execution of work that looks to address the diasporic challenges of identity and agency.

There are also comparisons that could be made of my work to the tiki lounge aesthetic of velvet paintings, the infamous 'dusky maidens' that served as objects of Western male erotic fantasy and fascination. The process by which these were painted come to light in the Sima Urale directed film *Velvet Dreams* (1999). Painted in reverse on a black velvet background the image of scantily clad Pacific women are exploitative. Urale explains that in the making of this film she, in effect, flipped the narrative in that she makes the European man who painted Pacific women central, effectively moving the focus away from the maiden and firmly back on the male protagonist. (Screentalk 2008)

My black, that is the black that shrouds my portraiture sits on my shoulders, stands by my side and comforts me with anonymity. The black I utilise is an element I see as ‘living’, living as *Vā* and living in that it supports my self-portrait as a relational element to bind the stories I weave around my lived experiences.

Self Aware – Raymond Sagapolutele (2018)

*In the silence I find my home,
It is a cloak that sits across my shoulders,
It is a warm hug that lingers,
It is a smile, half-formed and fully sentimental,
It is my heart-paused holding the beat,
A BLACK reflecting my life,*

Silent.

Smile.



Figure 4. *Crucifixion of Christ with Tatau, A Classical Study* 1999.



Figure 3. Tianagi ,1989, Woodcut on flax paper, 760mm x 560mm

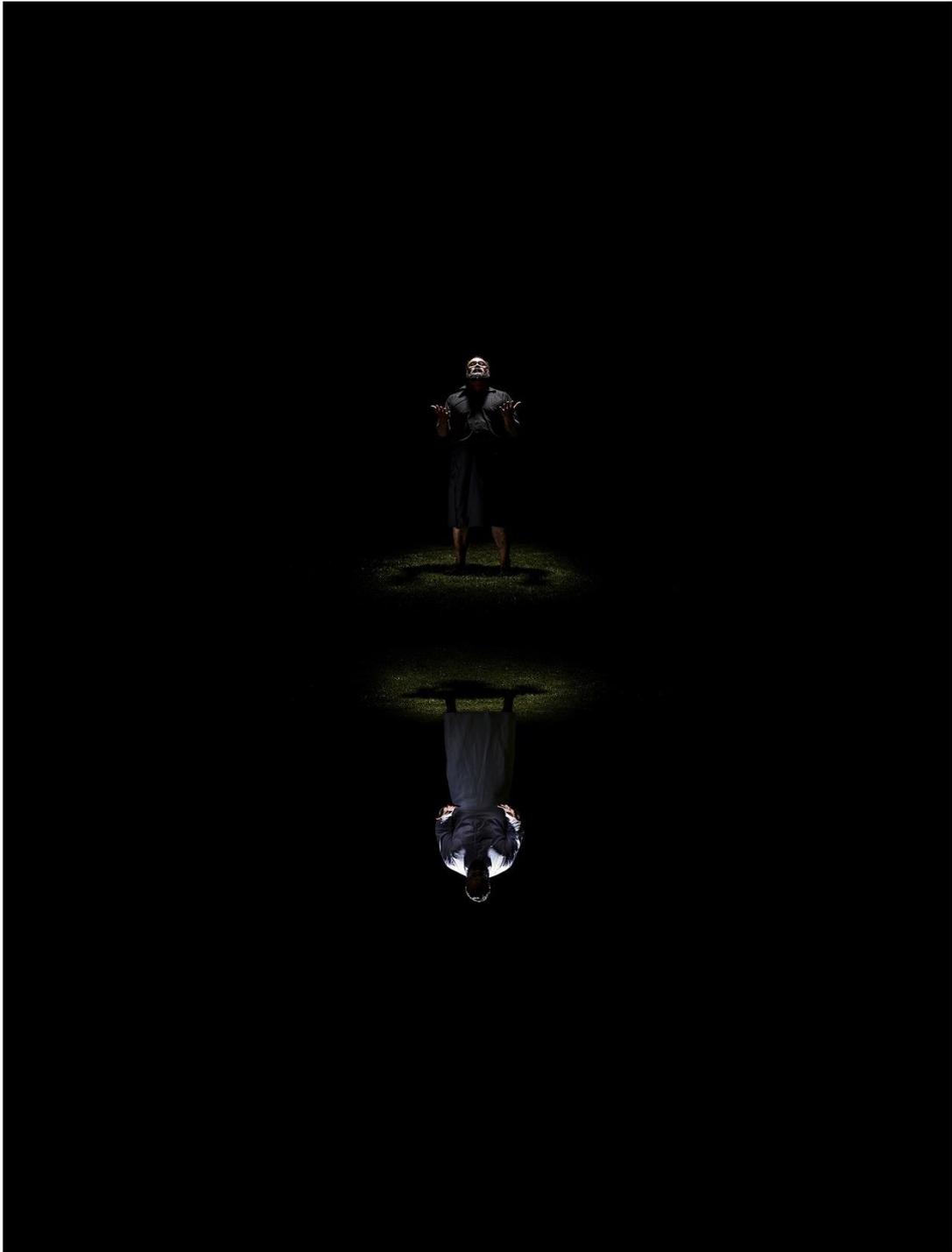


Figure 5. The Only Time, 2016, Digital inkjet print, 594mm x 840mm

Black and Diaspora

This chapter delves into the relationship between myself as an artist of Samoan heritage and the way this upbringing works its way into my artistic practice, more accurately how this upbringing can serve the growing diasporic community and its expanding milieu, which is heavily influenced by Western culture. Fundamental to how I tell *Fāgogo* is my diasporic lived experience as an Aotearoa born Samoan, the relational space I occupy geographically, historically, and physically as Raymond Sagapolutele. This context shapes the way I conduct myself, not only within Samoan society but anyone I interact with on a day to day basis. My upbringing in Aotearoa is different to a life I could have had if I was raised by my grandparents in Samoa. This way of viewing the world is also part of what shapes and drives my practice as an artist.

