

**Through the Neighbourhood  
A Photographic Archive of Otabu**

**Elisha Oloapu**



Exegesis in support of practice-based thesis

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Master of Visual Arts

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## **Abstract**

In a rapidly evolving world, communities like Ōtāhuhu face pressures of gentrification, loss of identity and culture. This creative project researches how documentary photography can be a tool to explore how a community can preserve their identity in the face of these challenges, to overcome adversity. My practice explores ways that images might create an archive for our community to celebrate, and to inform future generations about the history of our community. This project is deeply rooted in memory, community, and the preservation of the 'Golden Times' in Otablu. Through my lens, I create a photographic archive that honours the characters, culture, and spirit of my upbringing. My practice extends beyond documenting faces or places. I aim to evoke the essence of a time from 2005-2015, when I remember the streets alive with connection, identity, and belonging. By putting My People, My Village and My Community in the limelight, I present an unfiltered view of the diversity that shaped the person I am today. At the core of it all, it is just me and a camera telling stories, recording history, and amplifying the voices of my locals here in this small part of South Auckland.

## Attestation of Authorship

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

Signed: 

Elisha Oluapu

27 May 2025

## **Ethics Application**

25/4 Through The Neighbourhood: A photographic archive of Otablu276 approved for three years until 10 March 2028.

## Dedication

This is dedicated to my late grandparents Agalufilufi Oloapu and Malo Oloapu. And my nana Ferila Vaimaila Poching, all your prayers are the reason why I'm here right now.



Figure 1. Photograph by a Church member. My late grandparents after church service, Grandfather (Malo Oloapu), Grandmother (Agalufilufi Oloapu), in Vaisala, Samoa. Late 80s.



## Trickster Manifesto “Homage To Home”<sup>1</sup>

This is for the Gangsters and Pastors, Dream chasers, Storytellers, Triple one dialler’s, Honest workers, promise breakers, Fence jumpers, Desk sitters, Beggars, Glow buggers, Ram raiders, Over achievers, Clowns, Crims, and Dealers, Pension holders, Wrench holder, Jandal throwing, Graffiti taggers, higher power believers, Drunks Feens fighters and lovers. The past, present, Old, New, Hood lifers and the newbies....

OTABLU 276.

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<sup>1</sup> After *Trickster Manifesto*, Danny Butt, Hemi McGregor, Natalie Robertson. *Trickster Manifesto*, Pataka Art + Museum, Porirua City: Ioana Gordon-Smith. Retrieved from <https://pataka.org.nz/whats/exhibitions/Mischief-Makers/>

## WHO I AM

Born with pride, from Samoan seas, I'm SOUTHSIDE.

Copped a degree, now gunning for 2.

Raised in the BLU, Stereotypes I went through.

Storms and struggles I broke those chains, built by pain,

Now down memory lane, here I explain.

Family call me Saia, true, Heart's always humble, circle few.

C.SIDE.E, the streets know, walked where most won't go.

Proper hood shooter, no wasted clips, I aim with light, not hollow tips.

Load my lens, not a gun, Shoot for truth, not just fun.

No ski mask, just camera tight, I pull focus, expose the fight.

Every frame speaks what we feel, No cap, my work is real.

See our world, they see just crime, But I capture pride in grime.

Tattoos church and hungry dreams, All my shots hold deeper themes.

From the Blu, I lift our name, Turn the pain into perfect frame.

Cuz, I don't just try, I show our wings before we fly.

## Acknowledgements

My beautiful, hard-working parents, Lu'ulau Oloapu and Uaita Sauoaiga Malo-Oloapu, thank you for the uncontested love you have shown and continue to show us. Also, my beautiful late aunty Vasati Gale, thank you for being my second mother and the part you played in my upbringing. My cousins Vao and Vaea, for your many sacrifices during our upbringing and for playing the role of our older siblings. My late cousin Jordan Pouafa Ainui. "One Promise at a time, brother"

My supervisors Dienneke Jansen and Natalie Robertson thank you for the time you've both put into teaching, supporting and believing in me, even though most of that time was spent on you both chasing me around asking for drafts, but most importantly thank you for giving a kid from SOUTH AUCKLAND, OTABLU!, A chance to try and make a difference within his community.

The whole Visual Arts department, thank you all for the part you have played right from undergrad to now. It was indeed a pleasure to have been taught by you all for 4 1/2 years. A special thank you Monique Redmond, Dorothy Tolentino, Isabella Rasch and everyone else who were involved with sorting out my legal enrolment issues during my 2<sup>nd</sup> semester, without you guys I wouldn't be in the spot I am right now, finishing of this thesis.

All the boys who made this journey a fun one, Kiso, Fotz, Blakz, Ice. The original 402 boys Bills, Vae, Tauey, Javan, Villz, Uaki, Tyler and Shocky. My uso matty from MDS. The T-War boys Ali, Slick and Gelu, thank you all for making this one of the best experiences ever.

Also, I would like to acknowledge a few of the boys who have passed during and after our shared time at Ōtāhuhu College, *Holomesi Paea, Nigel Fuatimu, Tomasi Jr, Siu Malamala, Siale Koloï and Owen Vae.*

My Siblings Simon, Gloria, Lufi and Abbey, love yous all.

#FREE.YG #FREE.THA.7 #FREE.OTABLU



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## **ŌTĀHUHU —Humble Beginnings (Backstory)**

My family moved from Samoa to Aotearoa, New Zealand, in August 2005. My parents called it the land of milk and honey, the land where opportunities came in abundance. We left behind a life my parents saw as having no future for us. They sacrificed literally everything for a fresh start for my siblings and me. My beautiful belated aunty Vasati housed us for months until my parents were ready to get our own place. There were 13 of us in that 4-bedroom house in Hutton Street, Ōtāhuhu. The time finally came when we moved out to our own place. We started renting a small 3-bedroom house on Nikau Road, Ōtāhuhu. I remember vividly peeking through the window as we packed our things into our new house's living room and seeing my cousin Vaea hand my dad \$500. That \$500 was stretched into buying our school uniforms, rent, bills and other household accessories. Our first meal as a family in our new home, we ate from an electric frying pan on the floor covered with a newspaper in a living room with no furniture. We were already two steps ahead of what life was like in Samoa. My parents weren't always around because they went from job to job. That's when the cultural shock kicked in. This was the side we had been sheltered from when we stayed with our aunty. We had a front-row seat to seeing police chases, fights, and the lives alcohol and drugs destroyed. I saw my first overdosed victim in 2010 at the park behind our house one morning when I was on my way to pick up a mate for school. "Overdose", I heard the cop talking into his walkie as I walked past on the opposite side of the footpath, I was too young to understand what it meant. The land of milk and honey we left everything behind for, quickly turned into a land of thriving or survival. But through it all, we kept going. My parents' dream was not wrong, it was just more complex than any of us imagined. That dream came wrapped in many sacrifices, long, cold nights, community paper runs and scrap metal recycling. But somehow, we found something fundamental in the middle of that struggle. It wasn't always sweet, but it was ours. Maybe that's what the milk and honey really looks like.

## **STREET ORIGINS OTABLU**

The term all started with a young man name L36 standing in the grind of a truck wash out in Sylvia Park. No gold medals. No parades. Just stained overalls, cracked knuckles, and a Sharpie. He tagged "Otablu" on an old workbench not for the world to see, but for the soul to remember. That bench became a shrine. One day, his youngins rolled through, saw the tag, and something clicked. Not just words, a movement. They carried it in their bones, and it spread like fire on dry leaves. The boys from Sturges Ave lit up first. Then the Walters Road boys, then follow by the boys from Seaside Park, the whole hood caught the flame. Otablu became more than a name. It was a war cry. A banner for the dreamers and the doers. For the hustlers, the heartbroken, the hopeful. The kind of word that makes your spine stand up straight. Now? It's how we breathe. How we bleed. Our sports teams chant it. Our local rugby league team wears it on their chests like Armor. It's no longer just where we're from. It's who we are, that's it, nothing more nothing less, that's the origins of the term OTABLU.



Figure 4. Photograph by Elisha Oloapu, Hot Box in the Hood, 2024. (Also featured in the Masters Showcase July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025 at Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery)

## Introduction

Our family's roots were humble and deep. My parents moved to Aotearoa with little more than dreams of a better life for us. They had journeyed across the Pacific, believing their hard work would transform our lives, a belief woven with sacrifice, love, and boundless faith. Growing up here in Ōtāhuhu as a Samoan kid was like being part of a woven mat, each thread representing family, faith, struggle, and resilience tightly knotted together. Our small house was always warm with the smell of food and the sound of laughter. It was more than just walls and a roof; it was where our family stayed grounded. Our community's life was whole and rich but also filled with struggle. We were surrounded by other hardworking families, many of whom were also first-generation immigrants from across the Pacific. Life wasn't always easy in Ōtāhuhu. It wasn't postcard New Zealand but was and is still my home. My parents worked relentlessly. Early mornings, long hours, no complaints. My father did heavy labour; his hands were rough and calloused, his shoulders carrying the weight of every dollar he earned. My mother worked as a bus driver, which meant twelve-plus hours a day, and still, she'd come home with the energy to prepare dinner for us and make sure we were good to go for the following day.

But Ōtāhuhu had a dual reality, our island of cultures on one side, and on the other a darkness cast by poverty and hardship. There were people who turned to gangs to survive, kids who were drawn into it because they felt it was the only path available to them. Street gangs and motorcycle clubs (MCs) were woven into our streets like streetlights, present and inescapable. Seeing blue and red rags and leather vest patches was as normal as knowing Monday comes after Sunday. They were like landmarks in our neighbourhood, as much a part of it as the old buildings and the bus stops. The gangs were a choice some made, often out of necessity rather than desire. They offered a sense of family, security, and purpose, things everyone needed but not everyone could find in the right places.

