

Genealogy of lines Hohoko ē tohitohi

Filipe Tohi

Genealogy of lines Hohoko ē tohitohi

Introduction

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SIMON REES

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is delighted to publish this catalogue accompanying the new body of work produced by Filipe Tohi for, *Genealogy of lines Hohoko* \bar{e} *tohitohi*. Tongan born and New Plymouth based artist Tohi is currently charting a line between ancient Tongan practices and contemporary minimalism. While the origin of his designs that span sculpture, drawing, and process-based installation are traditional (based on Tongan rope-lashing) a contemporary art audience is as likely to read them in the context of symbolic abstraction. His drawings, based on historical patterns, look like tapa designs yet they also enact a minimalist semaphore similar to that of Australian artists Stephen Bram and Keri Poliness or the American artist Sol Le Wit. Moreover, their repetition and geometry (especially when they are scattered on the wall) multiply after the fashion of Richard Killeen's cutouts. In fact, there is a coincidence of style; Killeen lifts a number of his recurring motifs from Pacific Island cultures.

Recently, art historians have been involved in a dialectical reappraisal of their discipline concomitant with the eclipsing of the twentieth century. One of the major loci of discussion has been the entwining of 'Primitivism' and cross-cultural 'appropriation' with the birth of last century's brute exemplar, modernism. In particular the critics have focused on modernism's primary style – Cubism. Since 2000, there has been a burst of scholarship about Picasso and the planar radicalism of *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* (1907) inspired not by the Cezanne of popular imagination, but by the African statuary at the Trocadero Museum. (Major texts have been produced by the likes of Rasheed Araeen, Rosalind Krauss, and John Richardson). If we accept this new history, and Picasso as its embodying hero, modernism is implicated in a referential cycle.

Following this analysis, cross-cultural translation is ceded a legacy long enough to be: dispensed with, sublimated, or taken as given. While New Zealand art historians are still debating the national apotheosis of 'new' style, embodied by Gordon

Walters's mid-century appropriation of the *Koru*, a closer examination makes his work part of a broader sweep of art history. In this context, Walters is re-positioned in the field of rarefied minimalist (and conceptual) abstraction alongside American artists Frank Stella and Sol Le Wit. For instance, Sol Le Wit's later wall drawings draw heavily on the aesthetic philosophy of Japanese Zen. This comparison doesn't take away from the indigenous referent of Walters's work even if it complicates the reading of his practice.

The Gallery has produced this latest exhibition to tease out cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary associations. Rather than present Filipe Tohi's signature stone-carvings, Director Gregory Burke has worked with the artist to elucidate the concerns located in his drawings and wooden-slat sculptures. The drawings and the sculpture spin out of *lalava*, a term that means 'intersecting lines! Used categorically *lalava* refers to the entwining of coconut fibre in the production of rope, or the rope that lashes together timber in houses or canoes. Aesthetically, *lalava* describes the play of lines in the production of art.

Of course, complicated images can be produced from the simplest relationship of lines – and to a contemporary art audience the oscillation of lines in Tohi's drawing approaches the kinetics of Op Art. Herein lies the reason for presenting *Genealogy of lines Hohoko ē tohitohi* in a contemporary museum setting; as looking at Tohi's work in this context produces a proliferation of contemporary Western art associations; Op Art, Minimalism, Abstraction. Tohi's vocabulary, tracing its genealogy to traditional Tongan art is suspended in an intermediate space: vibrating between histories.

Tufunga lalava: the Tongan art of lineal and spatial intersection

'OKUSITINO MĀHINĀ

In memory of the late tufunga lalava master Tamale of Niutōua.

Generally, Tongan art can be divided into two types: performance and material arts. The performance art is called *faiva*, and the material art *tufunga*. The current work of Filipe Tohi belongs to the latter. Both *faiva* and *tufunga* are constitutive of both time and space. Whereas the former means 'time and space,' the latter refers to the temporal production of 'form in space.' Thus, the work of Tohi, produced in wood, stone or line, can be critically appreciated in the context of the Tongan conception and praxis of *ta* and *va*, or time and space. It is from this anthropological perspective that I will reflect on the current work of Tohi on *tufunga lalava* or art of lineal and spatial intersection, in relation to aesthetic concepts and practices of particular and universal significance.