In Caroline Vercoe's essay '*Contemporary Maori and Pacific Artists Exploring Place*' (2017) she provides the following statement that I find accurate in relation to my experience as diasporic:

Diaspora is a charged term that has in recent times developed beyond its historical reference to the Jewish diaspora, to become a meaningful point of identification for a range of communities living away from their homelands for generations, across the globe. The notion of 'Diaspora is a place' is driven by stories and memories, and is configured just as much by geographic places and homelands as it is by the agency and performativity of intergenerational relationships, communities and the space of 'home' in the diaspora. (Vercoe 2017, 138).

Framed around my upbringing, I can speak and understand *gagana Pālagi* (English) and I can also understand *gagana Samoa*. This language ability allows me to negotiate relationships with Samoans and *Pālagi* (Europeans). This is relevant to the diasporic experience as it places me into what I refer to as a limbo space, a space that makes me another type of 'other'. This other space, this other *Vā* is where I used to feel too brown to be a Kiwi (New Zealander) and too white to be Samoan, unable to feel accepted in either culture even though I could 'operate' within them.

In 2012 I participated in a group exhibition of mostly diasporic Pacific photographers; the name of the exhibition - *Bounty Bars and Coconut Roughs* - was representative of this othered otherness (Kohlase 2012). Bounty bars is a term used for people of colour deemed brown on the outside but white on the inside. My work in this exhibition, *Siva Samoa* and *Poly Swag*, (figures 6 and 7) was formed around a conversation I wanted to create around generational dualities that exist in dance between my mother Ruta Sagapolutele and my sister Ufitia Sagapolutele. A Samoan woman and her diasporic Samoan

daughter occupy *Vā* defined by their relationship as *aiga* and *siva* (dance). Taking a self-reflective approach to the dynamic and interplay between two family members offered a window into how my photographic practice could expand *Talanoa* around and within my diasporic community.

Shift this to 2018 and the recent *Pacific Notion* (Lopesi, Whitespace 2018) group exhibition I participated in at Whitespace Gallery, and the conversation around my diasporic experience is now firmly focused on myself. The *Vā* wraps itself around me and across time to discuss my attempted suicide *Mea Alofa* (2017) (figure 8). A discussion I am fully comfortable with and one that I see as important given the alarming statistics around the subject in Aotearoa. In being open to discussion around my experiences I am prepared to wear the consequences, this is my *Fāgogo* as *Tautua* (being in service) to my community.

In his essay 'Our Sea of Islands' (1993), theorist Epeli Hau'ofa makes reference to the dynamics of dominant position holders and their subordinates stating that this one-sided relationship would have significant advantages for one at the cost of self-image for the other. Hau'ofa is making reference to the relationship between early interactions between Europeans and indigenous Oceanic populations (Hau'ofa 1993). Within my work, I take this idea and explore this and shift the dynamic, add another layer to see how 'derogatory and belittling views' effect the relationship of othered other, which my generation of diasporic Samoans and that of our parents embody. In my work *WE WERE JUST KIDS / WE WERE YOUR KIDS: Lessons in love that left scars across time* (2017) (figure 9), I created an image formed around a discussion around physical abuse, more directly the abuse that my cousins and I were subjected to as children. In the text for the work, I opened with this paragraph:

There is an aspect to growing up in my family and within my culture, that I understand as "just the way it was". A framing of the unacceptable as acceptable – what I have come to understand in my way as the damaging of the *Vā*, the context of relational space that connects and defines Samoans and the way we interact with each other, places and in the wider context, time.

These are the sentences at the end of my statement:

My scars haven't healed, I am burdened, we are burdened.

The *Vā* has been scarred, without acknowledging the pain, time is not enough to bring healing.

This hard analysis of how our parents' discipline is a topic not openly discussed within my generation; it is not our way, it is not *Fa'a Samoa* - the Samoan way. I couch my analysis and criticism within the context of my photography and the images I create as a diasporic Samoan. I am following a path taken by other diasporic Samoan artists such as Andy Leleisi'uao; artists who have looked to offer insight into subjects beyond the sun-drenched beaches and swaying palms (S. Mallon 2002, 127). For my project, Leleisi'uao is a catalyst for change within Pacific art; he touches on subjects that make the established hegemonic power structures in Samoan society uneasy. He brings to light in certain works the faults in our culture that take on newer dimensions when filtered through the lives that many Samoans live outside of Samoa. In many ways, seeing his work has emboldened my own practice to be less Polyfest and more Polynesian Panther. Here I am referring to my work exhibited in *Bounty Bars and Coconut Roughs*. The work produced through my research is not passive, with self-reflection and consideration I draw the line on where I will remain silent on issues that affect my community in work like *Mea Alofa* (2017) and *WE WERE JUST KIDS / WE WERE YOUR KIDS: Lessons in love that left scars across time* (2017).¹

In 1994, writer Anne Marie Tupuola broke new ground by exposing the limitations of applying Western theories to Samoan research, making the comment that to avoid tokenism of Samoan people, frameworks must prioritise their 'holistic' perception of knowledge and scholarship (Tupuola 1994, 179). Tupuola also argues that 'for too long we have had to express our thoughts within a *Pālagi* framework. The time has for our Samoan research to be processed and written within a Samoan context.' (Tupuola 1994). This view of ourselves is not one-sided, it is not only Samoan. I must also acknowledge that the *Pālagi* systems that exist in Aotearoa also dominate the way I perceive myself. In writer and curator Lana Lopesi's book, *False Divides* (2018) she makes mention of the fact that by utilising English as a first language we have placed a barrier to being able to reconnect to our heritage. By operating in English we had affected our conversations on indigeneity (Lopesi 2018, 16).