This project was never just about taking photos. At the outset, I asked two interwoven questions:

How can documentary photography explore intertwined narratives of gentrification, culture, community resilience and the struggles within Otahuhu, while creating photographic archives that celebrate my neighbourhood?

In what ways can photography be used as a tool, to show how my community can overcome adversity and preserve their identity in the face of challenges like gentrification, and how can these images educate future generations about the history of our community?

It was about drawing on my lived experience of growing up in this area. It's about using photography as a tool to create an archive of something that 'once was', with my community. Also preserving our community identity in the face of social challenges. Through an autoethnographic lens, I position myself not only as a photographer but also as a participant within my community. It comes from a place of wanting more for my people, more than headlines, more than mugshots, more than being misunderstood. I grew up in this community. These streets taught me everything. I've seen the beauty in us that the world chooses not to see. And it hurts—it really does—when we show up in the media. It is always in the worst light, like we're only worth looking at when we've fallen. That sadness sits heavy. But it also lit a fire in me. If anyone is going to tell our story, it must be one of us. Someone who knows how the church hymns echo throughout the streets on a Sunday morning, the way laughter fills a room even when not much is on the table. It needs to be someone who has felt that quiet strength in our families, even when life kept testing us.

I want to show my people the way I see them. With love. With dignity. With truth. As Kings and Queens, not because of crowns, but because of how we carry each other through hard times. How we keep showing up for each other, even when the world looks away. Because in the middle of every struggle, silence, and stereotype, there was always something powerful here. In our churches, we found peace. In our homes, we found love. In each other, we found understanding. That's what held us together. As quiet as they were, these moments remind us that we come from strength. That we are not forgotten and that our stories matter. And I'll keep telling them, for as long as I can, until the world finally sees us the way we've always deserved to be seen.

“Brown brother, even when they knock you down  
Never let ‘em keep you down, stand tall, rise for our people  
Brown brother, we aren’t the slaves, we the masters  
The future’s right now, proud Polynesian Panthers”.

Poetik. Brown Brother, 2017 <sup>2</sup>.



Figure 5. Nikau Rd street sign front of Pipe Band Hall Ōtāhuhu, Elisha Oloapu. We lived here from 2005-2015. Taken 2023. (Also featured in the Masters Showcase July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025 at Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery)

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<sup>2</sup> “Poetik - Brown Brother.” [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=poetik+brown+brother](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=poetik+brown+brother)



Figure 6. Elisha Oloapu, (SA) South Auckland, July 19, 2024.

## CHAPTER ONE — GOLDEN TIMES

My practice is deeply rooted in memory, community, and the preservation of what I refer to as the Golden Times in Ōtāhuhu. Through my lens, I create a photographic archive that honours the characters, culture, and spirit of my upbringing. The concept of Manatua in Gagana Fa'a Samoa (Samoan Language) is the foundation on which my practice is built. Within the Samoan language, Manatua is a complex term with many contexts, but simply means to remember or in remembrance of a person, time or place. Manatua is more than just a word; it's a reminder, a heartbeat of memory that carries the weight of who we are and where we come from. In our culture, Manatua means 'memory' or 'to remember,' but it runs deeper than the simple act of recalling. It's a spiritual call to acknowledge the stories, voices, and sacrifices that shaped our existence. When our chiefs speak of Manatua, they speak from the depths of ancestral wisdom, invoking the past—not to dwell in it, but to guide the present and inspire the future.

Throughout generations, Manatua has been woven into songs, chants, and stories passed down through oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> For example, a phrase used at funerals “Sā ola gāia i se olaga ia manatua” which means “they lived a life worthy of remembering”, was seared into my mind as a child. Our Samoan elders would use terms such as ‘O le olaga nei’ to refer to a non-existing physical realm which we shared with our ancestors. This reminds us of the great voyages, the love stories, and the battles that defined our lineage. Every word and note carried lessons of resilience, faith, and unity. Through Manatua, identity was preserved to ensure our people never forgot their language, customs, or place in the world.

My practice is not just about documenting faces or places, it's about evoking the essence of a time when the streets were alive with connection, identity, and belonging. This expanded documentary research project is contextualised by the art practices of

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from my Art Notion written theory in Year 3 Visual Arts, 2023, <https://elishaoloapu.wordpress.com/notion-manatua/>

Edith Amituanai, Raymond Sagapolutele, Janet Lilo, Emily Mafile’o, Ans Westra, and, importantly, L.A.-based Mexican photographer Estevan Oriol. My approach to art installation practice is primarily influenced by Janet Lilo and Estevan Oriol, who both have a strong documentary methodology.

My generation was born in Aotearoa, part of what some call the Pasifika urban diaspora. Art historian Dr. Caroline Vercoe (Vailima, Samoa, Aotearoa New Zealand) writes about how photographers Edith Amituanai (Aotearoa, Samoa) and Ane Tonga (Vaini, Kolofo’ou, Tonga) respond to this experience:

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. Edith Amituanai and Ane Tonga have photographic practices that speak to this thematic. While referencing their urban experiences living in Auckland, their work also reflects global experiences of migration, diaspora and belonging.<sup>4</sup>

Being a Samoan artist living in Tāmaki Makaurau, I have always called Ōtāhuhu and Vaisala (my father’s village in Samoa) home. Although I have only been back to Vaisala, Samoa twice since moving here in 2005, once in 2023 for my nana’s funeral, and again in 2025 for my Dad’s Saufa’l (Chief title ceremony). But despite only going back twice in a 20-year span right through my upbringing here, our Samoan values were burned into our identity. In our churches, we sang, prayed and preached in Samoan. At home, we were only allowed to speak our native tongue; every aspect of how we lived was Samoan. Those same values that were instilled in us as kids are what I still live by today, and it makes me even prouder to be Samoan. That’s why I carry my village everywhere I go. By putting my people, my village and my community in the limelight, I present an unfiltered view of the diversity that shaped the person I am today. At the core of it all, it is just me and a camera telling stories, recording history, and amplifying the

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<sup>4</sup> Vercoe, Caroline. *Journal of New Zealand & Pacific Studies* 5, no. 2 (October 1, 2017): 131–143, <https://aoauli.acca.melbourne/pdf/vercoe-place-1.pdf>

voices of my locals here in this small part of South Auckland. Today, Ōtāhuhu is a backbone for its residents, expressed in the meaning of the name. As the Tūpuna Maunga Authority states: ‘The name Ōtāhuhu is a reference to Te Tahuhutanga o Te Waka Tainui, which translates as the ridgepole of the Tainui waka / canoe.’<sup>5</sup> It refers to this strategic location between the two harbours of Waitematā and Manukau.

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<sup>5</sup> Tūpuna Maunga Authority. Ōtāhuhu (Mount Richmond). Website retrieved 13 May 2025. <https://maunga.nz/maunga/otahuhu>



Figure 7. Photograph by Elisha Oloapu, Uaita Sauoiga Oloapu. Neiafu, Samoa 2025.

## Documentary Photography

Photography has always been a powerful tool for storytelling, but when used for documentation within a community, it becomes significant in the way it preserves history, giving a voice to the people, and strengthening their identity. In low-income areas like Ōtāhuhu, where the narrative is often controlled by mainstream media, documentary photography plays a critical role in reclaiming the narrative and showcasing the reality of life in the neighbourhood. From our cultural traditions to everyday struggles and moments of joy, it ensures that the people and our experiences are remembered, understood, and respected. One of the reasons documentary photography is important in my community is that it fights against negative media portrayals. As an example of how this affects my generation, in 2018, hundreds of students from South Auckland united to change perceptions.

“Mentions of South Auckland are often tied to stories of poverty, crime and violence in the media which reflect on it largely Pacific population. But in a rare move, hundreds of youth from the area have united this week to push back against mainstream media messages about their community, which they say are wrong.”<sup>6</sup>

Through my photography, the presence of gangs is not treated as a one-dimensional stereotype, but as part of the layered reality of South Auckland life. Most gang members I know and grew up with are great fathers and my lifelong mates. For me, gangs are not just about violence or crime; they speak to belonging, migration, systemic struggle, and survival. By framing them with both dignity and honesty, I aim to hold that tension to show pride and pain, solidarity and stigma, while resisting the flattening gaze that often reduces gang members to caricatures. While the term Otablu was strongly connected to crip street gangs in our community in the past, today locals use this term casually.

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<sup>6</sup> Indira Stewart, “Youth Unite to Change Negative Perceptions of South Auckland,” Radio New Zealand, July 6, 2018.

My work is a response to harmful, negative stereotypes in media representation, perpetuated against Māori and Pasifika peoples. Jean M. Allen and Toni Bruce's discussion on the Paulo Freire's views on pedagogy of education mentioned:

“oppressor/oppressed relationship as the physical, spiritual and mental domination of one group or individual over the other, which results in the group and/or individual feeling, and sometimes believing, they are less human.”<sup>7</sup>

These images carry pride, history, and the resilience of people who have long been misrepresented by mainstream media, instead, highlighting the deep sense of culture, resilience, and unity that exists within the community. When the people within the community document their own lives through photography, a different story emerges, one of family, laughter, and hard work. As Dr Caroline Vercoe discusses documentary in Amituanai's work:

“Inspired by documentary photography and a commitment to community engagement, her images do not reflect the objectifying ‘othering’ that can characterize the documentary genre. Capturing more intimate and personal scenes and moments, they are characteristically set in the private space of home or community space of church, school or suburban street. At once distanced from her subjects, the images often have a familiar quality.”<sup>8</sup>

Like Amituanai, I work within the private spaces of home and community. These images counter the negative headlines and present the truth that there is more to this humble little suburb than what outsiders choose to highlight. I believe photography has the power to change perceptions, not just for those outside the community, but also for those within it. When people see images that reflect their lives authentically, it fosters pride and belonging. It reminds them that their experiences matter, that their struggles and victories are worth documenting, and that they are more than the labels society tries to put on them. Another critical aspect of documentary photography is its role in

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<sup>7</sup> Allen, J. M., & Bruce, T. Constructing the other: News media representations of a predominantly ‘brown’ community in New Zealand. *Pacific Journalism Review: Te Koako*, P 232, discussing the views of Freire, P. on oppressor/oppressed. <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/article/view/33/329>

<sup>8</sup> Vercoe, Caroline. *Journal of New Zealand & Pacific Studies* 5, no. 2 (October 1, 2017): 131–143, <https://aoauli.acca.melbourne/pdf/vercoe-place-1.pdf>

capturing the impact of gentrification. Low-income communities are often targeted for redevelopment. A Stuff News hub article *A Tale of Two Cities* showed a 2018 graph of Household Prosperity Comparisons (figure 8) that indicates just how far below Ōtāhuhu-Mangere household incomes sit in relation to other Auckland regions.<sup>9</sup> Since then, new businesses and rising rents have been pushing out longtime residents. The culture and history of the area are being erased in favour of door-to-door apartments.