In general, ta is considered less important than va in Tonga. But, in formal contexts of extreme social and aesthetic importance, ta and va become equal in worth, especially the performance of prescribed social obligations and artistic creation of harmony and beauty. Like the world over, both ta and va underpin the overall Tongan conception of the practice of art. Not only are the ontological entities, time and space, the medium in which all things are, in a single level of reality, spatio-temporality or four-sided dimensionality, they are epistemologically intensified and reorganized, thereby giving rise to art. Art can, thus, be defined as the rhythmic and symmetrical reorganisation of time and space that produces harmony and beauty. A type of ta-va, time-space, transformation, art is formally investigative and functionally therapeutic.

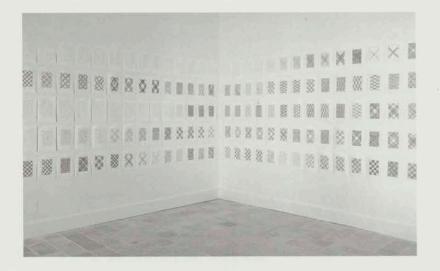
As hereditary professions, or ways of life, faiva and tufunga were the functions of ha'a punake and ha'a tufunga. The class of ha'a tufunga was divided into sub-classes of tufunga langafale and tufunga fo'uvaka amongst many others. These two arts were directly connected with tufunga lalava, the subject matter

of Filipe Tohi's current work. Artists working with 'akau and maka were called tufunga tongi'akau or tufunga tātongitongi and tufunga tāmaka, both using the intertwining line and space. Working with kohi or tohi, by way of ta or beating of time, makes lalava an abstract artform. By extension, tufunga lalava is akin to tufunga tātatau, body art or tattooing. Although they differ in subject matter, or space, the former is work with houses and boats and the latter with sino or the body. Both arts utilise line and space, with kafa sinnet made from coconut fibres and black ink or vaitohi'uli as respective means of interlacing kohi and va.

Tohi draws his aesthetic and philosophical insights from the richness of his Tongan artistic and cultural heritage, which informs much of his current work on *lalava* in a forceful and dynamic manner. Tohi had the rare opportunity of studying under one of the few remaining *tufunga* masters, Tamale, now deceased. Tamale's inspirations, like those of his contemporaries and predecessors, were empirically derived from his experience of the physical and social environment. As an abstraction of real life experiences, ancient masters ingeniously and creatively developed formal and thematic *lalava* geometric designs, or *kupesi*, such as *amoamokofe*, *fā'onelua*, *fisi'iniu* and *manulua* amongst many others, which were connected with house building and boat building.

Tohi sees nothing but lines and space, infinitely and complexly intersecting in nature, mind, and society; inspired by the Tongan conceptualization of such things as the sky, the human body, and social practices such as *lālanga* and *koka'anga* or *ngatu*-making, all of which are associated with the lineal and the spatial. The celestial bodies in the sky or outer space, or *vavā*, were treated as *kohi 'a Velenga*, where the points of spatial intersection of imaginary lines form the actual stars and galaxies, of value to navigation and voyaging. In fact, *kohi* is the older form of *tohi*, hence *tohitohi* or *kohikohi*. The word *tohi* applies to *lālanga* and *koka'anga*, especially when making dried pandanus leaves into *fe'unu* or fine threads or fibres for weaving and painting over printed *kupesi* using *koka* and *tongo* 'black dye' made from treated sap of *koka* and *tongo* trees, which are known as *tohi lālanga* and *tohi ngatu* respectively.

Similarly, the blood vessels, made up of veins and arteries, are termed *kālava*, intersecting to form the human body. Likewise, the human brain, *'uto*, is believed



to be made up of a fibrous or thread-like substance. Different forms of thinking are called havala, vavanga and vavalo, all pointing to their spatio-temporal ta-va, kohi-va or lala-va basis. In fact, the maintenance of exchange relations between social groups in terms of performing their reciprocal duties is termed tauhivā, literally meaning 'the beating of space'. The crossing of two blocks of wood (i.e. a cross) is termed 'akau fakalava, and is imagined to be made of two lines. Tohi likens lalava to human DNA and computer chips, which point to the complementary roles of art and science as forms of investigation of beauty and truth, opening up new avenues for knowledge and technology. As an ordered chaos, Tohi entertains a view that lalava, like reality in general, operates in an ever-shifting, infinitely complex, butterfly-effect mode.