This push and pull between cultures is an aspect that takes a toll on how I see myself, in my earlier years this pulling of cultures played a huge role in issues that manifested as cultural disconnection and an apathy for either. Researcher Deborah Gough provides insight into this attitude among diasporic Samoan communities in her doctoral thesis *Cultural transformation and modernity: a Samoan case study* (2009) In her chapter – '*Connectivity, Identity, Belonging and Samoanness*' – I found support,

¹ Alongside Leleisi'uao I would include Aboriginal photographer Tracey Moffatt, her 1994 series *Scarred for Life* with its nine images of what on the face of it look like ordinary pictures. On closer inspection and with the addition of the captions that accompany each image she builds a connection that is soaked in trauma and unease.

through her interviews, in the need to address the case for evolving diasporic identity beyond binary concepts of one or the other. This limbo space, the *Vā* I referred to earlier in this chapter has become a place for contemplation and a chance to challenge the existing frameworks of both cultures, Samoan and *Pālagi*. My ability to see *Vā* as black, as meditational, as unconstrained by time and to apply this to my art is a direct result of the ability to go into a space of upheaval and change as opposed to the *sunken place*.²

In challenging the structures that exist I have also been aware that I am not doing so for the sake of challenging itself, rather there must also be a greater purpose. The photographs I create must have a sense of this greater purpose. I have found the writing of former Samoan Head of State and academic His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Tupuola Tufuga Efi (hereon referred to as Tui Atua) relevant:

Cultural incompetence stems from a mindset premised on the belief that culture and custom is/are above accounting and scrutiny. Change and modification to accommodate the contemporary context is often argued to be at the expense of identity and soul, i.e. that current practices cannot be challenged because they represent the essence of our being Samoan. This is a fundamental flaw, for no culture nor custom, nor for that matter religion, is above accounting and scrutiny. Life is a dynamic and the principal imperative on leadership is to seek, find and implement accommodation with a changing context. (Efi 2018, 164)

In creating work that connects to Samoan cultural concepts I, as someone with Samoan heritage, am fully aware of the implications in looking to adapt these to my context. Disapproval from elders, a reprimand from my *aiga* and criticism from within the diasporic community are all possible consequences. Tui Atua makes the point that contexts shift and change and that we must be free to examine and question these and when required offer solutions for the wellbeing of all, be it community, concept or *aiga*. I do so with the knowledge and consideration of academics such as Tui Atua and with *fa'aaloalo* (the act of paying respect and honouring) to those that have come before me and the heritage I am a part of. As an example, *Mea Alofa* (2017), does not focus solely on the trauma attempted suicide as a fourteen year old, the work is formed around a conversation that crosses time from my past to the present. It is a self-reflection on my state of 'knowing' as that frustrated teenager to my understanding now as a forty seven year old. It is a recognition of the relational space that I

² A space of frustration occupied by those who feel marginalised by a broken system, popularised by the film *Get Out* (Peele 2017).

could not see in operation with my *aiga* then but now, with time, I am able to weave together the lesson from that suicide attempt and pay honour and respect my *aiga*.



Figure 6. Siva Samoa (2012), Inkjet print mounted onto 20mm foamcore, 1500mm x 600mm



Figure 7. Poly Swag (2012), Inkjet print mounted onto 20mm foamcore, 1500mm x 600mm

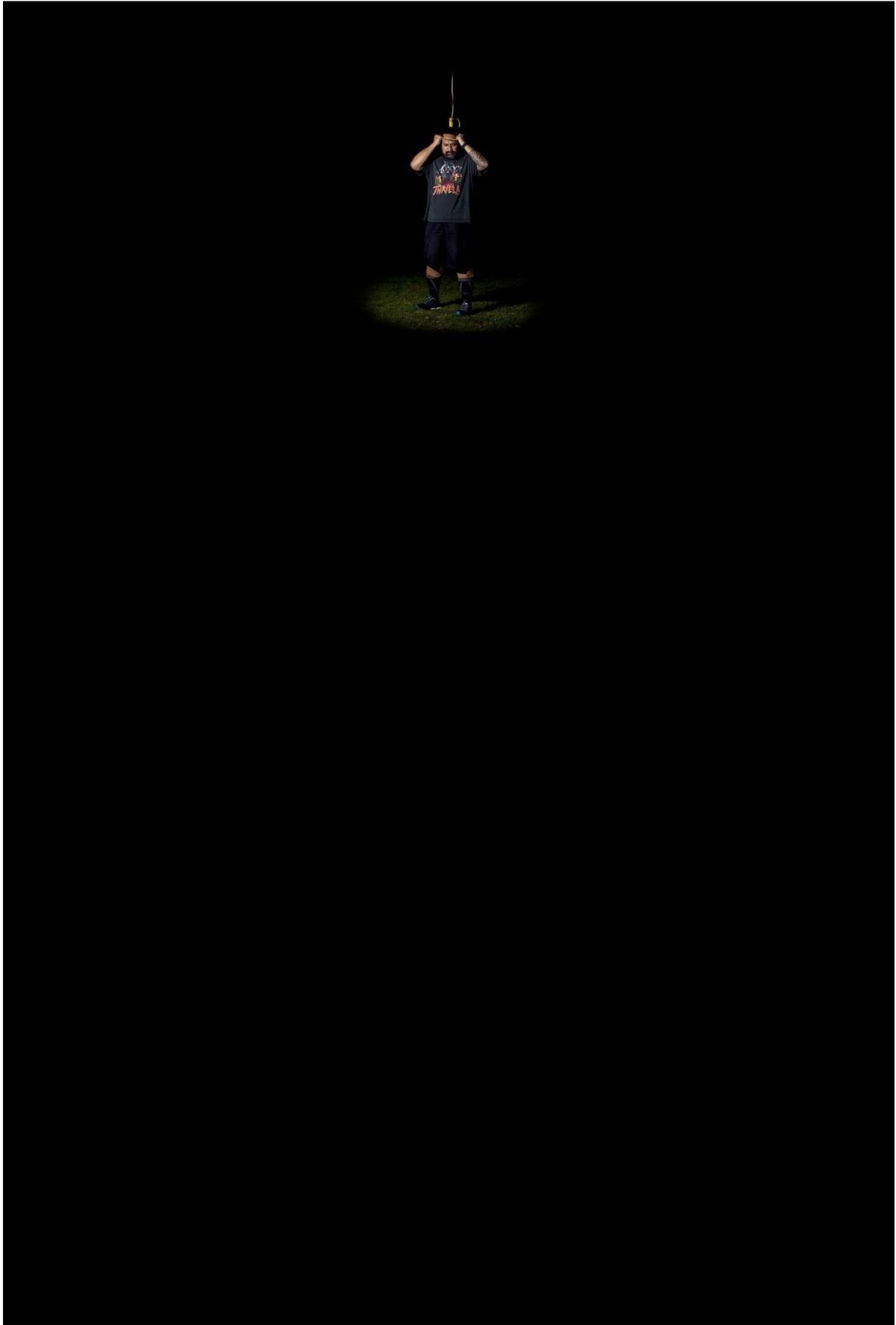


Figure 8. Mea Alofa (2017) triptych, image 1 of 3, mounted on to ACM, 841mm x 1260mm

