

# A PERSONAL EXPLORATION OF THE VĀ

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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 acknowledgements), 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.

*Pilimilose Jr Manu:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my separate groups of friends and family, you know who you are; for handing me a ladder when I was at rock bottom. Without you I would still be in darkness. Thank you.

To my supervisors Ian Jervis and Ingrid Boberg. Thanks for the past 4 years; for opening my mind up to the world and helping me to be more expressive. Without you I would have never become the person I am today.

To my Dearest Mother and Father,

You may not understand the art that I make and I may seem reserved with my life and what I do, so here is my life written for you. Always remember you are my heart and soul. Without you, I am nothing. Thank you SO much.

Ofa Atu

Xo



Figure 1 Images extracted from the work *Untitled (Veil)*, 2013.

## ABSTRACT

This project is a personal exploration of cultural values in relation to traditional and westernised influences, as they are received by young Pacific people. This project employs practice – based approaches, using video performance and audio.

This is to negotiate positions from which to engage with the world, including emotional, cultural gender and emerging standpoints. In this respect the project explores the forces that impinge on how such standpoints might emerge, and how they might unfold over time.

This space is not a void or an empty space but a space where things meet; where ideals relate. The Tongan term for this space between is ‘*Va – Vā, Va’a, Vaha*’; *Va oe Kau Tonga*, which translates to “*The relations between Tongans/Tonga*” or as I see it the differences between; a buoyance of differences, rising above, emerging and merging.

The project brings together different questions and ideas to form an orchestra of *difference* that performs the work of art



Figure 2 Image extracted from video work, *3mins*, 2013.

## INTRODUCTION

### KAMATA'ANGA / BEGINNING

My parents were both born in Tonga, Mum from Folaha and Dad from Nukunuku. My Dad was sent to New Zealand by his Father, who I am named after, sent him here with a bag of clothes and no money to find a better life and to stay out of trouble.

Four years later my Mum arrived in New Zealand. After finishing high school, her mother wanted her to continue her studies at Auckland University, so she sent her to New Zealand to stay with her mehikitanga (father's sister). However the Aunty she stayed with was eiki over the family as the 'fahu'<sup>1</sup> and sent her to work.

My parents met through the church youth, they got married and moved into a three bedroom house in Sandringham with my Grandmother, Aunty, my mother's cousin, his wife and their three kids. During the 7 years they were together they had four children: three sons and a daughter, and moved around three times before settling in a state house in Blockhouse bay.

We attended Pule La'a Methodist church in New Lynn every Sunday and gave money to the church when requested. My Father was Methodist so we had to follow his Religion. His word was law, when we did not obey we were ALL smacked.

My parents knew little of the English language so we were raised speaking Tongan. I remember when I was ten I had to learn ten words for the spelling bee at school. I had asked my Dad to help me by reading the words out while I spelt them. He began and then stopped, looking confused he tried pronouncing the word 'Decision' and it came out 'D-sh-shun'. Oblivious to the proper pronunciation of the word I continued to spell anyway.

The next day at school we had the spelling bee. I got up and had to spell the word I had learnt the previous night. I began spelling out the word "D, E, C, I, S, I, O, N... d-sh-shun". The class broke out in laughter, yelling out "fob"<sup>2</sup>. Puzzled and confused to why they were laughing, another kid had yelled out "Decision you dumb ass not d-sh-shun". My face burnt with embarrassment; that was how my Father pronounced it. Head down I silently walked back to my desk where I sat in complete silence for the rest of the school day.

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<sup>1</sup> Tongan family structure. In order of most respected (Eiki) to lowest (Tu'a): Aunts (fathers sisters-mehikitanga/fahu), Father (Includes Fathers brothers – Tamai), Mother (Fa'e – Includes mothers sisters and brothers/ Fa'e tangata), Eldest Daughter, Other Daughters, Eldest Son, Other sons.

<sup>2</sup> F.o.b – And abbreviation for Fresh Off The Boat, used to mock Pacific Islanders who could not speak or pronounce English words properly



## NGAUE / PROJECT

There are many who were and still are raised in this type of structure. Raised in both a traditional household but taught in a western system or any other system that is foreign to their heritage. They see themselves being stuck between worlds. Va – Vā, Va'a or Vaha are the Tongan translations for the space between. The Va exists between multiple things. Personally it is about opening up the emotional territory that I am negotiating. Reflecting on this negotiation and transitioning of the Va in an emotional territory of unfolding of a sense of self-respect. In many ways it is not just an awareness of being in a body but acknowledging that I have a body, that I am a body, that it is a sensory body and being in a space.

*Why?*

Because no one talks about it.

For me and my practice I see it already crowded with these images of emotions and ideas of hopes and fears. It is not illustrative but comes from a deeply personal perspective that are linked to the theoretical concept of the Va.

When I think about my own connections I think of myself loosely attached here and a little there, taking groups or friend allegiance versus older allegiances as an example. However, I may change my mind depending on the context I am in, also changing as I age and grow. I also find certain things coming back to me more strongly than other things. Hence a negotiation -- constantly changing.

This exegesis will discuss the ideas of the Va and follow my development and thinking within this project. The Va is about a continual negotiation of an open space, this project is an exhibition of provisional or interim images in a continuum of exploration.

## CONCEPT

### VA, VĀ, VA'A, VAHA<sup>3</sup>

Personally the Va is about time, growth and change. I was drawn to the space that lay in-between. A charged space between points of view and people – a space of connection, negotiation and interaction; the living space. A space of aliveness where people interact, where ideas and emotions merge and interact and come together in confluence and come into conflict. A space of living that contained the messiness of life and its joys and sorrow.

In my first year of postgraduate studies I initially came into the concept of the Va through my Grandma who discussed with me the connections of the Tongan people and their obligations. She likened the Va to the ocean by expressing that the Ocean is a metaphor for the Va. She goes on to say that there are two ways to look at the ocean, the ocean that separates and the ocean that creates; a space which separates islands and creates individuality and creating connections to those islands. The sea reaches out and touches each islands shores, therefore the sea creates a sacred space of connection. So care for the Va; it is what connects each one of us.<sup>4</sup>

In response to this I made a wall drawing for an exhibition *Girls who Shoot/Boys who draw, 2012* [Fig.3]. By drawing inspiration from the patterns and motifs of the tapacloth designs, I drew directly onto the wall and mapping out islands in the Pacific Ocean. With the spaces between each event on the wall, the viewer is forced to think of the space between the drawings, its connections and the differences between them.

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<sup>3</sup> The title is of Tongan language and all reference the same idea of spaces between.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Refiti also makes this connection, he states <sup>4</sup> "The ocean played a dominant role in shaping the environment and people of the pacific; boundaries are easily drawn on its surface, so the islands become figures that are isolated and placed deliberately on the oceanscape with the promise of fertile land and the possibility of rest and respite from the sea. Islands enabled the location of identity and the boundary of cultures, but the sea, with its changing currents facilitating migration and exchange, also meant that boundaries were often resolved and redrawn. The ocean provided separation and connection, an in-between space where commonality and difference." (Refiti, 2002, p.209)



Figure 3 *Untitled*, 2012. Mixed media. From the exhibition *Girls who shoot / Boys who draw*.

Samoan theorist Albert Wendt (1996) writes:-

Important to the Samoan view of reality is the concept of Vā or Wa in Maori and Japanese. Vā is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but 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/the contexts change. A well-known Samoan expression is 'la teu le Vā.' Cherish/nurse/care for the Vā, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group, unity, more than individualism: who perceive the individual person/creature/thing in terms of group, in terms of Vā relationships.<sup>5</sup>

In this abstract from Albert Wendt's paper *Tatauing the post-colonial body*, he is addressing Samoan tatau (tattoo) in relation to the Va, he talks about the spaces and the relationships between identities from a Samoan and global perspective. Unlike Albert Wendt, I do not identify to/with any Samoan heritage, but this same notion is just as important to my Tongan culture as it is to Samoans. Tongan theorist Ka'ili states

"Vā can be glossed as 'space between people or things'. This notion of space is known in Tonga, Samoa, Rotuma, and Tahiti as vā, while in Aotearoa and Hawai'i it is known as wā. Vā (or wā) points to a specific notion of space, namely, space between two or more points"<sup>6</sup>

The Vā notion is pertinent across many Pacific and other cultures; and any young person growing up these days is going to be negotiating between cultures from all over

<sup>5</sup> Wendt, A. (1996). *Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body*. *Span*, April–October, 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> Ka'ili, O. T. (2005). *Tauhi va: Nurturing Tongan Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond*. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 17 (1), 83-114.

the world through different means. For example this negotiation could occur across the internet, video games and music clips to name a few.