The term *lalava* is made up of two words, *lala* and *va*, which are a form of *ta-va*, time-space. The same applies to *lālanga* and *koka'anga*. To *lala* is to intersect, as seen in the intersection of two or more imaginary lines, *kohikohi*, as well as the two or more intersecting woven cords, *kafa*, in lashing, line-marking, black-dyed *koka* and *tongo*, in *ngatu*-making, lining-threads of leaves, *fe'unu*, in weaving and line-producing, black ink, *vaitohi'uli*, in tattooing. In its 'pure' form, the word *lala* evokes a pristine state of, harmony or beauty, existing within and between things in nature,

between mind and society. In this respect, the notion *lala* lies in close proximity to the concept *noa*, meaning a zero point, which depicts a state of nothingness, emptiness or formlessness. This state of affairs is marked by a counter-poising of a number of conflicting tendencies that commonly intersect and give rise to unity, harmony and beauty.

Tohi's current work is an attempt to make sense of his art in *lotolotonga* or the present, by harking back into *kuongamu'a* or the past, and projecting both past and present to *kuongamui* or into the future. In Tonga, the past was considered to have stood the test of time, and is thus used as a guiding principle for people in the present, and because the future is yet to be experienced, it must be brought to bear on the actual, ever-changing past and present. This classical view is embraced by Tohi, witnessed in his 'undoing' or 'unpacking' of the existing *kupesi*, where he has produced huge volumes of actual designs in exciting, original and substantial ways, giving a new life to *lalava* as an art. Amongst many of his new *kupesi* are 'aukimoana, 'aukitonga, kupenga'amaui and nikoniko'amo'uililo.

Consequently, Tohi has developed a new *founga* or style, in correspondence to a novel *fātunga* or form, marking a change in theme and the introduction of vinyl in addition to *kafa* as new and traditional material means for his art. Given the geometry and genealogy underlying *lalava*, as observed in both nature and culture, he has coined it as '*lalava*-ometry' and '*lalava*-ology'. While they are forms of investigation of abstract line and space and their 'genealogical' relationships via intersection, they are also forms of spiritual, social and psychological communication. According to Tohi, the *kafa* sinnet is normally in *kula* or red and '*uli* or black, the spatio-temporal intersection of which eternally reproduces four-sided dimensionality, the colours symbolise men and women, who are physically united and genealogically related in time and space, and connected through procreation. The older Tongan word for sex is *lala*, probably symbolic of the physical 'intersection' between men and women.

The form and function of Tongan arts are well established, and clearly demonstrated in the case of *tufunga*. However, the anthropological treatment of Tongan arts strictly subsumes the formal to the functional, thereby blurring the distinction between form and function. Philosophical, aesthetic and spatio-temporal, *faiva*

and tufunga are seen to have a universal appeal. There is, though, a consistent decline in both arts, marked by a shift from: abstraction to representation: and a movement away from quality to utility. Filipe Tohi is, in its older form, Filipe Kohi, 'the abstractor of line'. Besides being a tufunga tongi'akau or tā'akau and a tufunga tāmaka, working with wood and stone respectively, his current work as a tufunga lalava, working in a spatio-temporal line-space, kohi-va, lala-va continuum, surely adds vitality to this dying yet beautiful Tongan art form.