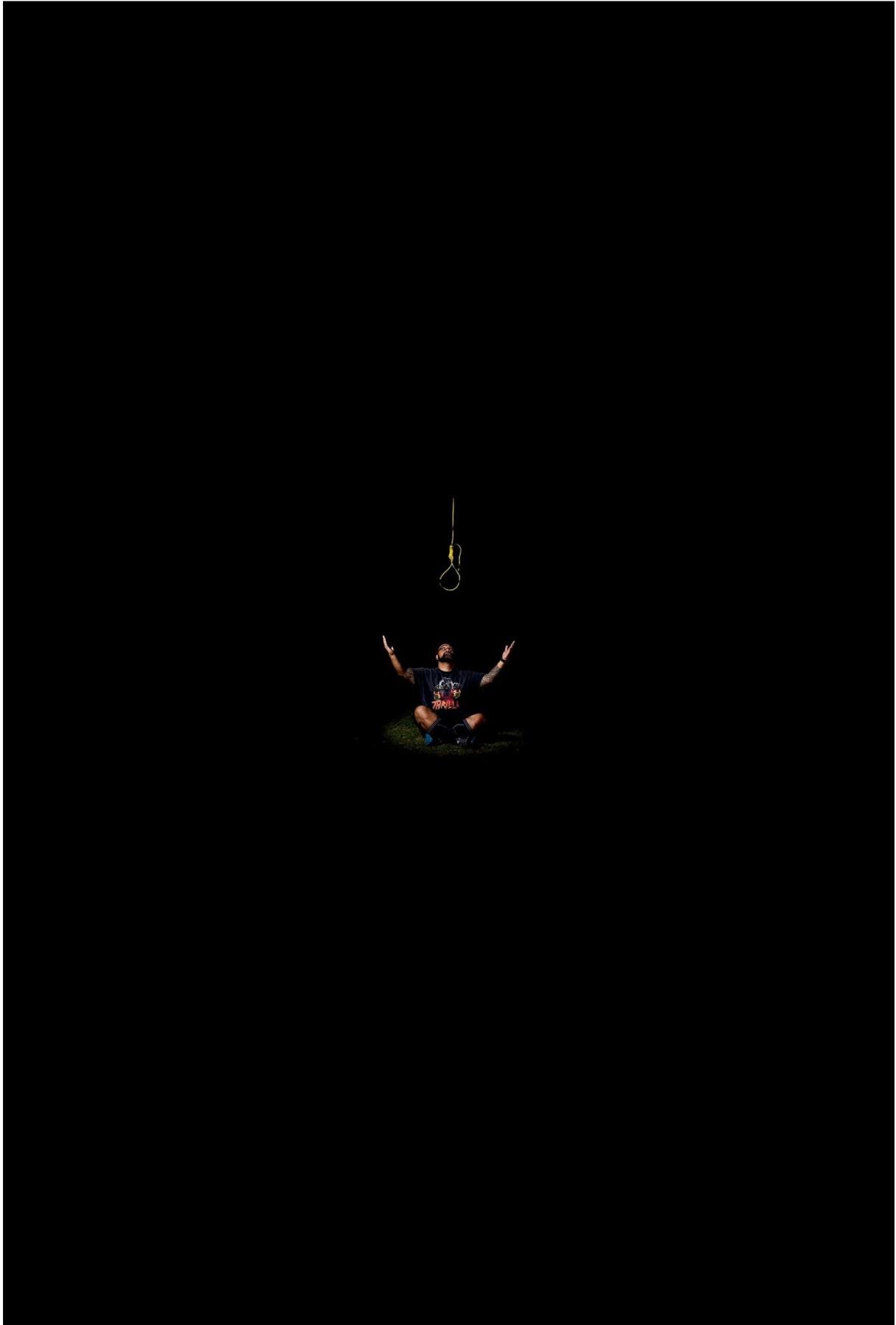


Figure 8. Mea Alofa (2017) triptych, image 2 of 3, mounted on to ACM, 841mm x 1260mm