Thinking about this space, it is not a void but an arena where multiple standpoints, frameworks or perspectives meet and a series of differences are continually negotiated, merging and evolving. Whether it is a difference in age, gender or a difference of a culture which remains relatively pure to a traditional line to another one which has become informed by other cultural perspectives. In this case Difference; which usually has negative connotations and viewed as a contested space (often through a Western perspective) becomes something positive because there are difference that are negotiated. Without difference there will be no negotiation. Albert Refiti (2002) refers to the Va as a “spatial ordering concept that exists between things and administers a code of good (ideal) behaviour, an invisible language that enables space and things to be configured in a positive manner”. (Refiti, 2002, p.209).

‘Tauhi-Va’ is the Tongan expression for respecting and keeping the in-between space. In the quote on the previous page Albert Wendt acknowledges this and expresses that you are not an individual. You belonging to a family, a group, a community. Further to this, respecting the Va and caring for it means that there will be a balance between ideals thus creating harmony between people and the ‘Unity-that-is-all’.

It is important to know that Tongans are relational rather than individualistic meaning ‘we speak as a group and not individually’ Tongan theorist Dr. Konai-Thaman (Cited in Coxon, 2007) puts this into perspective by stating that:

“Because the cultural identity formation of most Oceanic people is relational rather than individualistic, it follows that the spaces or vā between and among persons, or between a person and his/her environment, together with the frameworks that determine such relationships, must be nurtured and protected. Understanding the significance of the notion of vā and educating for its continued nurturance and maintenance are central to any type of discussion for inter-cultural understanding in Oceania, if not globally.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Coxon, Eve. (2007). Unpublished discussion paper prepared for ‘Challenge Spot’ during joint NZARE/Ministry of Education symposium *Is your research making a difference to Pasifika education?*, Wellington, November 2007



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Figure 4 Ha'amonga 'a Maui, Historical site in Tonga

In discussing the Va with my Grandma she raised the idea that the Ha'amonga<sup>9</sup> is a symbolic metaphor which I thought fit well with the Va concept. She suggests that the Ha'amonga is a reminder to Tongans about the faka'apa'apa (respect) and hierarchy within Va relationships especially that between a brother and sister. She goes on to say that the two vertical pillars are the brothers carrying their sister, fulfilling their fatongia (obligation) to care for the needs of their sister. According to the Tongan gender roles the females are ranked higher than the men in the community whereas the men have more political power. The mehikitanga (father's sister) controls the future of her brother's children, they are her *faiteliha'anga*<sup>10</sup>. When she becomes a Mother or an Aunt she then takes on the role as Fahu/Mehikitanga while the brothers remain tu'a (lower in rank) as the fa'e tangata (Mother's brother). In Fig. 5 this portrays the hierarchy. Take my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday for example. The fa'e tangata fulfils his fatongia as the fa'e huki<sup>11</sup> by lowering him/themselves to respect his sister or in this instance sisters children, as a result they become my *faiteliha'anga*.

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<sup>8</sup> Image retrieved from [http://www.lonelyplanet.com/tonga/images/ha-amonga-a-maui-trilithon-monument-tonga\\$26235-4](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/tonga/images/ha-amonga-a-maui-trilithon-monument-tonga$26235-4)

<sup>9</sup> Ha'amonga 'a Maui (meaning Maui's burden Fig.4) is a historical site in Tongatapu. It consists of three coral slabs, two vertical slabs holding the third across. One theory imply that it was the gateway to the royal compound and another that it was used for astronomical purposes. Long before the arrival of the missionaries, Tongans believed in Pacific Gods and spirits. Maui was one of those Gods who was said to have pulled the Pacific islands out of the sea with a hook. It was also said that Maui was under pressure by his task, with the weight of the heavens, sky and other planets placed on his shoulders. The structure appears as a person with a heavy burden. Hence the naming of the structure, Maui's burden.

<sup>10</sup> *Faiteliha'anga* – To say someone is your *faiteliha'anga* means they are your submissive.

<sup>11</sup> *Fa'e Huki* – Fa'e meaning Mother, Huki – Sit, Hold, carry. Only the Sisters Brothers take on this role, in the case of the fig. 5 the sisters children use them as a seat. Common tongan expression is *Faiteliha anga* – meaning to do to them as we please (submissive).



Figure 5 My 21st birthday. Sitting on my uncle (Fa'e huki)

An artist who plays with this role is Tongan performance artist Kalisolaite 'Uhila<sup>12</sup>. His work *Fa'e Huki (Mother Brother)* 2013 [Fig.6], shows him in the gallery context taking on the role as Fa'e huki and transforming himself into several objects; a chair, a bench and a bed. In doing so he creates a seat for his niece to sit on, who becomes part of the work. Tongans who know the custom would understand the meaning of the work, however from the perspective of the non-Tongan this would appear humorous. In conversation with the artist he says a spectator asked if he could sit on him and he replied "No I am my niece's chair". I am interested in the function of this work, which shifts between performer and object.

In Fig.7 another Tongan performance artist Sione Faletau<sup>13</sup>, performed in the gallery context lifting Tongan koloa<sup>14</sup> (mats) up and over his head. Speaking with the artist he

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<sup>12</sup> Kalisolaite 'Uhila, is a performance artist of Tongan heritage who is known for exploiting the customs and roles important to the Tongan culture.

<sup>13</sup> Sione Faletau, is a performance artist currently in his last year of Fine arts at Elam (Auckland University). He references Tongan culture and the 'weight' of things by performing Tongan masculine gender roles.

<sup>14</sup> Koloa – In the Tongan context koloa represents the 'wealth' of a person. When Tongans wear their mats at occasions (wedding, birthdays etc..) it usually means that they are wearing their wealth. Referred to mats and ngatu (barkcloth) typically handled and taken care of by the females in the Tongan culture which are preserved under the mattresses and given at special occasions like birthdays, weddings, funerals as a me'a ofa (gift).



Figure 6 Kalisolaite Uhila, *Fa'e Huki (Mother Brother)*, 2013. From the Exhibition *Anatomy of Paradise*.

says that his work was also linked to the ideas of the Va. He states “I am weight lifting my mother’s koloa, this is linked to the idea of the Va in terms of nurturing the Va. This is me showing my family I am capable of leading the family and keeping the Tongan tradition alive”. By lifting the mats over his head he references the Va making a metaphorical statement that he can carry the family legacy and hold on to its traditions within the New Zealand context.

I reference these two artists because they are respecting and caring for the Va. In the case of Kalisolaite Uhila, he respects the Va by honouring his role as Fa’e Huki for Sione Faletau he honours the space between through the physical act of carrying the mats, linking this to the act of carrying his family’s legacy and the Tongan customs that come with it.



Figure 7 Sione Faletau Film Stills

In response to these ideas of carrying and holding on to something. I created a video work [Fig. 8] where I reach out and grab on to bars. Although this work could have multiple interpretations, for me it is about these ideas of stretching out and holding to something; when you can no longer hold on to that something you let go. In this case I am referring to old cultural customs becoming unfashionable. This also goes on to

suggest that culture is in constant change and negotiation and many things are evolving and changing. 'The context is still there, the meaning changes'.

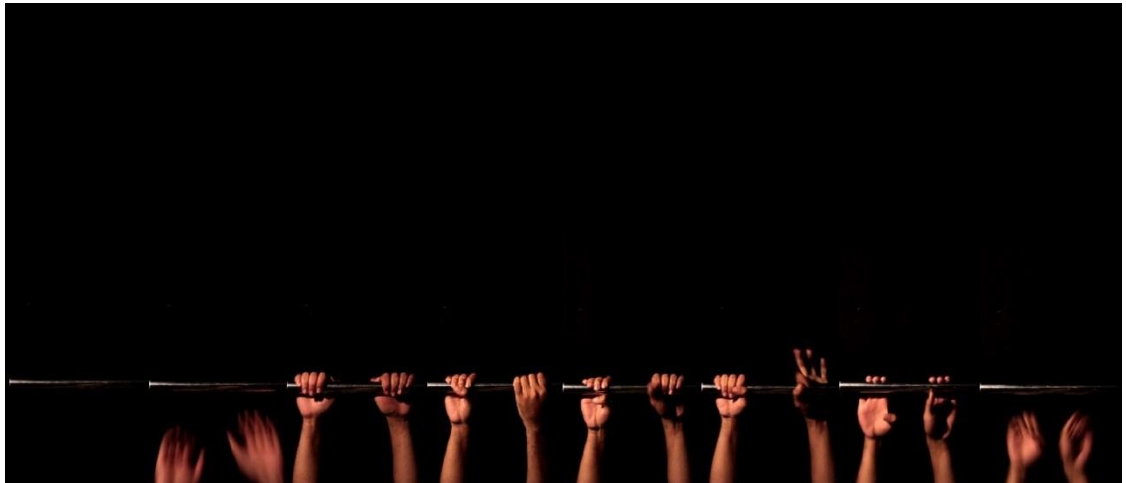


Figure 8 *Untitled*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 30seconds

## PUSH/PULL

My lived experience growing up in New Zealand as a first generation born Tongan is the primary focus for this project. Speaking for myself, and I am sure for many others as well. I viewed myself as being in a negotiation between worlds. Thinking about this it is more trying to develop my own character, while trying to fit into multiple cultural situations.