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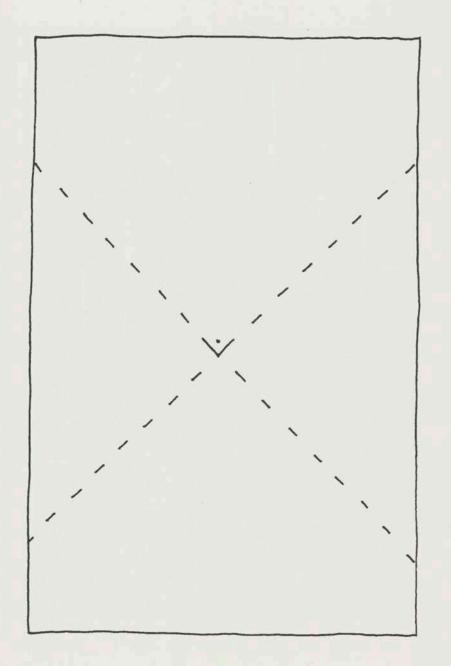
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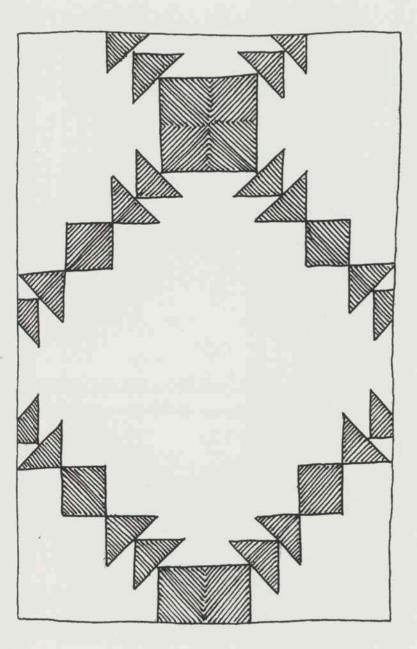
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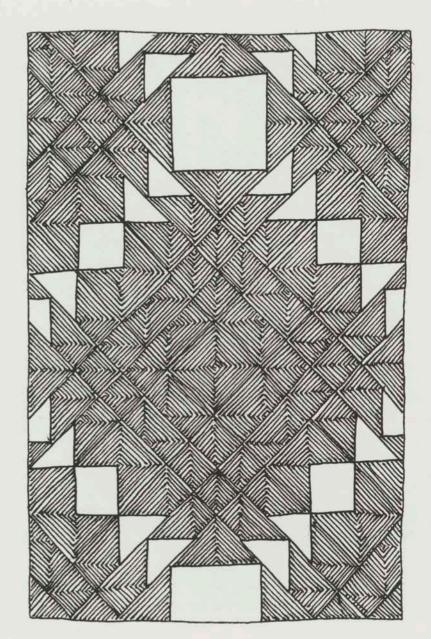
'A consideration of *tāfua* "rhythm", *tatau* "symmetry" and *heliaki* "imagery" in Queen Sālote's *ta'anga* "poetry,"' paper submitted for publication to, *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, University of Auckland, Auckland, 2002.

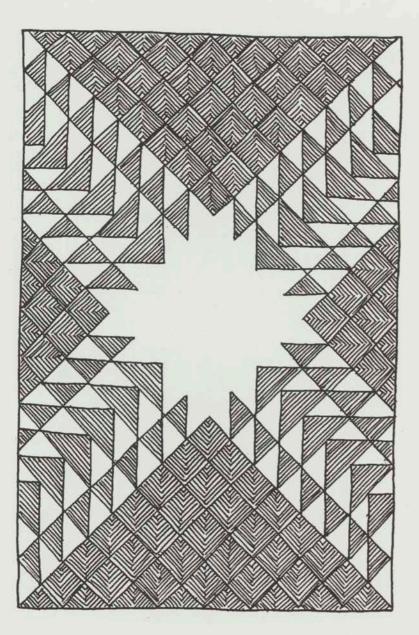
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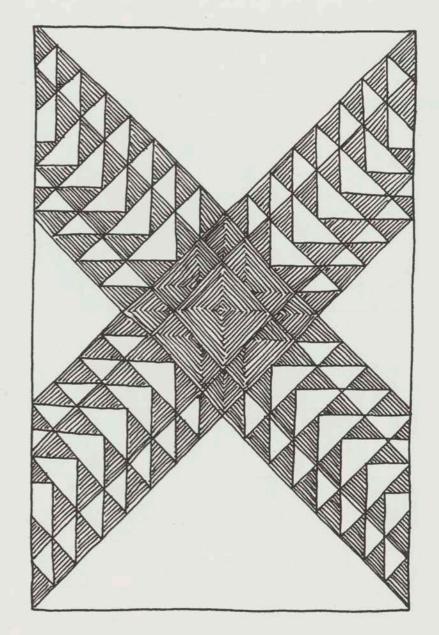
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Lalava-ology: A Pacific Aesthetic