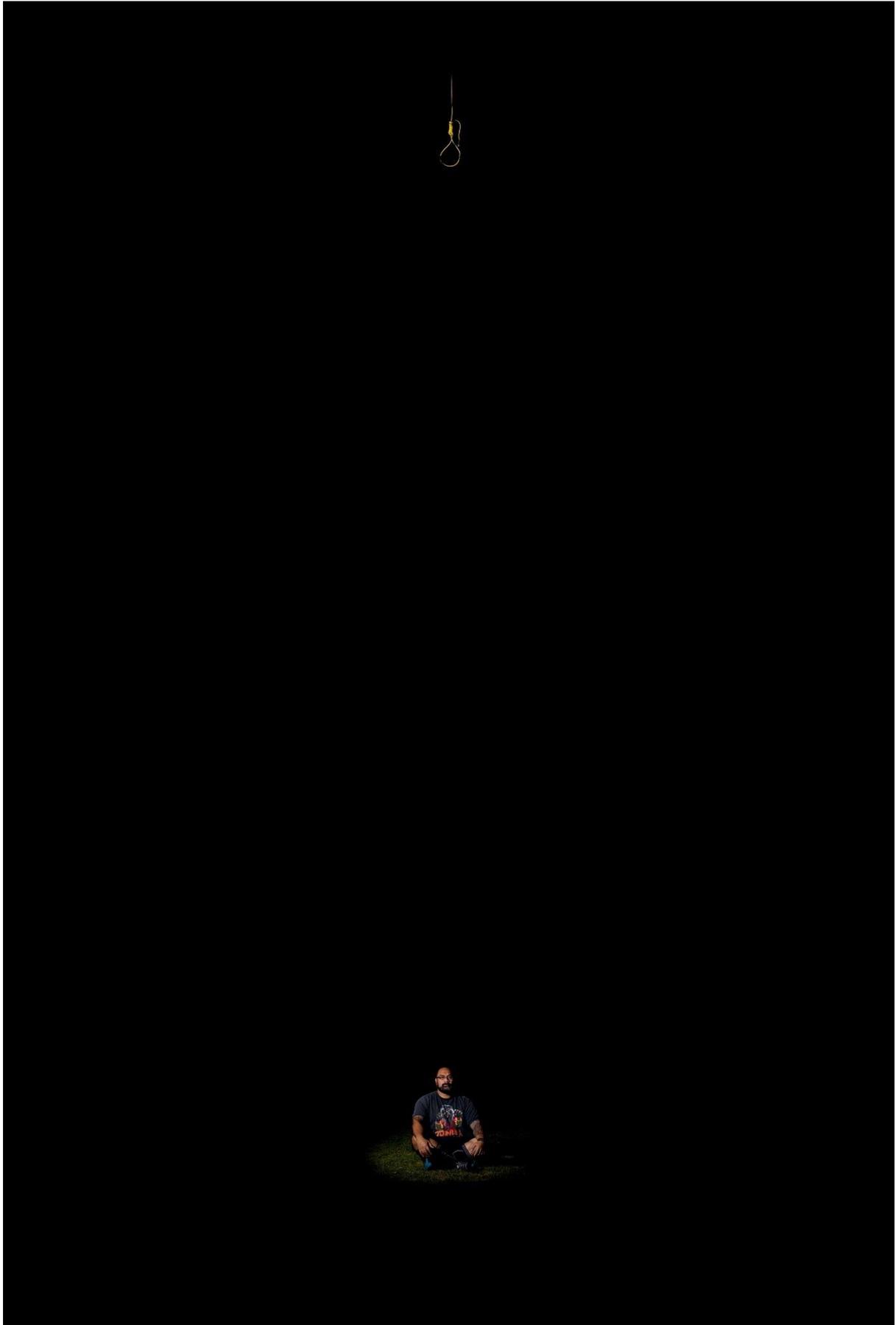


Figure 8. Mea Alofa (2017) triptych, image 2 of 3, mounted on to ACM, 841mm x 1260mm



Figure 9. We Were Only Kids/ We Were Your Kids (2017) Diptych 1 of 2, Inkjet prints, 2300mm x 1400mm

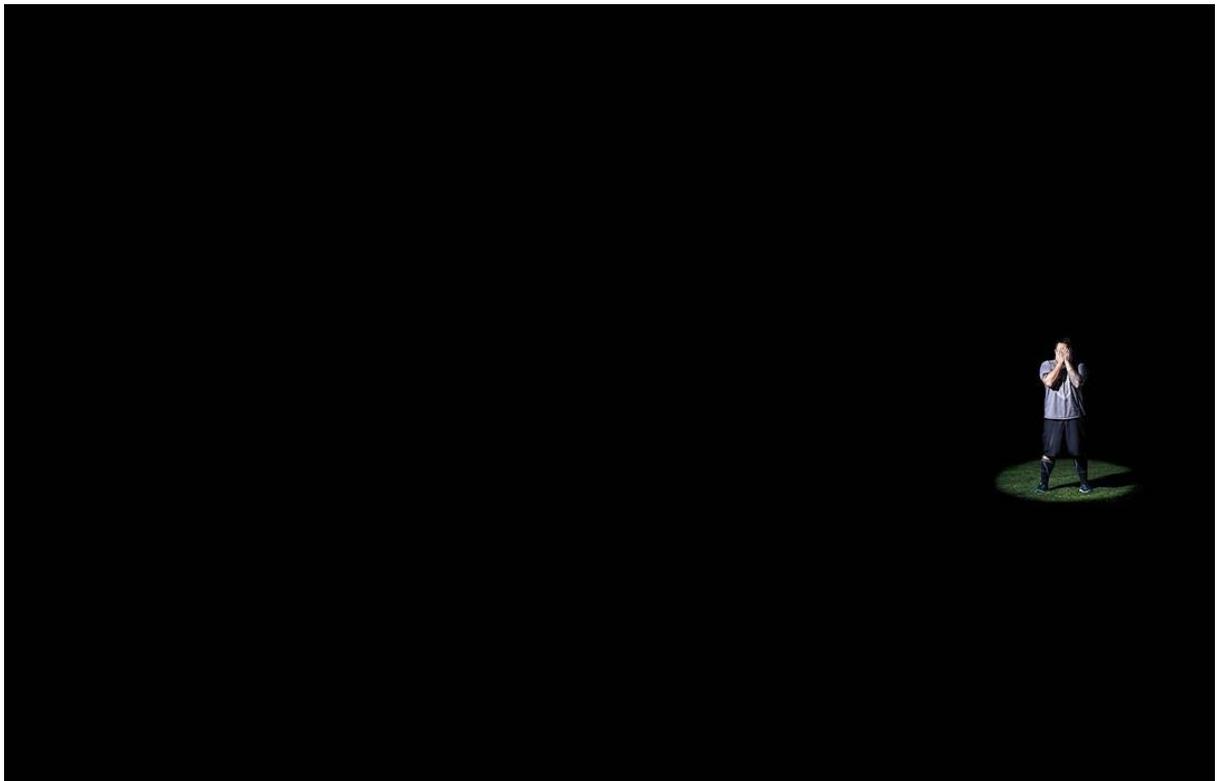


Figure 9. We Were Only Kids/ We Were Your Kids (2017) Diptych 2 of 2, Inkjet print, 2300mm x 1400mm

Fāgogo and Talanoa

This chapter contextualises my methodology of *Fāgogo*, by addressing its relationship to *Talanoa* and how they function within my photographs. The Samoan practice of *Fāgogo* and the process of *Talanoa* share similarities, both are forms of conversation. These conversations occur in space and time between people. Within my practice I start with self-reflection, talanoa between myself, which provides the context for the wider conversation that forms my work. These initial conversations can include my aiga, especially where topics touch on events that have affected them directly and this contextualises how I shape my *Fāgogo*. Writer Sean Mallon refers to *Fāgogo* as a form of storytelling, framed as a style of performing art where people, events, and stories are brought to life through the voice and skills of the narrator (S. Mallon 2002, 163), Tui Atua also references the importance of this art form stating:

During the height of the *Fāgogo* period the young did not acquire their values from the cinema, television, the radio or from a public spectacle. They heard it from the loving tones of their grandparents or their parents; they were literally fed it from the *mama*, which is lovingly lined along the arm of the *matua*, their grandparent or parent. Thus the Samoan saying: ‘*Ai lava I le tagata I le mama lona matua*’; meaning ‘You derive substance and direction from the *mama* of your *matua*’ (Efi 2018, 96).