Although the concept of the Vā is about nurturing the space between and administers a code of good (ideal) behaviour; to view it from a Western perspective, there seems to be a conflict of ideas; it seems to hold ideas of assimilation, where one dominant standpoint is trying to own the space and bring the other to them, invading it and trying to override it, trying to assimilate that space. However one could argue that the Western perspective of the Va was an idea of self-critique that allowed the Va to remain open and borrowed from the other side. For example the idea of the diaspora where I don't necessarily need to declare that I am one thing because I can be many things, because I am influenced by what is around me and borrowing from them. This creating a fluidity, a movement, a negotiation between.



A diagram by Jemaima Tiatia from the book *Caught between cultures* (1998) highlights some binaries between the western structure and the traditional structure.

***Samoan/Tongan/Niuean Culture***

Communalism  
Unquestioned obedience and respect for seniority  
Understand and speak the mother tongue  
Church and extended family obligations first  
Fa'a Samoa/Anga faka Tonga/Faka Niue  
'you are palagi'  
'Don't ask, just do it'

***Western system***

Individualism  
critique  
Speak the English language  
Education/work first  
Fa'a palagi  
'you are a Pacific Islander'  
'Ask before you go ahead'<sup>15</sup>

Tiatia talks about the struggles of Polynesian youth raised in both the western structure and the traditional household structure. She interviews and records these youth describing their upbringing in both systems as being 'Caught between cultures'. Each participant she had interviewed had a similar story to the others. She recorded ideas of tension, confusion, and cultural cringe.

A work I made in response to those ideas was *Spin this way, 2013* [Fig.9] where I spun clockwise as if to suggest a fast forward of time. I spun around in places that were intrinsic to the relational Tongan. Which were the Church, home, work and school. The idea was to recreate this sense of confusion through the feeling of nausea. Holding the camera at arm's length and gazing into the lens; I spun around. The intention was to capture the spectators gaze with my own; transferring the physical feeling of the dizziness and nausea that I felt through the frame and to the viewer.

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<sup>15</sup> Table sourced from the book *Caught between cultures*



Figure 9 *Spin this way*, 2013. 3:05mins. Film stills.

In the book *The frangipani is dead* (2008), Karen Stevenson quotes Tai Multalo who states:-

There is no room for growth in the shadows. I wanted my independence. It was important to me that I did not offend my parents, but it was also important that I had psychological freedom. At university I was exposed to a different set of rules and cultural behaviour university encouraged independent thinking and the need to question everything, whereas at home my father's word was law. (p.138).

This idea of offense became evident in my practice. I realized that my practice was more than just the concept of the Va. It was about the idea of 'me being able to be me' or any young person growing up able to emerge through their own conscience, own inclinations, own respect to self; while acknowledging that they come from a family culture, but also acknowledging that the other people in the family culture acknowledge other influences in the person as well.

I am reminded of the idea of the 'closet' in that it becomes this thing that creates a boundary around something so that process cannot occur resulting in the Va closing down and the dynamics of it. In which sense one could argue that it is culturally

disrespectful because the Va is about the open space of negotiation. To put constraints around the Va would stop restrict it from opening up.

## ONLINE/OFFLINE

With the development of new technology, there has been an increase of young pacific islanders using the web as platforms; more specifically social networking sites to express their feelings about their culture. For instance there has been a lot of posts of images exploiting stereotypes from a humorous perspective of 'how we think we see ourselves' in contrast to 'how the world actually sees us' [Fig.10]. These images connect Pacific people not physically but through a virtual space. I find interest in the web being used as a space for expression and the play between public and private spaces. Readily accessible through any electronic device with an internet connection, people could browse the web and login to their Facebook profiles and update statuses, 'like' posts by friends, tell the 'public' how they are feeling with the use of emoticons and start full conversations with their friends from anywhere in the world.



Figure 10 Sourced from the Facebook page *Keeping up with the Solas*

## BOYS/GIRLS

The idea of gender roles are inextricably linked within my work. As Jemima Tiatias diagram presents the differences between the Pacific Islands and the Western perspective; Tongans also have their own differences on the different gender roles

that are linked to maintaining faka'apa'apa and anga faka Tonga<sup>16</sup> between people and family. For example, we could separate by generalised difference in a traditional value system:

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	
	Independent	Submissive	
	Masculine	Feminine	
	Political power	Higher status in community	
	Hard Labour	Light Labour	
	Outside	Inside	
Fakaleiti			Fakatangata

This table shows some of the gender roles, as I see them, within the Tongan culture intrinsic to the relationships between Tongans are their social roles. Typically men hold political power and sex specific roles over women<sup>17</sup> while the Women rank higher in the community.

The terms Fakaleiti and fakatangata are the Tongan translation for Like a lady (Fakaleiti) and Like a man (Fakatangata) which literally means gay. In my culture as I know it, if you are gay but not engaging in sex with another man or woman then you were usually ignored and remain unmarried. In many cases people in same sex relationships were considered a disgrace.

An artist who addresses these gender roles is Shegiyuki Kihara's triptych *Fa'afafine: In the manner of a woman*, 2004-5 [Fig.11]. Playing with stereotypes of the 'dusky maiden'; criticizing, deconstructing and reconstructing the gaze. Her first photo shows her reclined wearing a grass skirt with her chest bare, the second photo is her again the same position however this time she is in full nude. There is a striking difference in the third photo, positioned in the same manner as the other two however this time her penis is visible. The Va here is in the idea of assumption. My interest here is that the images pull you towards them however the judgement you initially make looking at the first photograph is challenged by the third forcing you to push away; therefore there is a push and pull happening occurring which I quite like.

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<sup>16</sup> Anga faka Tonga – Being a Tongan.

<sup>17</sup> This includes matapule (chief ceremonial officer), Punake (Poet), Faifekau (Priest).



Figure 11 Shigeyuki Kihara, *Fa'afafine: In the manner of a woman*, 2004-5

## METHOD

My method of approach is quite simple, I am trying to create an image that opens up all these sensibilities and thoughts around the Va, which has the sense of both restraint and release.

Before making art work I looked at how I first came into the world, the beginning stages and the influences in my lived experiences. I immediately looked at the household and school. The household where the initial teachings of my Tongan culture began following a structure that was influenced by the church and the school; where western teachings and its structure were taught.

I began thinking about these spaces; my home (traditional structure) and school (western structure) and my movements within them. I analysed that there was a sense of a subconscious performer evident in each of the spaces. By this I mean; at home I was more reserved and conscious of how to act and behave, instantly applying faka'apa'apa, using proper formal words around elders and remembering my hierarchy within the Tongan family structure. At school it was the opposite I had 'psychological freedom'. I was more open with my surroundings, I became more verbal, expressive and free. Free thinking and questioning were encouraged however I was still cautious and applying faka'apa'apa where necessary.

The subconscious shifts in performance was what interested me to use video as my primary medium. My choice of video was a result of my awareness of faka'apa'apa (respect); performing for an audience and a camera had different readings. In the case of a live performance; I would become more aware of my surroundings and how I moved within it, which affected the performance, becoming altered by that surrounding or atmosphere to make me feel comfortable; therefore aspects of the performance would be taken away and a different kind of performer (more conscious) would emerge. In the case of video performance I was more content performing to the lens; indirectly but directly portraying my emotions through a more subconscious thought through the means of the camera.

### POETRY IN MOTION



Figure 12 Traditional Tongan Tau'olunga

In the essay *Imperatives and Persuasion in the Conservation of Culture: Gender Constraints in Tongan Dance* (1990) Stephanie Reynolds describes the differences in Tongan dance, between Male and Female. She states that

“Women’s dancing embodied the characteristic features of the Tongan form: grace, subtlety and reserve, lack of literality, and minimal spatial and torso movements. Men’s dancing , by contrast, was more literal and less subtle, characterized by clear vigorous movements which involved less use of the lower arms and hands to portray abstract images. Often men acted out fighting with spears, or wrestling.” (Reynolds, p. 212)

The strength and power in the male movements and the female’s graceful and gentle movements are a reflection of the female and male movements in the Tongan society. The position in dances also reflect the hierarchies within its culture. Reynolds goes on to say “The contrast of male demonstration with female abstraction relates to the visual arts theory that women produce abstract images while men produce figurative forms. Because dance is a form of behaviour, the power of literal movements as demonstration is emphasized.” (Reynolds, p.217).