Documenting change such as demolished homes provide evidence of what is being lost. It tells the stories of the people who have lived in the community for decades, only to be forced out by forces beyond their control. These images serve as a record, a reminder that this was once a thriving, close-knit neighbourhood before profit-driven interests took over. Ultimately, documentary photography within a community is about remembering. It ensures that the people, places, and stories aren't forgotten, even when change threatens to erase them. It provides a sense of continuity, connecting the past, present, and future of a neighbourhood. This act of remembering is everything. It's about capturing the Golden Times, the moments that made Ōtāhuhu what it is. The gangsters, the pastors, the dreamers, the go-getters, all of them have a story worth telling. Through photography, these stories are honoured, preserved, and shared with the world. And most importantly, they belong to the people.

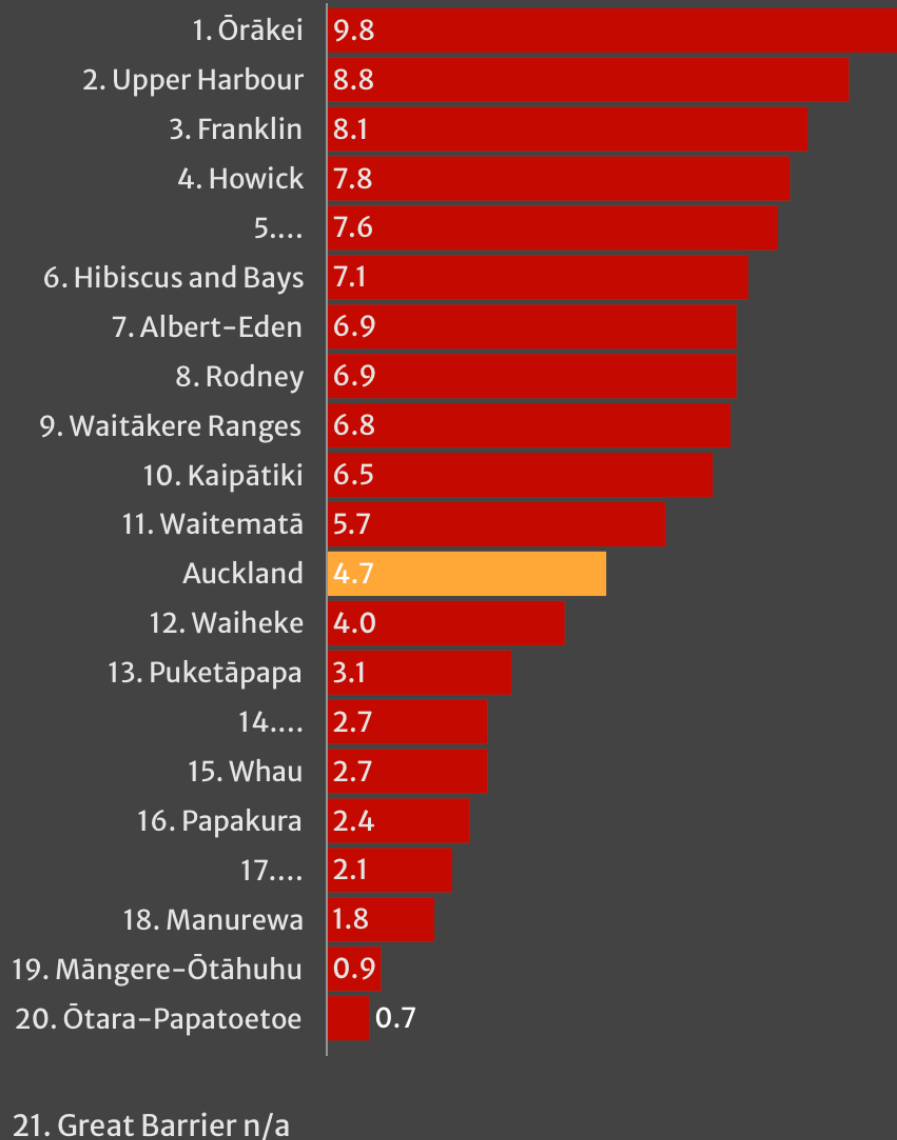
“South Auckland’s actually not bad, there’s a lot of talent here, a lot of willing people here, honest, you just have to get to know them really.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Shepherd, Carmen Parahi Simon. n.d. Stuff Newshub, “A Tale of Two Cities: The Inequality That Divides Auckland.” Date of access, April 02, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Sulia Pepa in Shepherd, Carmen Parahi Simon. n.d. Stuff Newshub, “A Tale of Two Cities: The Inequality That Divides Auckland.”

## Household prosperity comparison



SOURCE: INFOMETRICS

Figure 8. (Household Prosperity Comparison) 2018.

There is a history of photographers who have documented gentrification as a strategy of resistance at the intersection of race and class. For Samoans who came to New Zealand, Robin Morrison<sup>11</sup> documented their neighbourhoods, particularly Ponsonby and Grey Lynn, before they were gentrified. Allan McDonald documented houses on trailers as they were uplifted and removed.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Dienneke Jansen, documented the resistance to gentrification in Glen Innes with the project 90 DAYS+.<sup>13</sup>

Estevan Oriol is a well-established Mexican photographer who captured the street culture of Downtown L.A. in the early 90s.<sup>14</sup> He's the reason why I started this photography journey. One intriguing feature of his practice that I have always been captivated by is his work within the Chicano, gang and tattoo culture. Oriol's photography has significantly shaped his community by authentically representing Chicano and Los Angeles street culture, offering visibility and cultural pride to groups often marginalised or misrepresented. His work demonstrates the capacity of photography to preserve identity and history, transforming everyday people and places into enduring cultural symbols. In my own practice, I align with Oriol's insider perspective, using documentary photography to construct an archive that reflects the memory, spirit, and diversity of Otablu. A key point of divergence is Oriol's strong emphasis on gang culture, whereas I seek to broaden the frame to encompass nostalgia, resilience, and belonging beyond that singular narrative. Ultimately, Oriol's influence affirms the power of photography to honour communities, while I extend this by reframing my neighbourhood through joy, pride, and connection as much as struggle. I remember vividly, as a middle schooler in Year 7 (2010), I had printed an A3 image of Xzibit from the school library, which I pinned up behind my bedroom door, with the transparent watermarks that covered half the image. But I was hooked from then on, maybe it's his subjects that makes his photography great, or it's the monochrome stills of rappers and gang members that captivates me. This type of documentary

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<sup>11</sup> Edmunds, Bethany, Olivia Willock, and Auckland Museum. 2014. "Robin Morrison's work through contemporary eyes." April 14, 2014. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/stories/blog/2014/robin-morrison-s-work-through-contemporary-eyes>.

<sup>12</sup> Freedom Farmers, by McDonald, Allan Anna Miles Gallery. October 2013-2014. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://annamilesgallery.com/artists/allan-mcdonald/>.

<sup>13</sup> 90 Days+. Te Tuhi, 2017. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://tetuhi.art/exhibition/dieneke-jansen-90-days/>

<sup>14</sup> Estevan Oriol. "This Is Los Angeles." Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://www.estevanoriol.com>.

photography (figure 9). What follows is an internal monologue<sup>15</sup> about Estevan Oriol's work. Late August 2024, while planning for the exegesis.

*I don't really understand why that image. However, I looked at it for years and years until the paper started tearing, I threw it away when I was in year 10 (2013) when we moved homes, But it always gave me the urge to do something relating to it, At first I thought it was the tattooing part of the image, it was telling me to do, so I drew and drew, I got pretty good at it but it was not something I wanted to do, it felt like a chore. Long story short, I was in my last year in high school (2016) I had skipped a few classes in high school which landed me in after school detention, and part of detention was basically sit around in the library and wait until the teachers, felt like it you have served your time, mostly, it was only like forty minutes to an hour, easy lags\*. I was helping the librarian put away some books when a Hip-hop photography book caught my eye, so I took it and quickly flicked through and there it was, the same photo I had on my bedroom door all those years. (Photograph by Estevan Oriol). It was a full circle moment, like finally understanding what that image meant. Now, I'm here doing a master's thesis in photography.*

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<sup>15</sup> Internal Monologue, trying to recall when exactly I started wanting to get into photography, Late August 2024,



Figure 9. Photograph by Estevan Oriol of Xzibit., <https://www.estevanoriol.com>.