Tui Atua goes on to say that this relates to knowledge passed down from *matua* (elders) and that they are not just biological parents but *matua* within the family group. The reference to *mama* is literally to chew food for the young, an old practice in Samoa where the elderly chew food for the young, this was generally fed to children weaning from their mother's milk (Efi 2018, 96). In the context of *Fāgogo*, this food was more of the spiritual kind and it imparts *mana* from the chewer to the recipient.

With the narratives, such as physical violence in *WE WERE JUST KIDS / WE WERE YOUR KIDS: Lessons in love that left scars across time* (2017), I have found that *Fāgogo* as a methodology works to frame my lived experiences as diasporic in a way that holds to the established practices of my Samoan heritage. However, I am not using the established format of narrating a story to an audience at night that is punctuated with song and mystical monsters and supernatural beings. In my images, my self-portraits are the personification of my demons and angels. I am taking the narrative of my life and reworking them into a lens based practice that creates large *Fāgogo* photographic prints where the black of the night now becomes black, *Vā*.

In *O le aitu o lo'u Masina/The ghost of my moon* (2018) (fig 10) the context is my fear of the dark as a child, the narrative formed around two *Talanoa*, the first between myself and my uncle Johnny Penisula, the second is between myself and the *Masina* (the moon). There is tension in the first *Talanoa*, I am banished to the dark of my room. In the second *Talanoa* I am given respite from the dark by the light of the moon. This second *Talanoa* with the *Masina* provides comfort and light. There is reassurance that there is nothing to fear from the dark. I reinforce this in the installation of the work, by painting the surface it is installed on black (fig 11). The black in this work represents the *Vā*, relational space that exists between the work and opens the work to viewers.

Artist John Ve'a uses the term '*to instigate with Talanoa*' in his practice, a process that involves *Talanoa* between the artist and people that would provide the narrative context to his work. In his 2015 thesis he provides insight on how this *instigation to Talanoa* continues after the process of installing his work, adding to the context and extended the narrative and meaning of the work created (Ve'a 2015, 7). Whereas my *Fāgogo* is directly focussed on myself as the protagonist, Ve'a tends to operate from a point of being the conduit for *Talanoa* and from this position he is able to then feed his art as a wider conversation for all involved in his *instigated Talanoa*.

Timote Vailoeti offers a description of *Talanoa* in the Samoan context as:

The communications of *Talanoa* are not devoid of important information. While in Samoa in 2002, my understanding of *Talanoa* from the local people was that it is the ancient practice of multi-level and multi-layered critical discussions and free conversations. It also includes the way that community, business and agency leaders receive information from the community, which they then use to make decisions about civil, church and national matters (Vailoeti 2013/2014)

There is an interesting way of framing conversations and their validity in an essay that forms the text *Whispers and Vanities* (2014) by Tui Atua. In his essay, Tui Atua references a culture of whispers, these are the words that are life-affirming, love-affirming and faith-affirming. (Suaalii-Sauni, 2014,12). He refers to these as the culture of whispers engaged by Samoan custodians when passing on knowledge, *tala tu'umumusuu*.

Vailoeti and Tui Atua provide more context to the process of *Talanoa*, they both follow the narrative of *Talanoa* as a methodology to pass on knowledge. *Talanoa* in the voice provided by Vailoeti is open and layered, the voice that is firm in how it carries itself. Tui Atua refers to a form of *Talanoa* that is intimate and personal, like the whispers between a mother and her unborn child. I find that these

‘voices’, including the voice of *instigation* as proposed by Veā, make a harmonious choir when tuned correctly to my *Fāgogo*.