My choice to incorporate elements of Tongan dance is that it is an integral part of the Tongan culture, society, and history. Furthermore for the reason observed by Reynolds; that the movements metaphorically portray the relationships and behaviour within Tongan society. The dances are usually choreographed by the *punake* (poet - who is the story teller) who also writes the songs. The dance and songs always communicated in metaphors in respect of the Va.

I examined how the body moved and how the hands moved in conjunction with the legs and the *teki*<sup>18</sup>. On observation I became more interested in the graceful female movements. I looked more closely into the movements and became interested in the tension, extension, flexion and fluidity of the movements – specifically the arms and the gentleness and grace that they portrayed.

With my interest in the Tongan movements I fused both contemporary westernized dance with Tongan dance movements as if to suggest a merging of two things. Standing behind a fabric I sort to explore the space I inhabited. Touching the fabric every so often pushing, reaching out towards the camera creating tension and release

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<sup>18</sup> Teki is a movement motif quick jerk of the head to the side. Usually the most *Malie taha* (best dancers) is seen performing this motif and usually occurs when one is *Mafana* (inner feeling of exhilaration or warmth).



with the fabric and also referencing a sense of containment and the idea of the closet. Wanting to emerge but being restrained and contained by the Va (fabric).



Figure 13 *Touch*, 2013. Film Stills. 4mins 13seconds.

## EMERGENCE

The idea of emergence became an integral part of my practice. As a result of assimilation the idea of emergence is born out of one of the two ideals becoming successful in overriding the space. In relation to the Va (which is about nurturing and keeping the space), I observed that assimilation did not necessarily mean to take over the other; the opposing ideal was still there the dominant ideal was just changing it; much like a debate between parties where the opposing party would try to change the mind of the other, give reason and make understand.

With emergence in mind I looked at the how I moved around the frame of the lens, inhabiting the space, assimilating that space with my body. In response to this I created a work where I emerged out of darkness with a piece of fabric that covered me like a veil. The video begins as just a black frame then the 'event' (my emergence) occurs and then I decline into darkness and the video ends with a black frame.

The purpose of the fabric was to act as an extension of my body. When I moved the fabric moved with me. It abstracted and fragmented my body unable to recognize what was happening underneath the fabric. There are moments when the face



becomes evident then disappears again. I became interested in those 'moments' that occurred. Similar to the tension in *Touch* [Fig.13] there was a stretching and a navigation in the frame; assimilating the space in the frame. Which could easily point to the idea of being encased or within a womb.



Figure 14 *Untitled (veil)*, 2012. 3:40mins. Film stills.



Figure 15 Installation view

## TENSION

With the idea of tension I created two video works [Fig.16 & 17] of myself staring into the camera within the context of the home. In one video I have filmed myself outside referencing the male role; with an automatic shift in performance and becoming more masculine. The second video was again of myself inside the house also looking into the camera referencing the female role; shifting into a more feminine role appearing vulnerable.

After numerous installations of the work I finally positioned them facing each other. My intention was that upon viewing the work, they appear as two faces trapped within the box (television), contained and not quite able to observe both faces at the same time. As the title of the work suggests, the space between became charged with tension and every so often the gaze between the more masculine self and the feminine self would meet for a few seconds and then appear as if they were avoiding each other.



Figure 16 *Face off*, 2013, 3:30mins loop. Below: Detail view.



Figure 17 Detail of *Face off*, 2013

## MOMENTS/EVENTS

Thinking about moments in time, it interested me that these moments are events that occur for a period of time that are usually missed or over looked. Moments or fragments of the everyday.

The work *Abaude*, 2011 [Fig.16] by artist Luke Stettner is a video work of a butterfly with a broken wing, filmed from an aerial perspective. Motionless for 9mins the butterfly's only good wing suddenly flutters and thrusts into motion circling around the frame in what seemed to be a last desperate attempt at flight before exiting the frame. I was interested in this work because there was something quite beautiful of the stillness of the butterfly. The sudden last movements of the butterfly became the unanticipated event which lasted for a 1min 21seconds before the video looped and started again.



Figure 18 Luke Stettner, *Abaude*, 2012. Two Channel Video. Duration: 10mins 21seconds<sup>19</sup>

I realised that we are living in a technological world where everything is fast paced and moving forward and I quite liked the idea that this piece slows you down and brings you to a standstill. It becomes a piece of work where time has to be invested. Taking

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<sup>19</sup> Image sourced from <http://www.steneprojects.se/Luke-Stettner-USA>

this into mind I thought of the Va as a negotiation through time and space – meaning that the negotiation is endless and was not constrained to a specific time frame. An open space. I was interested in an idea Marcel Duchamp writes about which he states

“All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.” (Duchamp, 1975).<sup>20</sup>

Marcel Duchamp states that an artwork is incomplete without the artist and the audience. Their participation enhances the experience. There is a Va that co-exist between the three; The Art maker, the art and the viewer, which is determined by the spectator. There is an overlapping of the Art maker and the artwork in negotiating and generating ideas in the space they inhabit. The spectator enters and also inhabits the space therefore all three co-exist within the artwork.

In result of this I played around with the time frame of the works and created events<sup>21</sup> where time needed to be invested. Also with this I mirrored the time of the video with the ‘waiting time’. The name 2:15/2:15 [Fig.19] suggests that the work is actually 2mins 15seconds with a waiting time of 2minutes 15seconds, adding on to the idea of investing time. I created the work 2:15/2:15 where I merge out of the black space and into the frame with a veil over my face and performing hand motions similar to straining water out of a sponge that are the same motions seen in the preparations of Kava<sup>22</sup>. I twisted the fabric in my hands while it slowly crept over my head moving down past and revealing my face and ending up in my hands. At the end of the performance I move back into the black space and disappear for the 2minutes 15seconds before I reappear again performing the same thing.

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<sup>20</sup> Retrieved October 8, 2013 from <http://www.iaaa.nl/cursusAA&AI/duchamp.html>

<sup>21</sup> When I speak of events I am referring to the video and the movements; event taking place in the video.

<sup>22</sup> Kava is a ceremonial drink with men and a girl (to’ua) who serves the drink to the men in the circle. Usually seen in traditional ceremonies, it has now become a regular occurrence within homes.



Figure 19 2:15/2:15, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 3mins



Figure 20 Installation of work, 50" television.

## BALANCE

“Vā is closely associated with balance and harmony in relationships and the natural order and aesthetic of human interconnections and relationships. The Va is used interchangeably to describe aesthetic balance in art and architecture as well as aesthetic balance in relationships” (Mila-Schaaf, 2006, p.8).

Thinking about this I looked more closely at just the hands and its movements in the dance. I saw them as objects of storytelling and negotiation. I looked at the hands being a metaphoric and symbolic reference of the Va -- two things in negotiation. I became interested in the hands being a performative element that can shift between roles; the subtle, gentleness, gracefulness and fluid nature in contrast with the rough, vigour, and power they can also portray.



Figure 21 *Untitled*, 2013. Film Stills. Duration: 2mins 15sec

I filmed my hands and arms in various dance formations, colours and installations. Collating all the ideas I talked about earlier and extensive experimentation with the form of the hands I concluded that there was something about the colour black that added depth to the work, a kind of continuity that would suggest an on-going investigation of something.