## **The Art of Visual Observation.**

Visual observation isn't just about looking and seeing, It's knowing the difference between what's there and what's missing, between what's changed and what's stayed the same. It's watching the corner dairy turn into a liquor store, then into an empty shell covered in tags. It's noticing which families still put out the umu (Samoan cooking method, similar to a Māori hāngī) on Sundays and which houses have gone quiet. Observation is how we remember. The old heads sitting outside the fish and chip shop, the kids running barefoot on cracked pavements, the faded murals that once told stories of pride and struggle. It's how we track time through the businesses that come and go, the cars that were slammed with exploding airbags now rusting in driveways, the gang colours that shift with new generations. Change is constant, but the art of observation keeps us rooted. It teaches us who we are, who we were, and where we're heading. It's why I pick up my camera to catch the details others might miss, to document the beauty and the struggle, to hold onto the past even as the future reshapes our streets.

## **Navigational languages (Landmarks)**

“Sau sā'o a, pasi le supa-makeki, le fale gae le kulimagu” (Come straight, past the supermarket to the end of the street, then it's the house on the corner), “Uma loa le solofanua, pasi le fale pamu pegesigi agavale I le uati gae fa'afesaga'l le Star pub, (After the horse statue, go passed the gas station, then left at the clock tower opposite the Star Hotel pub). These are directions I've heard countless times growing up, as my parents were guiding family members to our house. Landmarks weren't just coordinates, they were the language of our community, shorthand woven into everyday life. I didn't get my first phone until I was in Year 13. Before that, plans were sealed in person, bound by trust. “Cuz, Sturges 5:30” (meet at Sturges park at 5:30 or implying that one of the boys was going to have a one outs) or “mirrors, after school” (A real popular takeaway spot, to grab a munch, back then for all the students). Our views on landmarks within this system means people, properties, or fixed structures. This form of communication, while informal, functions as a sophisticated system of spatial literacy. It

is something passed down through intergenerational dialogue, observation, and participation. For those unfamiliar with the cultural context, it may appear as fragmented or non-standard English. However, to our community members, it is a vital, dynamic, and intuitive method of orienting oneself in both physical and social space. The dialect of English spoken within my community is not merely slang. Rather, it constitutes the everyday language of the youth in the hood. Communication is often abbreviated into key phrases rather than fully structured sentences, where a reference to a place or time alone is sufficient to convey meaning.

For example:

Standard English: *“Hey bro, do you want to grab lunch in an hour?”*

Hood dialect: *“Munch soon, cuz?”*

Though seemingly simple, this mode of speech embodies pride, belonging, and authenticity. It reflects a collective identity deeply rooted in place and experience. My artistic practice is grounded in memory, honour, and identity: memory serves to preserve our stories; honour ensures that these narratives are represented with integrity and respect; and together they reinforce a strong sense of self and community. Viewed through this lens, my photography functions as both a record and a representation of Otablu from within, allowing the voices of my people to articulate their own truths.



Figure 10. Photograph Elisha Oloapu, Shopping strip Ōtāhuhu, 2023.

## CHAPTER TWO — OTABLU4LYFSTYLE

### Methods:

*Documentation* as a photography method plays a vital role in capturing the essence of a community and amplifying its voices. By documenting everyday life, significant events, and personal stories, photographers can create a visual narrative that authentically represents the community's identity. This method involves more than just taking photographs; it requires an immersive approach where the photographer engages deeply with the subjects, understanding their experiences and portraying them with sensitivity and respect. I align with Māori Ngapuhi photographer John Miller's approach to photographing immersing himself 'in the thick of it', who says "I tend to support the causes that motivate such protest, rallies or meeting"<sup>16</sup> Through this process, I can showcase the richness and complexity of my community, providing a platform for residents to express their opinions, share their stories, and reflect on their collective experiences.

By presenting a nuanced and multifaceted view of the community, my photographs can challenge preconceived notions and counteract negative stereotypes that often drag our community's name through the gutter. Through careful, respectful documentation, photographers can reveal the community's strengths, resilience, and vibrancy, offering a more accurate and humanised depiction. Documentation as a photography method helps create a visual archive that preserves the community's history while fostering understanding and empathy. It allows for an authentic portrayal that captures the physical and cultural landscape and elevates the voices within it, promoting a more inclusive and truthful narrative.

I wish to acknowledge a community of Pasifika photographers before me who have taken up the camera to tell their stories within their communities. They may not have directly shaped my work, but their legacies cleared the way for my generation to

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<sup>16</sup> Hana Pera Aoake, & Morgan Godfrey, "On photographer John Miller and an activist's lens," The Spinoff, August 14, 2021, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/14-08-2021/on-photographer-john-miller-and-an-activists-lens>.

express our creativity through our making. The early work of Greg Semu documenting the practice of Tatau “O le Tatau o Samoa / The Tattoo Arts of Samoa is a significant early example<sup>17</sup>. Yuki Kihara is the first and only Samoan photographer to represent at the Venice Biennial.<sup>18</sup> Tuāfale Tanoa’i, also known as Linda T, exemplifies a powerful, community-activated approach to documentary photography and portraiture. Her practice moves beyond traditional documentation; as it is grounded in participation, presence, and genuine connection. As both a photographer and DJ, Tanoa’i engages directly with the communities she represents, capturing cultural events while also contributing to the energy of those spaces. She describes her work as a way of visualising communities and individuals often misrepresented or overlooked in mainstream narratives. Through recorded interviews, photographs, and soundscapes, she builds a living archive that not only preserves memory but also uplifts and affirms identity within the communities she works with. Tanoa’i’s work challenges dominant structures of representation by creating space for Pacific voices to be heard on their own terms. Rather than taking an outsider’s gaze, she positions herself within the communities she photographs, allowing for an exchange built on trust and respect. Her portraits aren’t just images; they’re acknowledgements. They carry mana, embodying lived experience, humour, struggle, joy, and pride. Tanoa’i stated:

“This socially-engaged practice inspires artists like myself to consider how photography can be more than art; it can be service, legacy, and resistance, especially when rooted in the people and places that raised us”.<sup>19</sup>

There are several photographers who have documented their Pacifica communities in Aotearoa. For decades now, Evotia Tamua has documented her communities, while making a living as a successful commercial photographer.<sup>20</sup> Manurewa-based photographer Emily Mafile’o explores Tongan identity and diaspora experiences that blend documentary approaches to create emotionally powerful images that speak to

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<sup>17</sup> Greg Semu. n.d. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://www.gregsemu.photography/tatau>.

<sup>18</sup> Yuki Kihara. 2019. 2019. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://yukikihara.ws>.

<sup>19</sup> Lana Lopesi, (ed.). Pacific Arts Aotearoa. The powerful and dynamic legacy of Pacific arts in Aotearoa, as told by the artists themselves. 2023. Penguin NZ.

<sup>20</sup> Evotia Photography. n.d. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://www.evotia.co.nz>.

cultural belonging. Within the body of work titled, *Killer of a Time 2013-2024*, Mafile'o photographed an active gang member named 'Killer', in "an intimate observation of the freedoms, ties and violence that framed his life, woven together with glimpses of *anga fakatonga* (Tongan way)" <sup>21</sup> Her influential series *Humans of the Islands* offers insights into how environmental portraiture can explore connections between people and place, particularly in cultural contexts. She also speaks about the importance of representing ourselves. 'I believe in the importance of my people taking the responsibility in documenting our own culture. Telling our own stories. Finding a position in photography that allows me to convey my thoughts and people's experiences without disrespecting my culture. If it is the truth, then I am happy with that.' (n.d, The Coconet).<sup>22</sup>

Ane Tonga's Grills series offers a warm insider view of a particular Tongan cultural practice of gold tooth decorations, called Nifo Koula (Vercoe, 2017, 139).<sup>23</sup> *Grills* is about relationships. As Vercoe stated across the various video dialogues, a relationship develops as the different narratives thread over and through each other.

Edith Amituanai has been a profound influence on my work as a keen observer of social movements. Her work around the Sirens scene (figure 11) has influenced how I view space from an installation perspective. <sup>24</sup> The siren scene has been around our neighbourhood for years; It was a lifestyle I'm very familiar with, because I too was one of those little menaces at one point in my upbringing. It has always been a cultural thing in South Auckland, so, seeing it displayed and celebrated is a big win.

A photograph of mine that shares similarities with this whole siren culture is titled *Since knee-high* (2024), (figure 12) from a developing body of work named (LYFSTYLE). Through (LYFSTYLE) I document the crazy bike lifestyle of the youth within South Auckland, that has taken the rest of Aotearoa by storm. Amituanai's photography has methods that align a lot within my practice. Throughout her work the concept of home, or the idea of home is always at play. In her earlier works like *Miss Amituanai*, 2005,

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<sup>21</sup> Emily Mafile'o. May 26, 2021, Accessed 5 September, 2025 <https://vunilagivou.com/tag/emily-mafileo/>

<sup>22</sup> Emily Mafile'o, *Humans of the Islands* <https://www.thecoconet.tv/cocoblog/humans-of-the-islands-emily-mafileo/>

<sup>23</sup> Ane Tonga - Grills." 2014. May 30, 2014. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://anetonga.net/grills-1>.

<sup>24</sup> "SIREN culture." 2016. Edith Amituanai. 2016. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://edithamituanai.com/SIREN-culture>.

(figure 13). The work is a representation of beauty and cultural identity, in the settings of what every Samoan living room looked like in the early 2000's, being of Samoan descent myself this work resonates with the communities we are from.