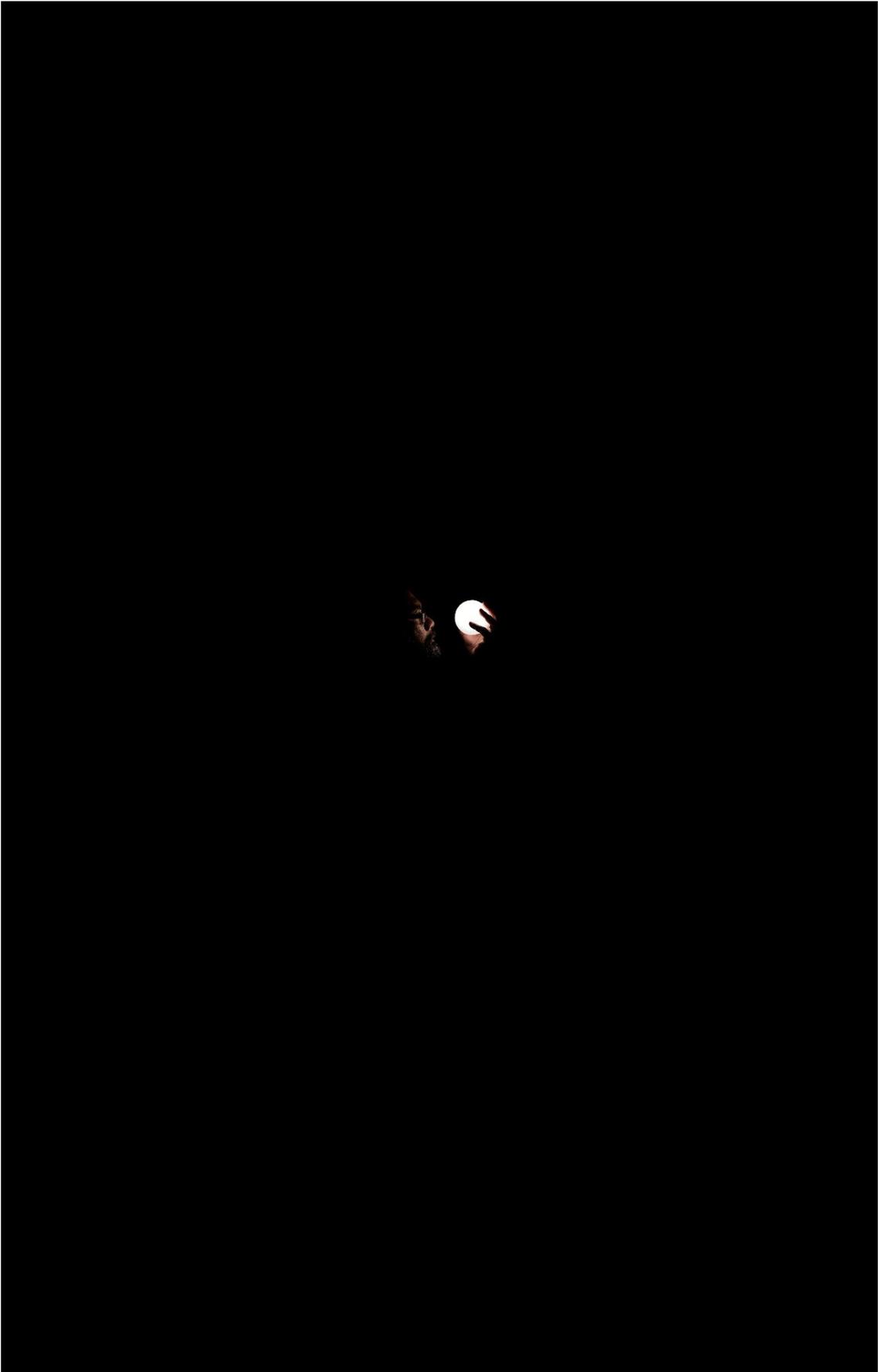


Figure 10. O le aitu o lo'u Masina/The ghost of my moon. Digital Inkjet Print 1200mm x 3200mm



Figure 11. Installation of 'O le aitu o lo'u Masina/The ghost of my moon.' Digital Inkjet Print 1200mm x 3200mm

Conclusion

Through this research process, I have reconstituted Samoan concepts and filtered them through my photographic methods as a means to reflect on my upbringing in Aotearoa. Through my practice, I have been able to give this concept form through the visual reference of black in my self-portraits. The portrait is representative of people and place, the black, the *Vā*, represents time and space.

Combining the methodology of *Fāgogo* and concept of *Talanoa* has resulted in photographic images that blend my lived experiences into narratives that speak openly and honestly about who I am and where I fit within my diasporic community. I have come to understand that through the process of challenging and wanting to create I am also gaining a better understanding of my Samoan heritage through my research. This has come about through *Talanoa* with *aiga*, friends, *tufuga* (expert craftspeople) in traditional Pacific arts, contemporary artists and Pacific scholars.

There is a Samoan proverb, *E sui faiga, ae tumau fa'avae*, when translated, means 'things change but the foundations remain the same'. Through the course of completing this research and the associated practice, I recognise the relevance of this proverb to my diasporic experience. I had initially set out to challenge and affect change to the traditional Samoan concepts of *Vā* and *Talanoa*, I felt it was necessary to provide a context that was in tune to my diasporic upbringing in Aotearoa. I have created a diasporic Samoan form of *Fāgogo* that utilises my photographic methodology but the *Vā* is still the relational space and *Talanoa* is still a method to communicate within this space and this allows me to understand who I am as a diasporic Samoan living in Aotearoa.

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Appendices

End of year installation.

Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts (2018) is the final work submitted for examination, a *Fāgogo* based on the name of the village my mother was born and raised. The name of the village is derived from the her regions guardian spirit, an octopus that possessed a heart in each of its eight tentacles.

The work is made of eight photographic portraits (fig 12 – 20), each a representation of specific periods from my life that have had impacts on shaping who I am as a diasporic Sāmoan raised in Aotearoa. The portraits sit within the black, the *Vā*, and each panel combines to form the larger *Talanoa* with the blackness of the *Vā* connecting the eight portraits. The first panel represents the past looking to the future, the second is the *alofa* (love) of my mother. The third is the expected death of my father, the fourth is the appropriation of another culture, hip-hop, and the rejection of my heritage. With the fifth, I display the hubris and arrogance that I reveled in my thirties only to have this shattered by the unexpected death of my mother – the sixth panel. Panel seven is the understanding of the gift of knowledge left to me by my father symbolized by my copy of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare he left me. The last panel is my present, myself looking back on my past and reflecting back across time and to the start of the loop in the first panel.

Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts is a *Fāgogo* that spans time, the *Vā* that anchors the first panel is the same *Vā* that encompasses and connects the last panel. The *Vā* is the relational conduit that links the beginning of my journey as an Aotearoan born Samoan to my current point in time and at the heart of it the story starts in Samoa. My existence connects Aotearoa to Samoa and Samoa to Aotearoa.



Figure 12. Detail of panel 1. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm



Figure 13. Detail of panel 2. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm



Figure 14. Detail of panel 3. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm