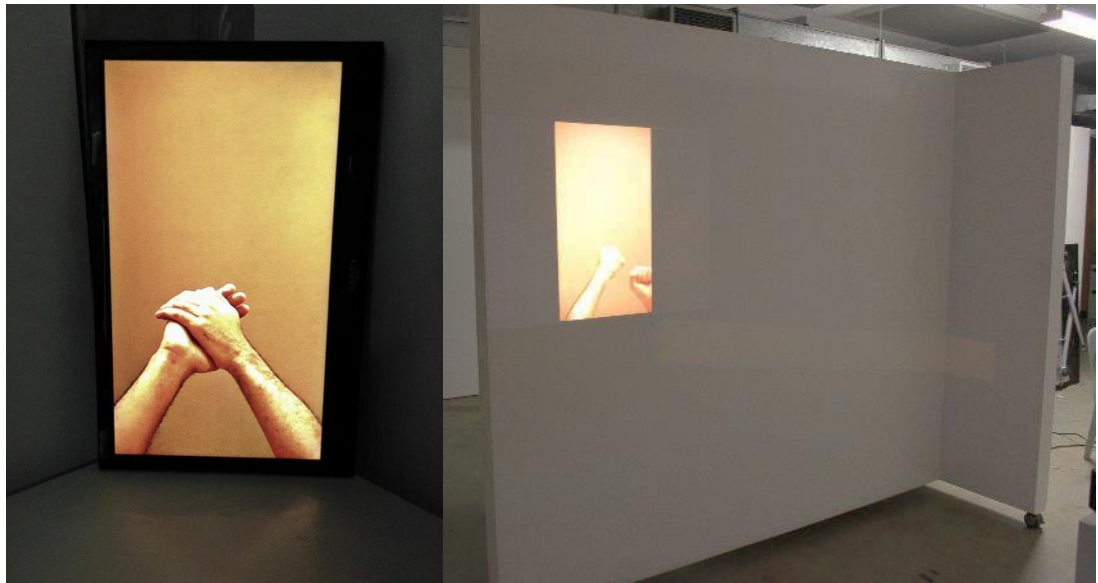


Figure 22 Installation tests – Monitor and projection

I played with the scales of the hands but found that it made sense to have them remain human size. I also did not want to display my work in a dark space because that would change the reading of the work, in the sense that it would become too theatrical and the work was not about that but about an honesty; an acknowledgement of self so I preferred it in a semi lit room.

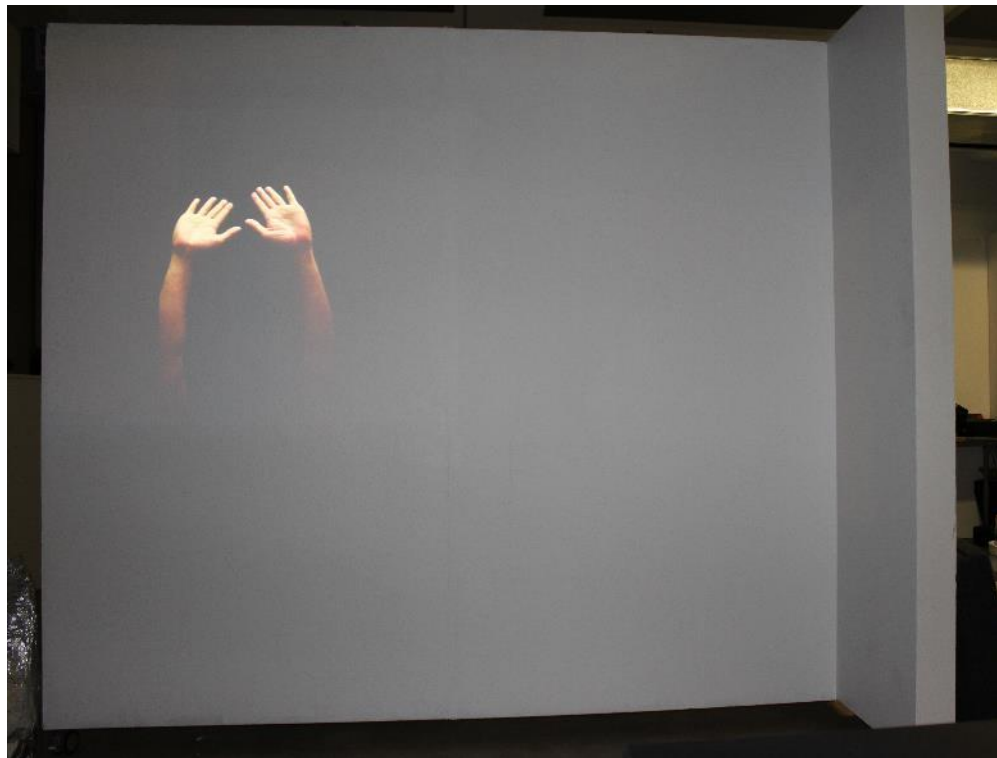


Figure 23 Testing different scales and lighting

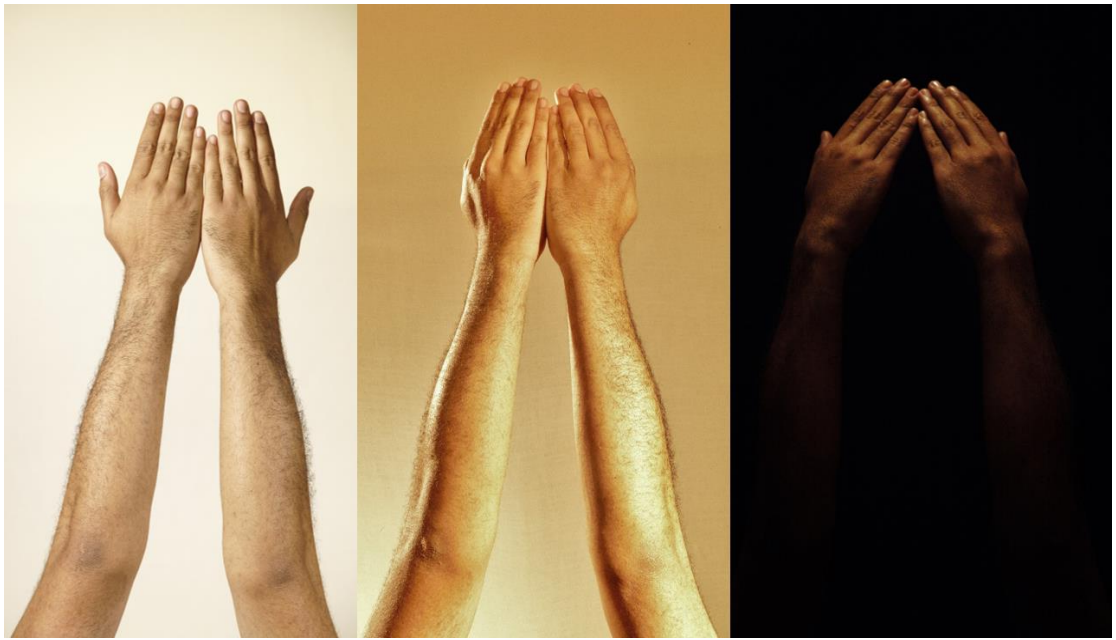


Figure 24 Test shots of different colours



Figure 25 *Untitled (flutter)*, 2013. Film Stills. 5mins

## CLOSE TO HOME

In the annual Tautai tertiary exhibition *Close to Home*,<sup>23</sup> I installed a projection of my hands directly on the wall entitled *6:15/6:15*, 2013. [Fig. 18] my intention was to show a sense of emergence from the wall to reference that idea of buoyancy; of floating on

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<sup>23</sup> Curated by Ahilapalapa and Melanie Rands sponsored by Tautai contemporary Pacific arts trust.



the wall. Aspects of the work would show it shifting in and out of the masculine and feminine. Examining the fluid movements of the hands I realized that this linked to the fluidity in the Va, the negotiation that happens within, that holds ideas of change, and becoming something else. It became a meditative piece which required the spectator to invest time.

I realized on installing the work that the luminous quality of the projected image took away from the fluid movement of the hands. I made the distinction that there was something about showing the work on a television that made it appear more crisp and fluid and err on the side of continual negotiation. Although I thought the installation was good and the frame of the projected image blended well with the wall, it seemed finished, in other words it became too resolved of a work and it took away from the idea of the open negotiation.

Thinking about this, I observed that the idea of the two would contrast each other well in the end of year work. There was a sense of danger displaying the work on a monitor in contrast with the projection. The danger I refer to is to do with the idea of a virtual and personal space the monitor presented. There was that sense of danger of a personal space being invaded. Because my work talked about the ideas of self-respect and being able to be myself, I quite liked the danger that someone can just walk on in or invade that personal space both physically and virtually. In contrast to the projection I saw it as this public thing which associated with advertisements, cinemas and open spaces and closed down the idea of a continual negotiation.