Figure 11. Photograph by Edith Amituanai, Snow White battles the Siren king, 2018



Figure 12. Photograph Elisha Oloapu, Since Knee-high 2024. (Also featured in the Masters Showcase July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025 at Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery)



Figure 13. Photography by Edith Amituanai, Miss Amituanai, 2005



Figure 14. Photograph Elisha Oloapu, Lotu Tamaiti, 2023 (Children Sunday or White Sunday)

Raymond Sagapolutele is someone I consider a mentor, both personally and professionally. He also taught me during my undergraduate studies, where his approach to photography left a lasting influence on the way I think about image-making and cultural responsibility. A key aspect that runs throughout his practice is grounded in the Samoan concept of *fāgogo* the traditional art of storytelling. Through *fāgogo*, Raymond not only preserves cultural narratives but also reimagines how stories can be told through contemporary photographic language. While *fāgogo* is not an explicit framework within my own practice, the principle of reciprocity is deeply embedded in the way I approach storytelling and *talanoa*. Like Raymond, I see *talanoa* as an evolving form of dialogue, one that moves between shared experiences, open conversation, and collective memory. The connection between storytelling, *talanoa*, and reciprocity forms the foundation of how I engage with my community and subjects. It ensures that my work is not just about representation, but also about maintaining respect, balance, and mutual exchange between myself and the people whose stories I am privileged to share. In his 2018 Master of Visual Arts exegesis, he states:

“I have found that *Fāgogo* as a methodology works to frame my lived experiences as a diasporic in a way that holds to the established practices of my Samoan heritage”.<sup>25</sup>

Sagapolutele, goes on to say he doesn't use the established format of narrating a story to an audience, but rather the narrative of his life and reworking them into a lens-based practice.

## **Methodologies**

Reciprocity through *Talanoa* is my core methodology. To gather community input and their stories, I talk with or have a *Talanoa* with them, and in the act of reciprocity, I photograph them to be a part of this community-based project, and at the end, they have their prints back. The teachings of *talanoa* derive from being raised in a *Pasifika* home and environment, where it occurred at family gatherings and acted as a vessel

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<sup>25</sup> Raymond Sagapolutele, “Tama Samoa, Tama Aotearoa. *Fāgogo*, *Talanoa*, *Vā*, Photography, and the Diasporic Samoan Reference in Aotearoa.” 2018.

that brought all together to connect through sharing stories and memories of each other's pasts. For this research talanoa or conversations occur in places that are family-oriented, such as homes and public places where family gatherings have occurred. This process of using Talanoa within my community enables them to be co-creators of the artworks. I see this part of my methods that surround the ideas of *oneness*, as Dr Manulani Aluli-Meyer's 'essay Indigenous Epistemologies writes.<sup>26</sup>

The concept of Manatua in the Gagana fa'a Samoa is both a method and an art practice in this research project. Using reciprocity as a method in documenting my neighbourhood not only enhances the depth and authenticity of the documentary work but also empowers our people by giving them a platform to voice their experiences. By engaging in conversations, attending local events, and participating in everyday activities, I can gain insights into the lives and perspectives of the locals I document. This approach ensures that the resulting images are not just snapshots but are imbued with the essence of the community's spirit and heritage. This method also addresses ethical considerations in documentary photography. It promotes respect and dignity for the subjects, ensuring that their stories are told with their consent and involvement. Reciprocity fosters a sense of ownership among the residents over the photographic archive, making it a true representation of our collective memories. This is evident in my photography through the act of transforming ordinary moments into collective memories. By documenting the people, spaces, and lived realities of Ōtāhuhu, my practice constructs an archive that resists erasure while honouring the 'golden times' of my community.

## **Art of Installation**

My installation practice comes from wanting to place my photographs and videography of my community within an art setting. Each element within my installations represents a certain group of people within my community. It is a way of honouring them and their

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<sup>26</sup> Manulani Aluli Meyer, Yvonna S Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. "Indigenous and Authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning." Essay. In *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, edited by Norman K Denzin, 217–33. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008

lives, and the types of people that they associate within the four corners of Ōtāhuhu, from Seaside Park to Mount Richmond, down to Middlemore and across to Toby's Seafood. Installation brings my project to life, through visuals and feelings. I wanted to explore how it affects the human senses by what they see, hear, and feel. The seeing is the photographs along with the videography, the hearing is the everyday sounds of my community, car noises, police sirens and helicopters and also some hip-hop, g-funk, rap music to bring that old school feel. Subtle installation methods are used to communicate the feeling itself.

For my end-of-year showcase in 2023 (Figure 16), I wanted to push things a little further to be more experimental with my setup and include elements that carried real meaning. The LED light panels were a no-brainer. I wanted the viewer to feel like they were standing in the streets at night. Those lights represent more than just atmosphere; they speak to the streetlight culture we grew up with in our area. As a Samoan kid growing up here, 7:00 pm was a sacred time for family lotu (evening prayer). It also happened to be the moment the streetlights came on. No matter where you were, once those lights flicked on, you had to be home, ready to pray. That's the meaning behind the streetlights; they weren't just lights, they were timekeepers, cultural cues, part of the rhythm of our upbringing. The milk crates are another nod to our shared childhood. That laid-back feeling of chilling outside the dairy, pie in hand, chilling it with the boys before or after school is a vibe, but it's also a memory that runs deep. It was where we broke bread, even if it was just one pie between four of us; everyone ate, no matter how small or big the food was. That's part of our culture too, making do, sharing, connecting. Then there's the lightbox, which represents the old bus stops covered in graffiti. That was just part of the scenery. A clean bus stop? That wasn't normal. If it didn't have tags on it today, it'd be covered tomorrow. It was all part of the environment in which we grew up, and it shaped how we viewed the world. These three elements, the lights, the crates, and the bus stop, were the first installations I experimented with during my final undergrad showcase. I never once ever viewed them as props, I saw them as stories, memories, and a reflection of where I come from.

Janet Lilo's *Right of Way* (2013) is a multimedia installation that weaves together photography, video and sculptural elements to explore the dynamics of community, identity and shared spaces.<sup>27</sup> Her decision to create a large photographic format from standard 5x7" commercial prints and install it across the entire wall gives the viewers an immersive experience, as if they are standing in the settings of her driveway. This is something I look to replicate within my own installation work, giving the views that immersive experience.

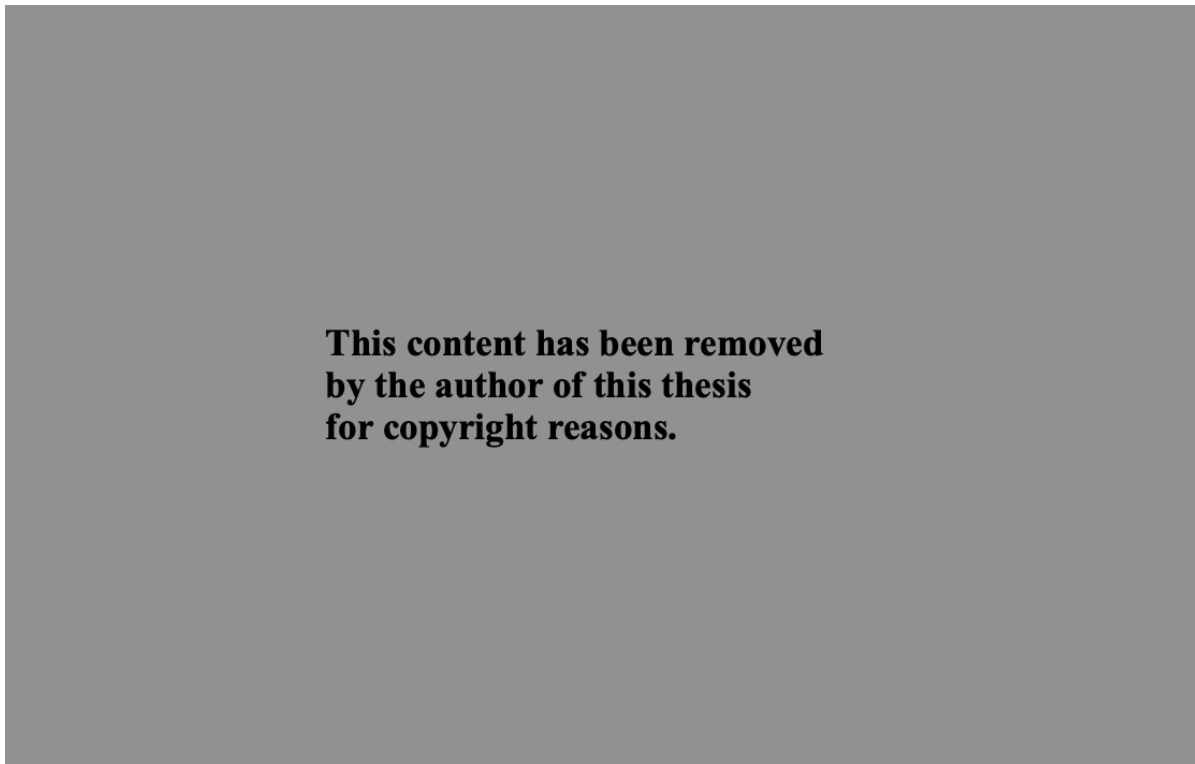


Figure 15. Janet Lilo, *Right of way*. Google images. 2013, <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/page/5th-auckland-triennial-janet-lilo-artspace>

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<sup>27</sup> Janet Lilo, "Right of Way," Auckland Art Gallery, 2013, <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/artwork/26862/right-of-way>



Figure 16, Elisha Oloapu, Final year Bachelor of Visual Arts showcase, 2023.

The mapping installation idea came from a popular video game named Grand Theft Auto (GTA). Video games were something monumental during my upbringing. It kept us indoors when my parents were out working late at night. The game kept us locked in for most nights when they had left. The map of the game (figure 17) has always captivated my attention: the icons, colour palettes and the feeling of knowing exactly what you are surrounded by. During my Master's project, I expanded this further, igniting my practice and developing this into a creative obsession with maps and mapping, also linking to the navigational language I mentioned earlier in the exegesis, which my art making has already explored. Joining the two created a whole new perspective on the possibility I saw my practice heading towards. I started improving the mapping installation through a moving image work (figure 18), a mix of multiple image slide shows projected onto a screen-printed map. I found out quickly that it was too busy. The idea was great, but I could have executed it better. At first, the selection of images did not complement each other. However, then I had to remind myself that my community has people whose life is the opposite of their neighbours, and it all ties back into the gangsters and pastors are neighbours, trying to accept the Vā we have as a community. The streets are the dividers and connectors; they are what bind and separate us as a community.