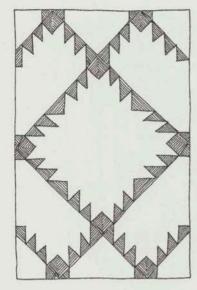
KAREN STEVENSON

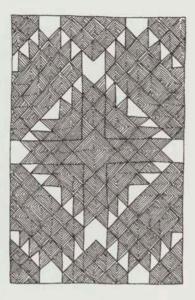
A Pacific Island cultural aesthetic has developed over the past millennium, changing as new materials and methods became available. As the Polynesians navigated their ocean, lashing technologies and the plaiting of sails were essential to their well being. In each phase of migration artists quickly learned to manipulate new technologies so that their function remained clear – it enabled the passing of cultural knowledge from one generation to another. The patterns created in lashings are also seen in tattoo, bark cloth, plaiting and on *Lapita ware*. This suggests that these designs are more than a pleasing aesthetic; they are integrally entwined into Pacific lives and have been part of this cultural whole for thousands of years. Referencing astronomical, navigational, and environmental knowledge, these motif, were, in essence, mnemonic devices that allowed for the dissemination of cultural knowledge.

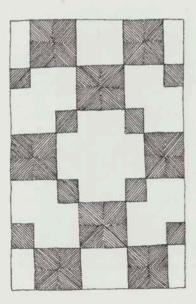
In the past 50 years, another change has taken place as Polynesians have again begun to migrate. Contemporary Pacific Island artists in New Zealand are utilising the cultural knowledge of their homelands in their artistic practice as a means of navigating their urban environment. An ideal example is Filipe Tohi and his integration of the traditional textile technologies of Tonga into what he terms 'lalava-ology.'

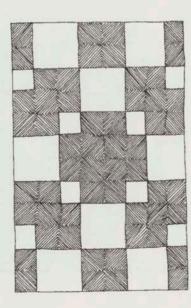
Filipe Tohi has spent the last decade studying the complexity of Tongan lashings, design patterns creating, in essence, a cultural language. Tohi is not trying to revive a lost knowledge, but is trying to understand the enormity of cultural knowledge entwined in this endeavour. For Tohi, the answers of the universe can be found in the patterns of *lalava*; they are, as he says, 'the metaphor of DNA in modern times.'

Tohi defines *lalava* as the 'intersection of two strings as they spiral up and down, forming patterns. Without both strings [lines] there are no patterns and both must go together.² Looking at these designs one finds a balance – there is always a male









and female; they become a metaphor for the ways of the world. This notion of balance, that there are two sides to everything, intrigues Tohi. Using models of the *lalava* designs, Tohi expands the patterns into three dimensions allowing his audience to see the geometric nature of the patterns, and more importantly to see them from multiple directions. In *Fakalavaepuha* Tohi creates, in three dimensions, a pattern that represents man. A balance is offered, as two lines are always necessary, with its counterpart *Fakalavaepuha a hihifi*, woman. With these images, we can see the tangle of two lines intermingled, revealing both a complexity and simplicity.

Tohi is offering a visual allusion to the cultural metaphor he depicts. Adrienne Kaeppler notes, 'Tongan aesthetic philosophy (is) based on *heliaki*, to say one thing but mean another.' The use of metaphor and allusion enable the transference of cultural knowledge as context and meaning change. To fully understand these textile traditions one must understand 'the poetics and politics of Tongan verbal and visual modes of expression, the Tongan philosophy of aesthetics.' This is not just an artistic penchant; it is a philosophy, a way of life. As such, the utilisation of these patterns provides sustenance to the culture. As times change, materials may change, metaphors may change, but the cultural essence remains.

Tohi believes that these patterns have been modelled into symbols of human interaction. These designs teach us how to: live/interact/be. As these lashing were used on canoes, they often reference navigational knowledge, knowledge transferred in the process of doing. The names of the patterns refer to guiding stars (the Pleiades, the Southern Cross, Venus), fish, and conceptual knowledge. They reinforce the unspoken word; they make the invisible visible. This Polynesian way of speaking and learning with metaphor reiterates the importance of pattern – pattern as a mnemonic device of cultural knowledge.

What is clear is that the complexity of the design; the pattern, the relationships between positive and negative space, interact not only to reinforce the notion of balance but also the aesthetic, cultural, and scientific knowledge of Pacific peoples. For Tohi, every pattern seen within the Pacific aesthetic can be found in *lalava*. The questions, like the patterns, seem endless. *Lalava* explores the myriad patterns used in lashing, and ideally the links to navigational and environmental knowledge that they imbue.