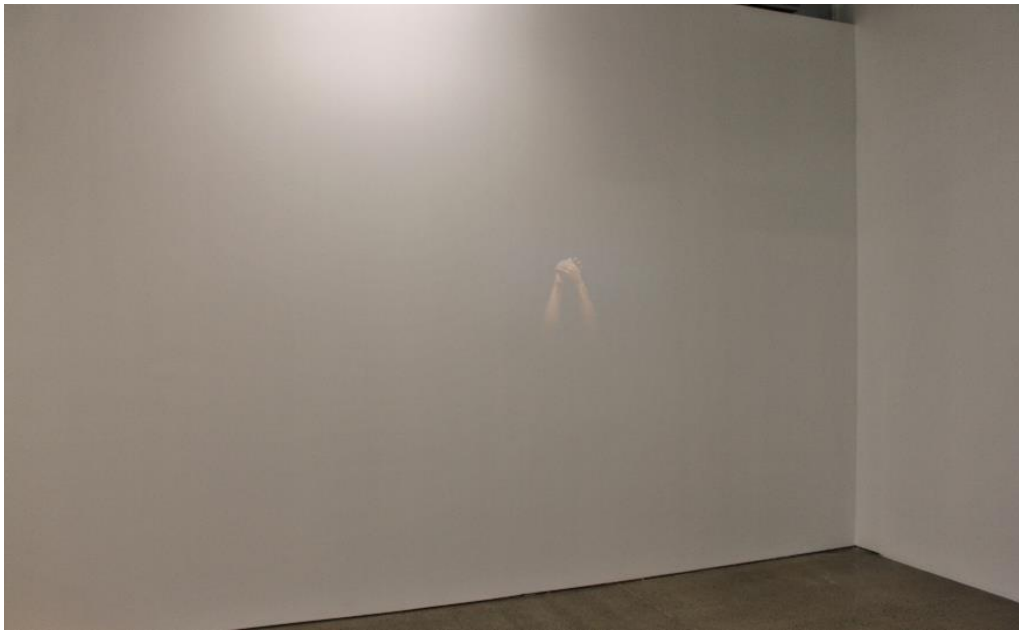


Figure 26: 6:15/6:15, 2013. Projection on wall. Duration: 12minutes and 30 seconds. From the exhibition *Close to Home*.



Figure 27 Detail view of 6:15/6:15, 2013 & installation view

## CONCLUSION

I agree with Albert Wendt when he writes that the Va is a space of negotiation and is not a closed space. This may be a way point project but for me and my practice it is not the end of my investigation, for the Va is an open space of a continual negotiation.

I could have approached the Va from many perspectives but I took a personal approach. My works are of my own thinking throughout the year, they are not illustrative but come from a deeply personal space and emotional territory. It is the space that is hardly acknowledged or talked about. The space that is overlooked because of ideas of offense and respect.

It is the fluid space that is always in constant change, always negotiating. With the realisations from the work in *Close to Home* for the thesis exhibition I will be looking at working with those ideas to create work for the exhibition that negotiate these things. The idea of the projection and the monitor, and the invasion of a personal and working space. Creating a space that seems to be in a continual negotiation that evoke a sense of fluidity.

If I had to pick things that I have learnt from these ideas it is that I had to find myself and be able to be that self. When will that happen? I do not know only time can tell. I am still constantly negotiating between things, places, and people. For now I wait for the moment when that unfolding event occurs.

## FINAL INSTALLATION

For the final exhibition I exhibited two moving image works both titled *Aubade*, 2013. The work had two screens, one screen of just my hands and arms performing an improvised tauolunga dance and directly opposite on the second screen was a moving image of me holding Tongan drum sticks with tassels performing a traditional tongan drum beat without the drums. The central idea was to create a space where the audience walked into the space and were immersed in between the two works and becoming part of the negotiation that was at play.

I had chosen the title *Aubade with a minute break* to title these works for the very reason that *Aubade* is a love poem or a song read between two lovers who meet and are about to part at day break. It is both joyful and deeply melancholic.

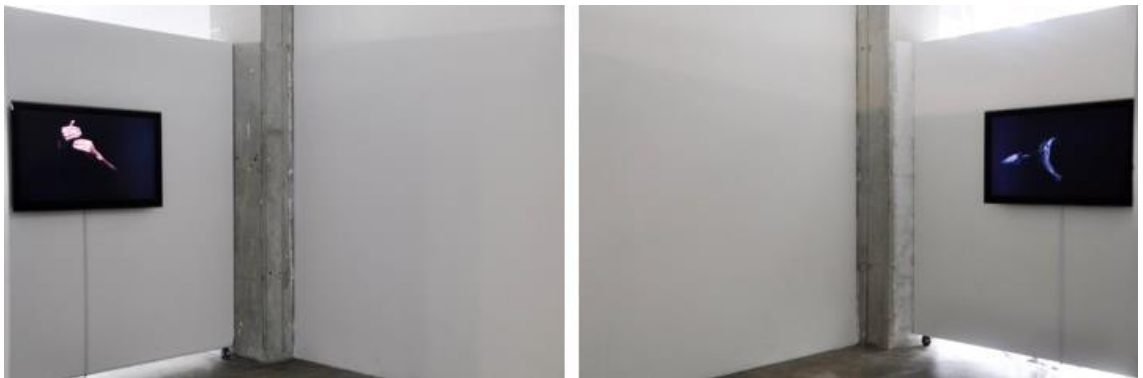


Figure 28 *Aubade*, 2013. Two channel work.

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## ARTWORK 2012-2013

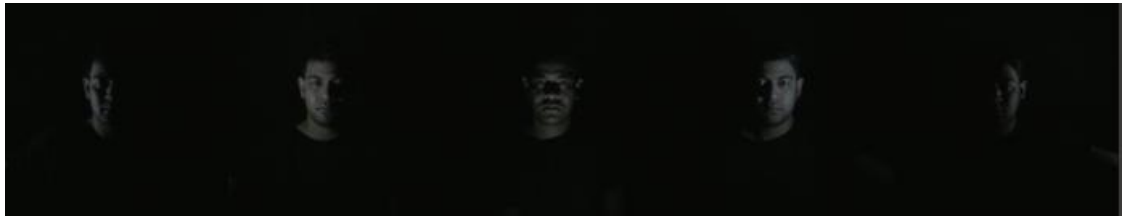


Figure 29 *Untitled, 2012*. Film Stills. Duration: 30seconds



Figure 30 *Untitled (Teki), 2012*. Film Stills. Duration: 2mins



Figure 31 *Untitled, 2012*. Film Stills. Duration: 2mins



Figure 32 *Untitled (Punopuna), 2012*. Film Stills. Duration: 1:30mins



Figure 33 *Untitled, 2012*. Film Stills. Duration: 2:30mins





Figure 34 *Turbulence*, 2012. Film stills. Duration: 7:25mins



Figure 35 *Untitled*, 2012. Film stills. Duration: 2:05mins

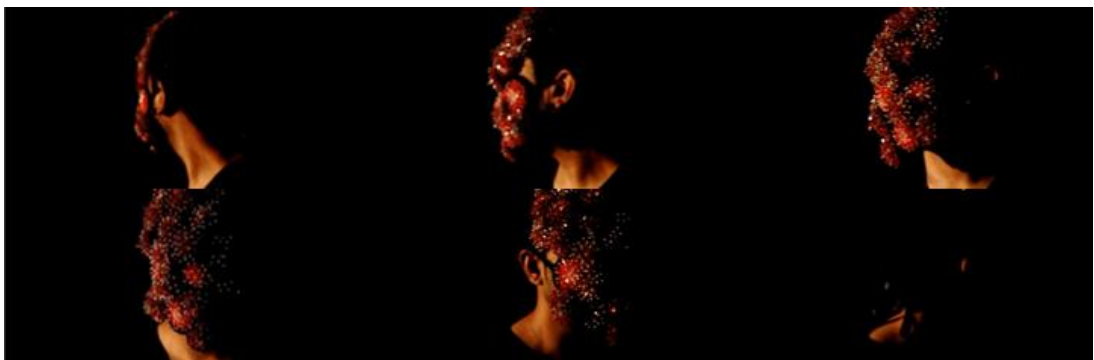


Figure 36 *Tafoki mihe maama (Turn away from the light)*, 2012. Film stills. Duration: 30seconds