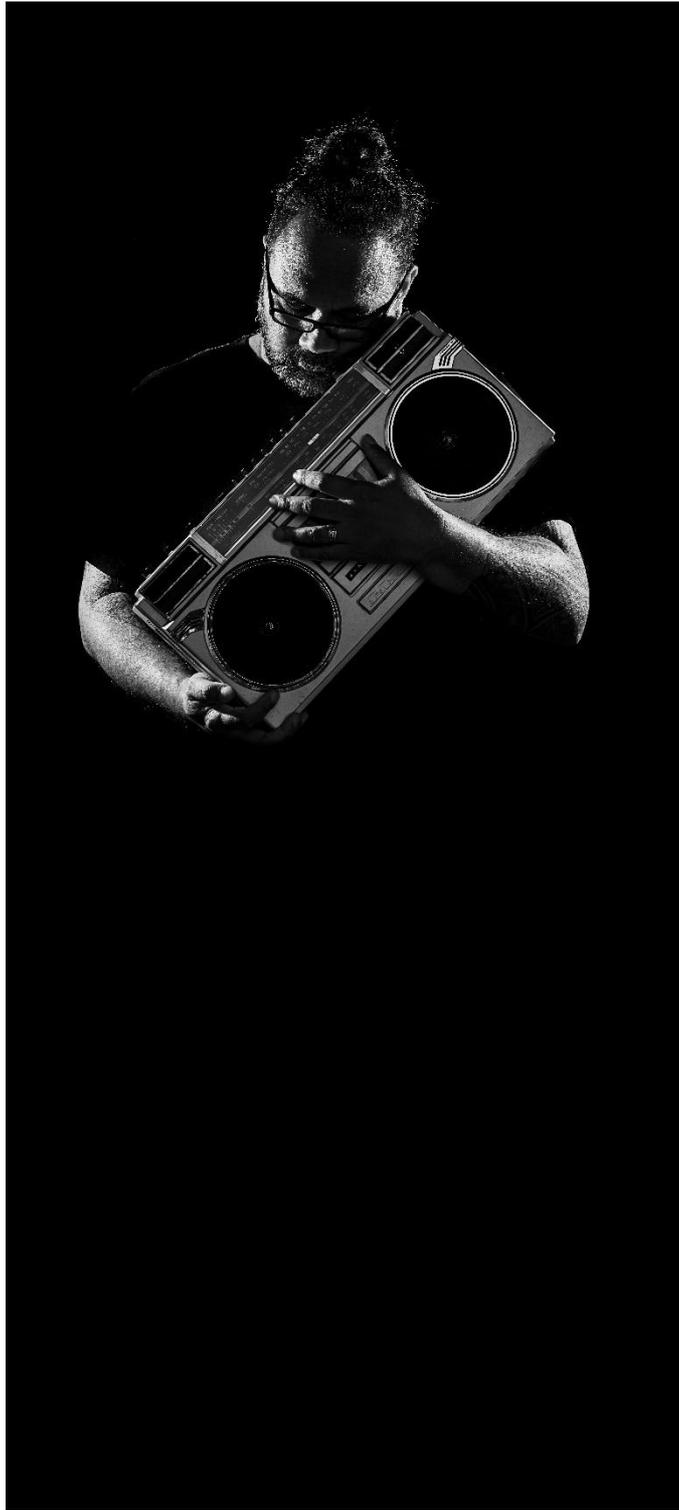


Figure 15. Detail of panel 4. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm



Figure 16. Detail of panel 5. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm



Figure 17. Detail of panel 6. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm

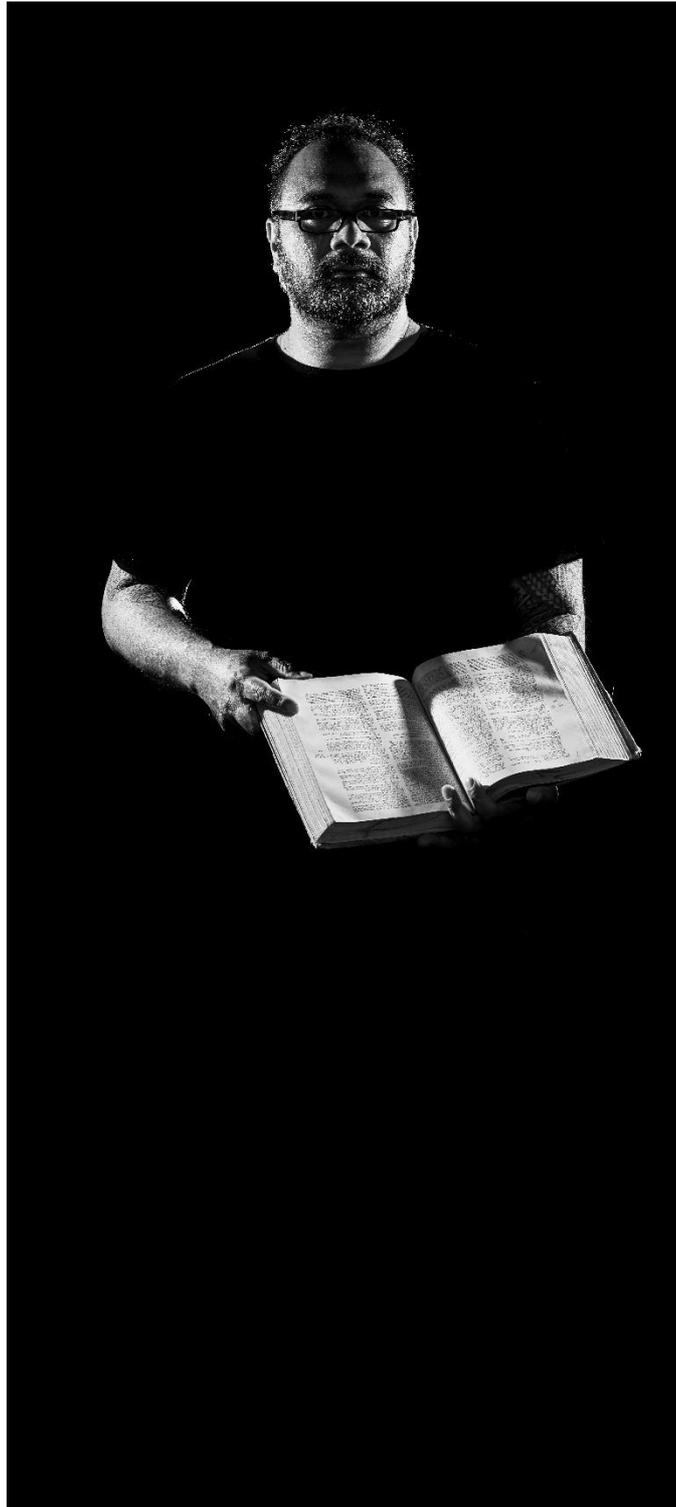


Figure 18. Detail of panel 7. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm



Figure 19. Detail of panel 8. Fatuvalu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 800mm x 1800mm



Figure 20. Fatuvatu / Eight Hearts Digital inkjet print mounted on to ACM, 6400mm x 1800mm