Figure 17. GTA 5, Map, Online Screenshot  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/gtaonline/comments/sgpsb9/how\\_do\\_i\\_get\\_rid\\_of\\_the\\_blue\\_icons\\_they\\_appeared/](https://www.reddit.com/r/gtaonline/comments/sgpsb9/how_do_i_get_rid_of_the_blue_icons_they_appeared/)

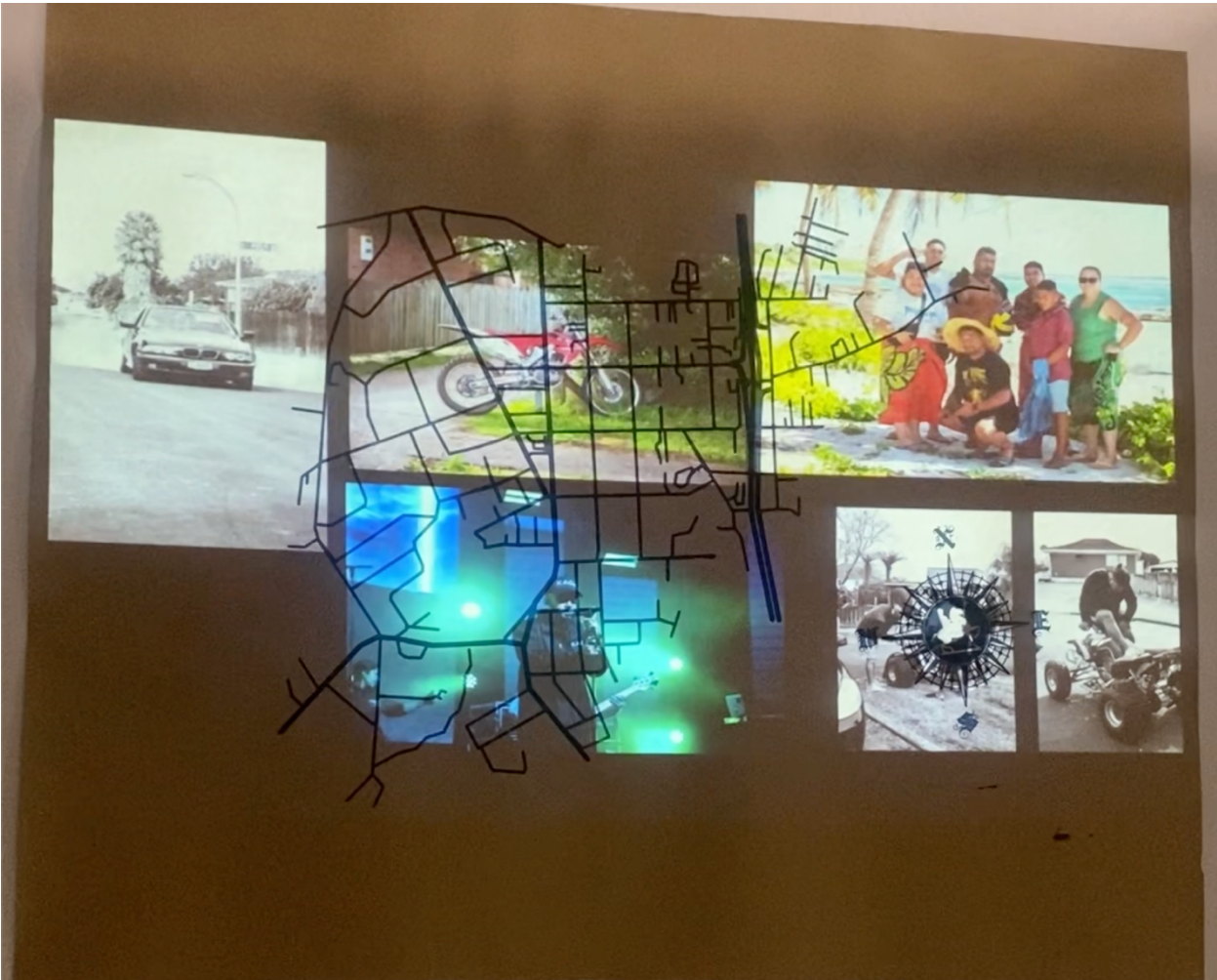
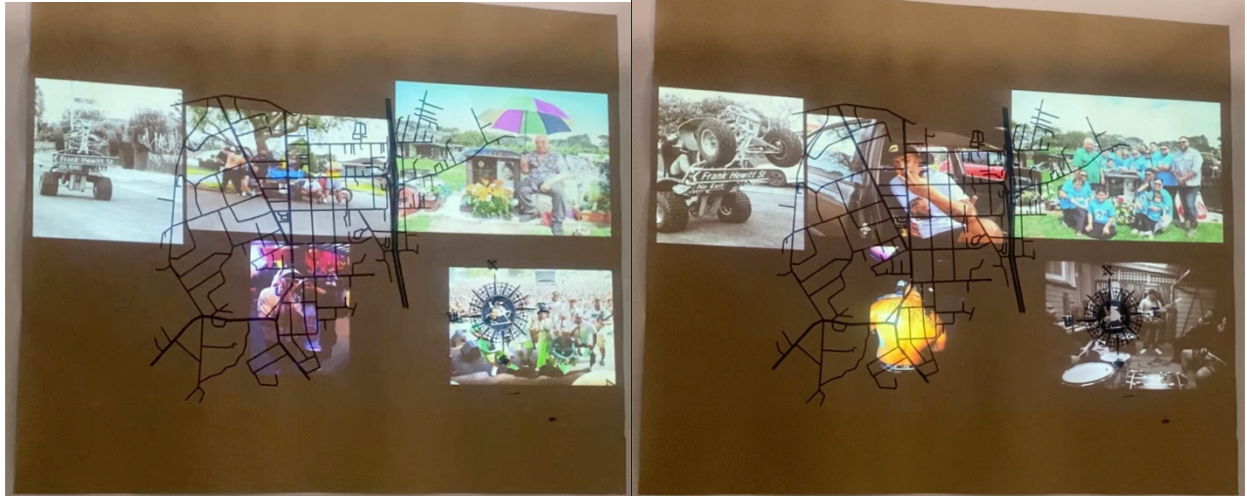


Figure 18. Elisha Oloapu, Screenshot from my moving image test installation. April 6, 2024

Keeping the same concepts, I wanted to split the video and mapping work. The map I screen printed on a piece of calico, after I dyed the fabric in a blueish – black dye to make a shade close to grey. I wanted it to represent the pavement. I also brought back the LED light, but blue this time, I did purely because it's our community colour. One screen had a before-and-after type video, which shows a screenshot of how that certain area looked back in the golden times, vs the now, which was mostly construction sites, or it's been totally abandoned, left to the weather to chip away at it. I have found the other screen compiled with different versions of the Ōtāhuhu maps from over the years on DigitalNz and overlapped them to create a time-lapse view from above.



Figure 19. MVA Installation, June 11, 2024

Estevan Oriol installation (figure 22) *Dedicated to You* formed a touchstone for my talk-week installation (figure 20).<sup>28</sup> Estevan's style has elements that are relevant to my art making. Personally, it just looks gangster, I don't know why, maybe it's because I've idolised him for so long, to the point that I can always see his presence in my work.

When I met him on the set of the Samoan brothers Boo-Yah T.R.I.B.E. (California-based hip-hop band) documentary, he was filming in Avondale, 2023. He mentioned something that I now see when photographing my locals: "No matter who you are, where you from, everyone is equal through my viewfinder".<sup>29</sup>



Figure 20. Elisha Oloapu, MVA Talk week installation. 2024

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<sup>28</sup> "Teen Angel & Estevan Oriol - Dedicated to You." 2024. Beyond the Streets. June 14, 2024. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://beyondthestreets.com/blogs/articles/teen-angel-estevan-oriol-dedicated-to-you?srsltid=AfmBOoqHb4Bo2p0TxwrGv5U9aLAhsHVqLpwj-M8VE3MNpCgrfh4mzVF>.

<sup>29</sup> Oriol, Estevan. Personal Conversation, 2023, on set of filming a documentary for Boo-yah T.R.I.B.E, Avondale, Conversation, "no matter who you are, where you from, everyone is equal through my viewfinder"