Figure 37 *Sink into oblivion*, 2012. Film stills. Duration: 2:14mins



Figure 38 *Untitled (Virgin)*, 2012. Film stills. Duration: 2:14mins

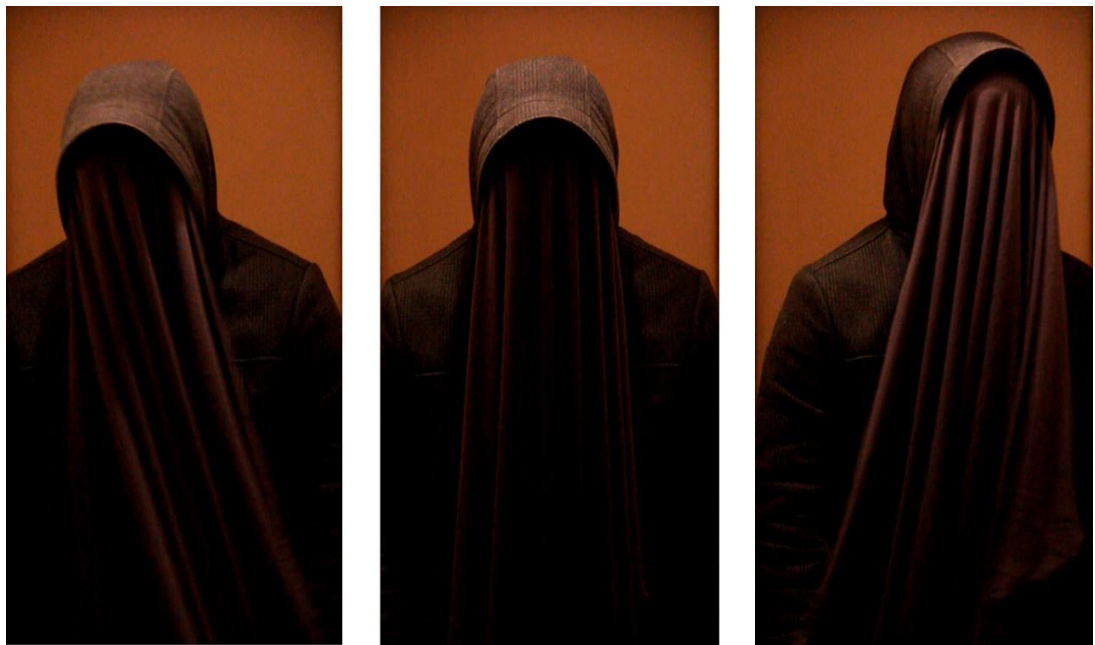


Figure 39 *Untitled*, 2013. Triptych film. Duration 3mins



Figure 40 *Untitled*, 2013. Film still. Duration 2mins



Figure 41 *Untitled*, 2013. Film still. Duration 2mins





Figure 42 *Overload*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 55seconds



Figure 43 *Touch*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 2:40mins

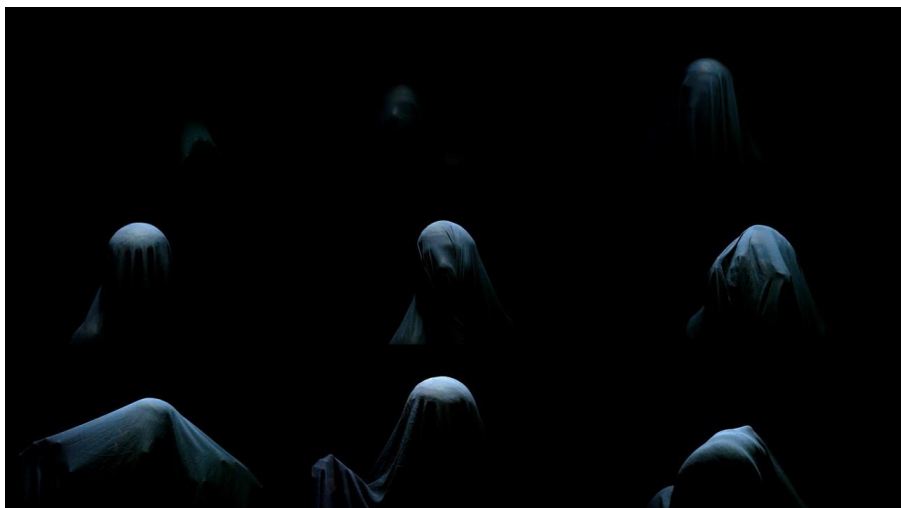


Figure 44 *Veil*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 2:45mins



Figure 45 *2:15/2:15*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 4:30mins



Figure 46 *Untitled*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 2:30mins

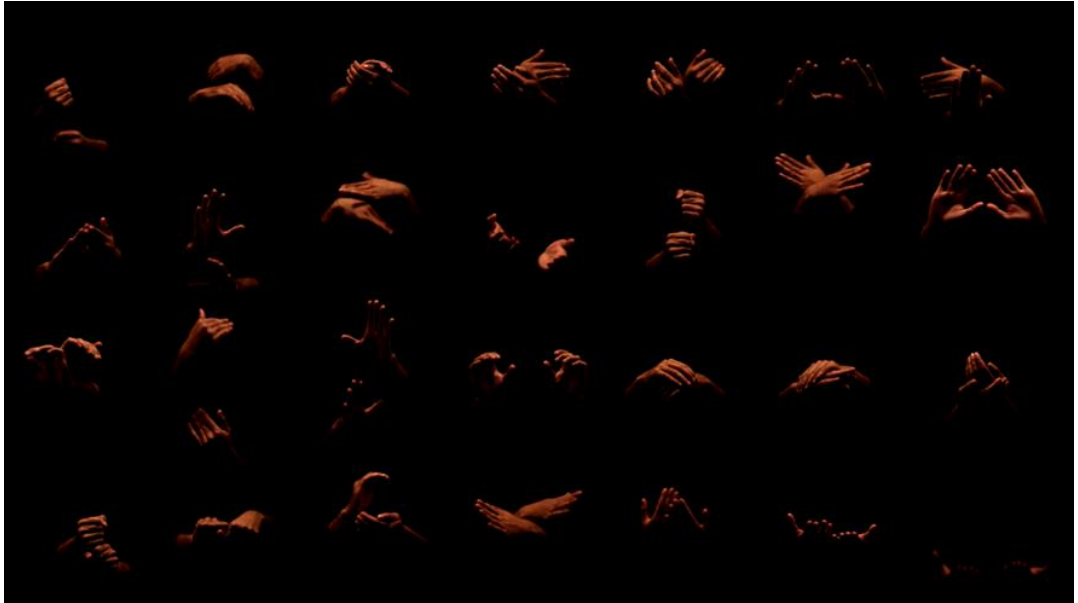


Figure 47 *2min with a minute break*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 3:00mins

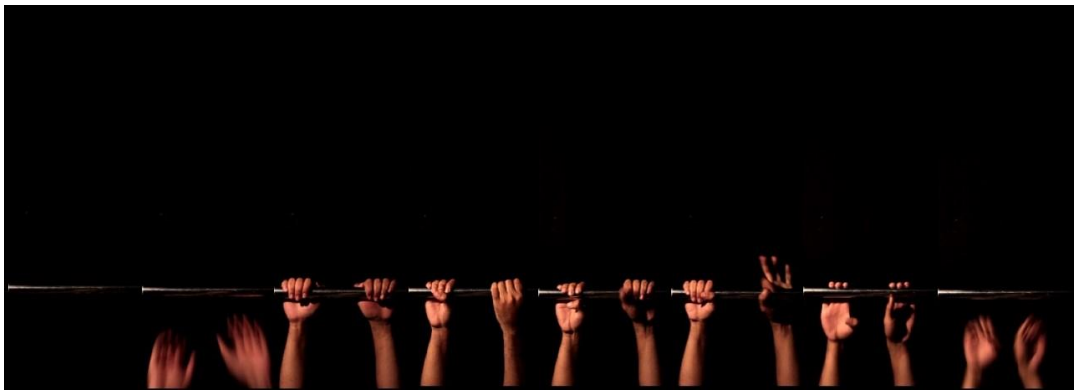


Figure 48 *Untitled*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 30seconds



Figure 49 *Face off*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 3:30mins



Figure 50 *Spin this way (School)*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 4:05mins



Figure 51 *Spin this way (Church)*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 4:05mins



Figure 52 *Left, right, center*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 1min



Figure 53 *Open, close, open close*, 2013. Film stills. Duration: 1min

## APPENDIX

### GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN VISUAL ARTS INSTALL



Figure 54 *Final installation for PgDip Exhibition, 2012*



Figure 55 *Detail of Turbulence, 2012.*



Figure 56 *Detail of Untitled (virgin), Untitled and Tafoki mihe maama (Turn away from the light), 2012.*



GIRLS WHO SHOOT / BOYS WHO DRAW EXHIBITION

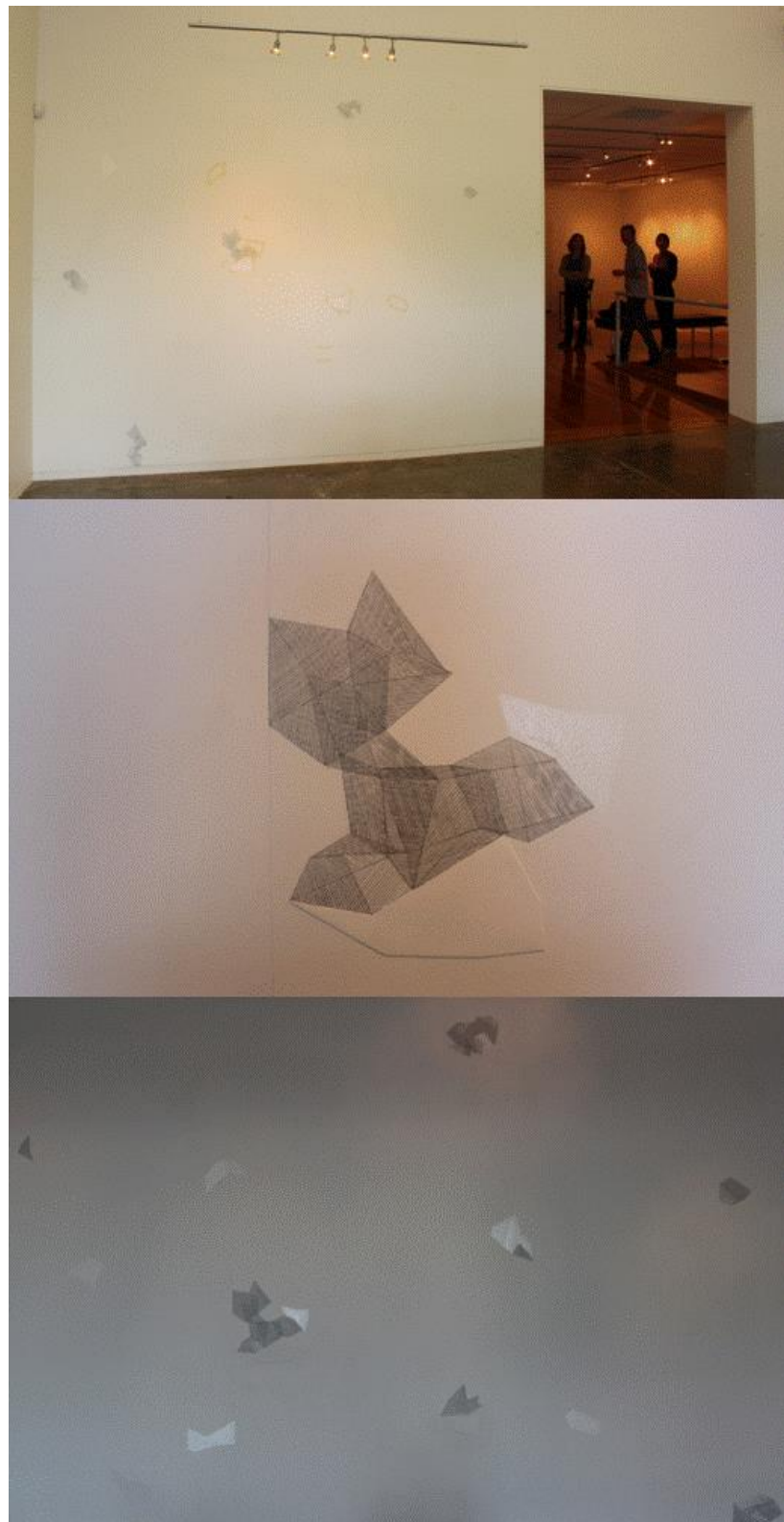


Figure 57 *Fragments of self*, 2012. Installation for GWS/BWD. Papakura Gallery.  
Curated by Janet Lilo.

## MOM: MEN OF MATARIKI EXHIBITION

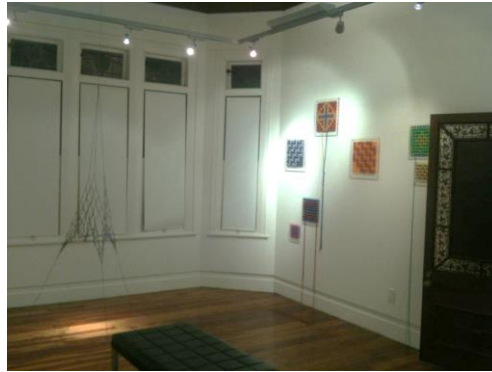


Figure 58 *Untitled*, 2012. 1000 rubberbands. Dimensions variable.



Figure 59 *Untitled*, 2012. Ink on watercolour paper. 300x400mm.

## CLOSE TO HOME

**Close to Home**

Opening 5 September 6pm - 8pm  
6 September - 18 October 2013  
ST PAUL St Gallery  
40 St Paul St, Auckland City  
Tuesday - Friday - 10 am - 5pm,  
Saturday 12pm - 4pm

**Artists**  
John Vea      Cora Wickliffe      Chris Ryan      Caleb Satele      Diana Alono  
Darrell Apelu      Pilimi Manu      Cordelle Feau      Salome Tanuwasa      Danielle Dooley  
Claudia Jawitt      Lucy Aukafolau      Sione Falelau      Paipai Fukutusi      Luisa Tora

**Curators**  
Melanie Rands & Ahilapalapa Rands

ST PAUL ST      AUT UNIVERSITY      WAIATAPU UNIVERSITY  
TAUTAI      creative nz      ASB Community Trust  
CONTEMPORARY PACIFIC ARTS TRUST      ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND - Te Aotearoa      Te Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri o Te Ika Māori



Figure 60 3:20/3:20, 2013, Images from the show. Curated by Melanie and Ahilapalapa Rands

## FINAL INSTALLATION OF THESIS SHOW

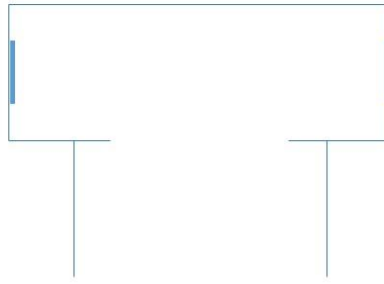


Figure 61 Layout of final installation

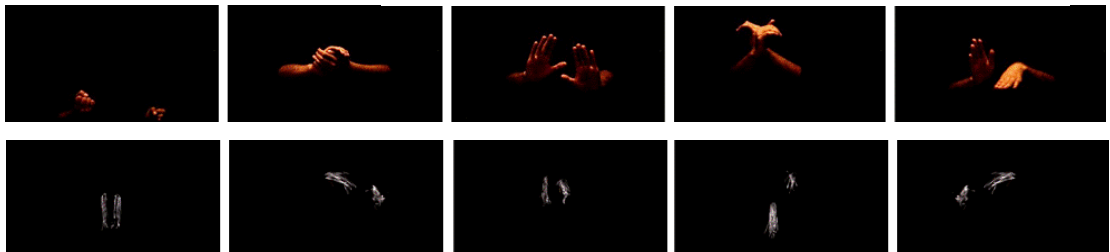


Figure 62 Deetail of *Aubade*, 2013

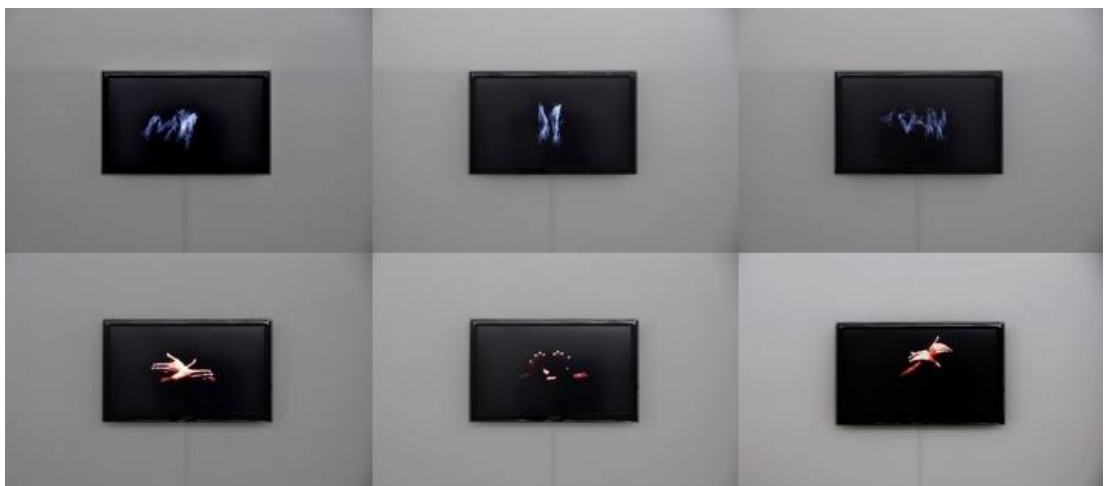


Figure 63 Installation of *Aubade*