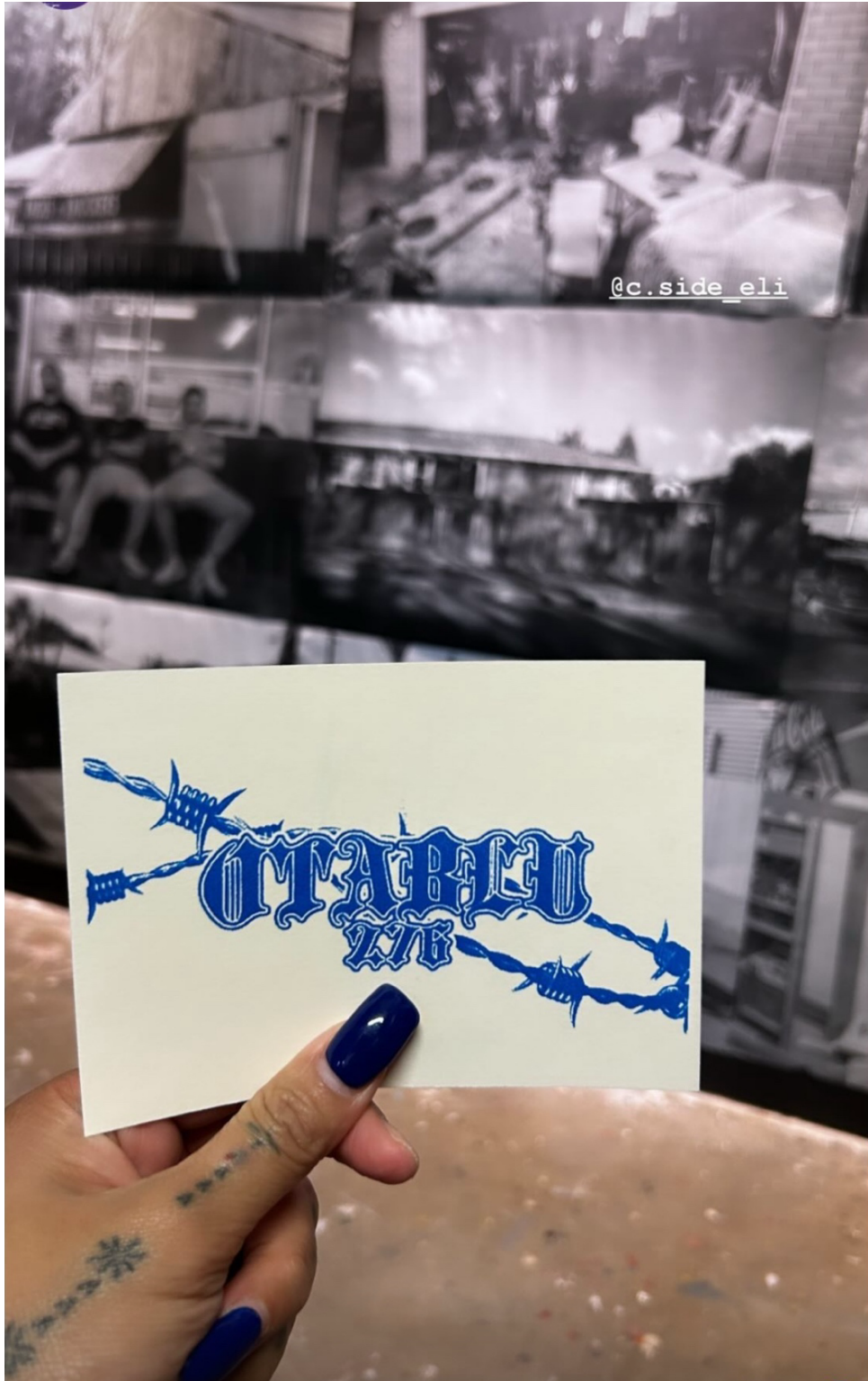


Figure 21. Talk week installation, Edith Amituanai Instagram story she mentioned me in 2024



Figure 22. Estevan Oriol, "Dedicated to you" 2024



Figure 23. Photograph by Jumpshot\_74. Estevan Oriol and Elisha Oloapu, Avondale filming Boo-Yah documentary. 2023

For one of the class critiques we had in 2024, I chose to develop my mapping works, which led me to scale my work up and test signage/ laser cuts. The laser cuts were made to present certain groups along with icons that show locations of schools, gang pads and liquor stores.

Glass bottles (liquor stores) : x10

Books (schools) : x7, x3 primary, x3 high school, x1 middle school.

Ski Mask (places where i got robbed) : x3

Fist (Black power Pad) x3

Bulldog (Mongrel Mob Pad) x2

Chess Knight (Horse) x1

House's (where I lived the past 20 years) x3

Skull Flag (Rebels Mc pad) x1

Old English B (Bloods part of the neighbourhood) x1

Old English C (Crips part of the neighbourhood) x3



Figure 24. Printed map of Ōtāhuhu 3x A0, and laser cut icons which represented gang pads, liquor stores, schools and my home locations along the horse statue, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

For an exhibition practice (figure 25) installation, I wanted to comment on how the change within my community is now a serious matter. Construction fencing is something that's in abundance within our community now. I added a mesh that usually wraps around the fencing of construction sites. The purpose was to display what our communities are starting to look like now, and how these fences represent the new experience. I wanted to show an insider/ outsider perspective as well. Like being a part of this community, you understand the ins and outs, viewing it as a local. But from an outsider's view, you see graffiti as that's a no-good area.

An interesting outcome from this installation was that I had the spray cans left on the ground by the mesh. Within two weeks, the mesh was fully covered in Artwork / Graffiti/classmates, and even my nephew helped himself start doodling on the mesh (figure 26). This sense of freedom in participating is something I value in my work.



Figure 25. Photo by Dieneke Jansen. Elisha Oloapu, featuring Aria, Installation testing, November 27, 2024.



Figure 26. Taken by Elisha Oloapu, iPhone, "Start'em young", 2024. My Neph CONz, laying in some marshmallow figures.

## CHAPTER THREE – THE OLD BLU

### Effects/ Changes Within Community:

From where I see it, the effects of urban change in Ōtāhuhu cannot be boxed up as simply positive or negative. It is more like a constant trade-off when something improves, something else gets left behind. Growing up here, I've seen this place shift in ways that hit deep. The gangs back in the day, believe it or not, used to be chill. They looked out for the hood, showed face at community events, and helped out where they could. Now, the next generation's wild. It's not even about street codes anymore; it's ram raids, smash and grabs, kids getting pulled into chaos with no guidance. That old-school sense of loyalty and boundaries has been replaced with reckless noise.

The streets may be cleaner now. Those new apartment buildings around the area actually look alright, I'm not going to lie. But with that comes the price, literally. The cost of living is going up, and it's pushing people out. Rent is climbing, and families that were part of the fabric of the community for generations are being moved on. It's textbook gentrification, something that scholars like Atkinson (2000) and Lees (2008) break down as the economic transformation of neighbourhoods that often leads to the displacement of long-term, low-income residents. And that's exactly what we're seeing happen to the soul of South Auckland.

The community has changed. Before the rise of social media, people genuinely connected. I could walk down Nikau Road and name nearly every family. We knew which families lived where, which families needed help, and which houses to stay away from. I stay on Convoy Lane now and cannot even name my next-door neighbour. That old-school trust we once had when you could accidentally leave your car unlocked overnight and someone would lock it for you, even returning your keys the next day, has become rare. It used to be normal. The streets once came alive at night, not with trouble, but with laughter, barbecues, and house parties. Music would echo through the block, sometimes soulful, sometimes just crack-up. You could hear the Tongan brass band practising down the road every Friday; that was our soundtrack.

Now? Silence. Even those we grew up with are moving away, house prices are rising, and landlords are cashing in. My childhood friends are scattered across Auckland, some even moved out of Auckland. It feels like watching the edges of a photograph slowly fade, while desperately trying to hold on to the image at its centre.

### **Preserving Archives:**

Preserving a community archive of photographs is more than simply collecting images; it is a vital cultural act that protects the stories, identities, and histories of people who might otherwise be forgotten or misrepresented. As time moves forward and physical and social landscapes change, photographs offer a powerful medium through which we can remember, reflect, and reconnect. Whether documenting everyday moments or significant events, photographs are visual testimonies to a community's experience. This becomes even more important in places where specific histories have been ignored, misrepresented, or erased from mainstream narratives.

Community photographic archives act as visual libraries that reflect the heartbeat of a place. They capture not just the faces of individuals but the environments, styles, celebrations, struggles, and spirit of a people. These images build a collective memory, grounding future generations in a sense of place and identity. They help answer questions like: Who were we? What mattered to us? What did we look like when we laughed, mourned, gathered, or protested? For young people especially, seeing images of their elders and ancestors in familiar neighbourhoods can offer deep validation and a sense of continuity. It's a reminder that their roots run deep, and their stories are worth preserving.

Photographs often succeed where words fall short. They hold emotional weight and nuance. A picture of a street corner in the 1980s might show a kid playing in front of a local dairy, a photograph of elders talking under a tree, or a church group walking together, all moments that may never be recorded in written history. However, through photographs, these moments become part of a shared archive, capturing the texture of daily life. These are not just pretty images for nostalgia; they are critical records of urban change, migration, resistance, joy, and kinship.

In the context of Aotearoa, the work of photographer Ans Westra stands out as an important though complex example of documenting community life. Westra dedicated much of her career to recording Māori life, particularly in the 60s and 70s. Her 1964 publication *Washday at the Pa* became both iconic and controversial.<sup>30</sup> While praised for its intimacy and technical strength, it was also criticised for presenting a romanticised and static view of Māori life, lacking proper consultation or context. This debate sparked nationwide discussion on who has the right to tell whose stories.

Each moving part of my exhibition represented the multicultural groups of characters within the neighbourhood. Moving on from the test exhibition practice (figure 25) I had a talanoa with A'aifou<sup>31</sup> (fellow MVA student). He mentioned that the collage concept was perhaps too ambitious to fully commit to and develop this late in the year. Given the limited timeframe, he advised that I return to my original plan of producing individual prints for each person, as this approach would allow me to highlight their unique presence more effectively. After reflecting on his feedback, I decided to stay true to my initial idea, as represented in (figure. 20) and (figure. 22). The black wall was something I was particularly drawn to, primarily for its aesthetic value and the atmosphere it could bring to the space. However, after further discussions with one of the gallery assistants at Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, I came to understand the practical challenges involved. The process of blacking out the walls required a significant amount of preparation and labour far more than what could realistically be achieved within the short turnaround time. This conversation encouraged me to reassess my priorities and focus on refining the work itself rather than overextending into installation adjustments that might compromise the overall presentation.

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<sup>30</sup> Westra, Ans. *Washday at the Pa*. 1964, <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/topic/952>

<sup>31</sup> Talanoa with A'aifou Potemane, while he was in tonga, 2024



Figure 27. Photograph by Elisha Oloapu. Vehala, Ōtāhuhu, 2024



Figure 28. Photograph by Elisha Oloapu, Zee, Lowrider, 2024



Figure 29, Old Bus Station, Ōtāhuhu 2024.



Figure 30, Seaside Park, Ōtāhuhu 2024.



Figure 31, Sturges Park, Ōtāhuhu, 2025.



Figure 32, Golden times. 2024.



Figure 33, Otahuhu Town Strip, 2024.



Figure 34, Tamaki Ave, 2024.



Figure 35, Garus Ave, 2025.



Figure 36, Seaside Park, 2025.



Figure 37, O.B.C, 2025.



Figure 38, John and Kesey, 2025.



Figure 39, Forever Bakery, 2025.



Figure 40, Gearat South Road, 2025.



Figure 41, Clock tower, Otahuhu 2024.



Figure 42, Tinā mural by Ueese Vavae, aka – Articulate 2025.



Figure 43, Baby Vita, 2024.



Figure 44, Spinning buck wild, 2025.



Figure 45, Codys n crocs, 2024.



Figure 46, Seaside the C.Side, 2024.



Figure 47, 1926 above the McAuley Brakey, 2025.



Figure 48, P.S.E, 2024.



Figure 49, Ofisa, Convoy Boys. 2025.



Figure 50, 12o'Clock, 2024.



Figure 51, Redline the 3, hug the tree, 2024.



Figure 52, Princess Street, dairy. 2024.



Figure 53, Down the Middle. 2024.



Figure 54, Nikau Rd house. (where we stayed early 2000s) 2024.



Figure 55, Otahuhu pipe band. 2024.



Figure 56, Princess Street. 2024.



Figure 57, Station, 2024.



Figure 58, Nikau alleyway, 2025.

- through the NEIGHBOURHOOD.  
 INSTALLATION...

- Street Chain Fence... → locked in,  
 → Gentrification,  
 →

Stones... → STREET  
 → LOCKERS.  
 → CULTURAL

HEATS... → STREET Light  
 product.  
 → curfew 7pm.

BARP WIRES...  
 → had joke about  
 life sentences.  
 → 20 years of  
 living in O.A.P.

**ONE M**

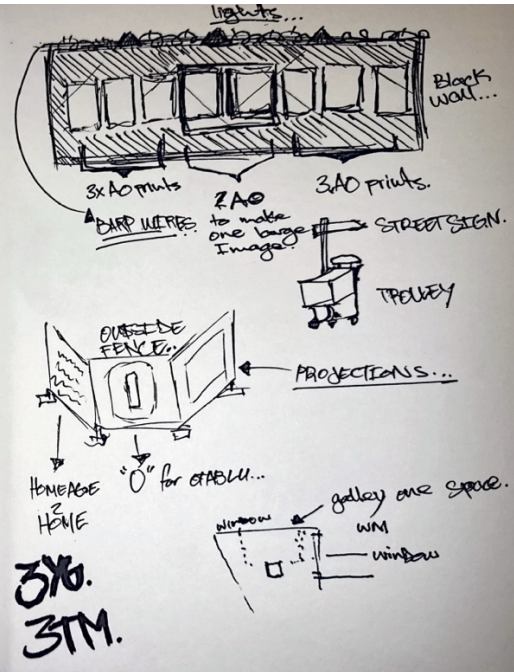


Figure 59 Notebook scan 5/03/2025, early exhibition set up.

## Farewell The Old Blu

*"I always believed it was the things you don't choose that makes you who you are. Your city, your neighbourhood, your family. People here take pride in these things, like it was something they'd accomplished. The bodies around their souls, the cities wrapped around those. I lived on this block my whole life; most of these people have. When your job is to find people who are missing, it helps to know where they started. I find the people who started in the cracks and then fell through. This city can be hard. When I was young, I asked my priest how you could get to heaven and still protect yourself from all the evil in the world. He told me what God said to His children. "You are sheep among wolves. Be wise as serpents, yet innocent as doves."*

*Opening scene from the movie, Gone Baby Gone 2007<sup>32</sup>*

The opening monologue in the 2007 film *Gone Baby Gone* (directed by Ben Affleck) resonates with me. Something in the rawness of his voice, the stillness of his words, captures precisely how I've felt throughout this journey. I never appointed myself to this role, and I never planned to become the one holding the camera for our people. It just happened. And somehow, it happened at a time when our community was shifting, when our stories were starting to fade, and someone needed to remember. I've come to understand that I was never making work for myself. Every photo, every story, every piece of this project came from a place of love and responsibility. Not the kind that feels heavy, but the kind you carry with pride. I didn't choose to become a photographer for my community; it chose me. And through that, I've had the privilege of capturing and reliving a time in our history that can never be repeated: Our Golden Times.

But as I look around and see a new wave of Otablu kids running the streets, claiming their own space, they make their own Golden Times. And who am I to take that from them? Who am I to stand in the way of that? I've accepted that our time, my generation's time is either behind us or halfway out the door. That hurts in ways I didn't expect. But it's also a reminder, we're not done. Our role now is different. We're no longer the ones creating the noise; we're the ones guiding, building, and clearing paths. It's up to us to break the stereotypes that have held us down for generations, and to

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<sup>32</sup> Affleck, Ben. "Gone Baby Gone. Opening scene" 2007. Accessed May 15, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnfR-KZ2Fxl>.

leave the doors wide open for the youngins who are coming after us. We've seen the damage, we've seen the struggle, but we've also seen the beauty, the talent, the laughter in the hood. We've held it, lived it, and now we get to pass that on. Whether it's through stories, art, leadership, or just showing up and being real, that's our new role. That's our calling now.

## Conclusion

Throughout this process, I have come to understand that photographing my community is not neutral. It is deeply political, emotional, and layered. Every image I take carries the weight of my people, places, and stories it represents. By foregrounding My People, My Village, and My Community, I have intentionally placed Otablu not as a backdrop or stereotype but as a rich and complex world full of dignity, struggle, pride, and joy. These images are not just for gallery walls but for us and future generations who deserve to see themselves reflected with honour and truth.

Using reciprocity as a method in documenting my neighbourhood enhances the depth and authenticity of the documentary work and empowers subjects by giving them a platform to voice their experiences. Reciprocity fosters a sense of ownership among the residents over the photographic archive, making it a true representation of our collective memory.

Artistically, this journey has expanded my understanding of what it means to be a storyteller. I've learned to listen more closely, to see more deeply, and to hold space for the emotions that surface when community memory is engaged. My camera has become a tool for connection, healing, and bearing witness to lives that matter. This evolving archive serves as a way for our community to Manatua, a time when our community was filled with laughter, loyalty, and life. I hope to freeze a moment in time before it slips away, erased by rapid change or forgotten under the weight of progress. My practice honours the beauty of the everyday, those unscripted, raw, and real moments that define us far more than any headline or statistic ever could.

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## APPENDIX EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION Final installation 2025

For my final exhibition, titled *Through the Neighbourhood: A Photographic Archive of Otablu*, the installation consists of forty-eight A1 prints arranged across a wall measuring approximately 3.5 metres in height and 6.7 metres in length. Each image represents the diverse characters that make up my community, alongside the local places that shaped my upbringing. Installed above the photographs are three streetlights that illuminate the work, evoking the familiar glow of our neighbourhood evenings. A street pole bearing the 'Otablu' sign points toward the images, serving as a symbolic marker of home. Completing the installation is a trolley that holds ephemera connected to the people and stories featuring objects that ground the work in memory and everyday reality.

This body of work is a reflection of who I am and where I come from. Every photograph I take carries the stories, struggles, and celebrations of my community. Growing up in Ōtāhuhu, I have witnessed the beauty that often goes unseen, the laughter that fills the streets, the strength within our families, and the unshakable resilience of our people. My photography is my way of giving back, of creating something that reminds us of our worth and the pride we should carry in our identity.

These photographs are not only for me, but also for the youth who need to see themselves represented, for the elders who laid the foundation, and for future generations who will carry our stories forward. Through this work, I stand with pride knowing that my lens does more than capture moments, it preserves our history, honours our sacrifices, and celebrates the heart of our community.

The trolley housed the ephemera, which was some prints of our community's main shopping strip, laser cut key chains, a screen print of our highway exit 441, and an A3 paper fold which holds everything together.



Figure 60, Photograph and edited: Elisha Oloapu, full front view with fence, Installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025



Figure 61, Photograph and edited: Elisha Oloapu, front right fence, Installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025.





Figure 63, Photograph and edited: Elisha Oloapu. Full front view without fence Installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025



Figure 64, Photograph and edited: Elisha Oloapu, Lifestyle sign on trolley Installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025.



Figure 65, Photograph and edited: Elisha Oloapu, Otablu street sign, Installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025.



Figure 66, Photograph: Paul Chapman, installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025



Figure 67, Photograph: Paul Chapman, installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025



Figure 68, Photograph: Paul Chapman, installation at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025



Figure 69, Photograph by Monique Redmond, Ephemera trolley opening night, July 1<sup>st</sup> 2025



Figure 70, Design by Elisha Oloapu, "The O" 2025. Cover of the A3 paper fold.



**36.9510° S, 174.8451° E**

Figure 71, Design by Elisha Oloapu, Otablu Map, 2024. Inside 1 of A3 paper fold.



Figure 72, GTA inspired design and layout by Elisha Oloapu, 2025. Inside 2 of A3 paper fold.

**For the gangsters and pastors, dream chasers, storytellers, triple one dialers,  
honest workers, promise breakers, fence jumpers, desk sitters, beggars,  
glow buggers, ram riders, over archivers, clowns, crims and dealers.  
pension holder, wrench holders, jandal throwing, graffiti taggers, higher power believers,  
drunks, feens, fighters and lovers, the past, present, old, new, hood lifers and the newbies...**  
**OTABLU 266**

Figure 73, Trickster Manifesto by Elisha Oloapu, 2025. Back cover of A3 paper fold.



Figure 74, Photograph by Elisha Oloapu, Ephemera trolley 2<sup>nd</sup> day. 2025.



Figure 75, Poster design by Elisha Oloapu, printed on 170gsm paper, A1 size landscape. Part of ephemera, 2025.