When grappling with *lalava*, with a Pacific aesthetic and cultural history which is now embedded in the multi-lingual/bi-cultural reality of New Zealand, much seems to have been lost in translation. Clearly, patterns can be recognised and named yet it doesn't follow that the knowledge that these patterns held is being transferred. Tohi's work, most often seen in a gallery context, will not provide the viewer with navigational knowledge. Rather, it provides an insight into a way of thinking, of an aesthetic, a philosophy.

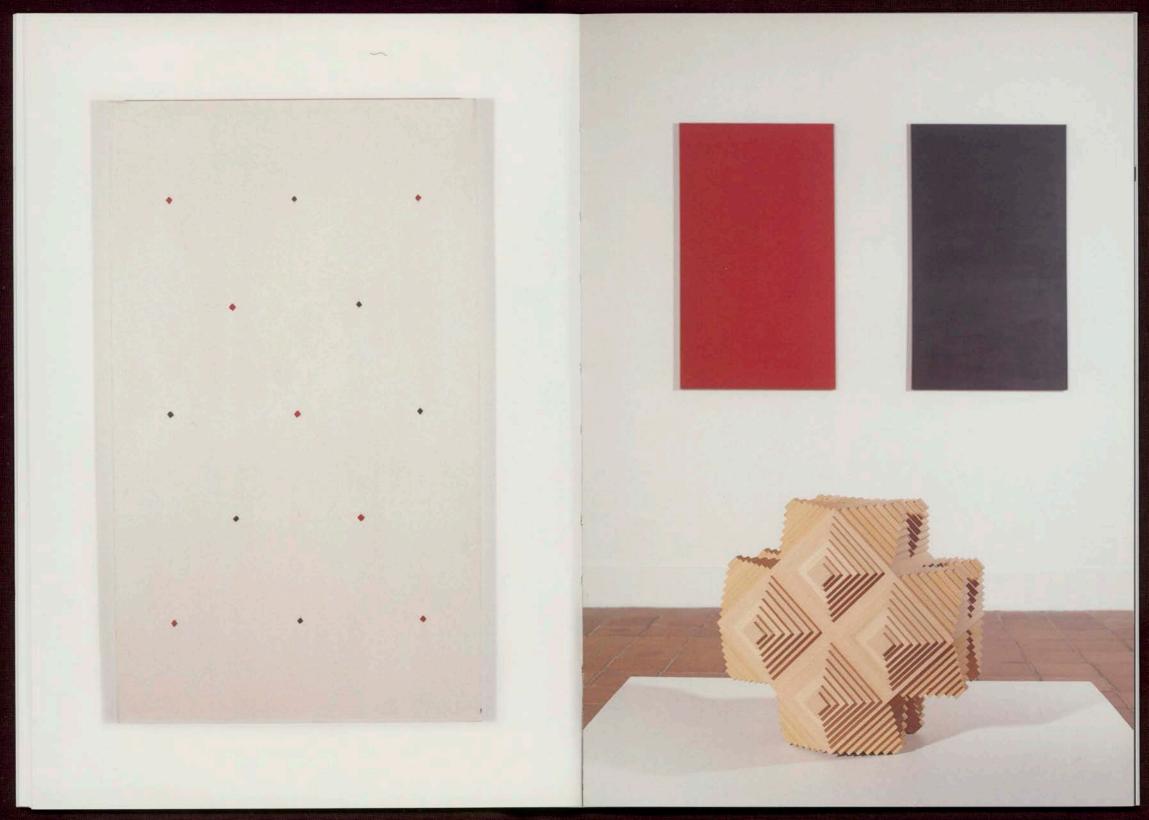
Filipe Tohi is one of a few artists who look to the traditional/cultural aesthetic of the Pacific as a foundation for his contemporary art practice. These references come, specifically, from Tonga, yet it is a broader cultural knowledge he is referencing. It is a Polynesian aesthetic; it knows no geo-political boundaries. Unlike many of his contemporaries who create their own visual language and/or use Pacific icons as springboards for their practice, Tohi remains true to *lalava*. In doing so, he recognises both its cultural importance, and more importantly recognises its potential as an aesthetic language. As languages are built through patterning, so is *lalava*. It is not a politicised language; it is not a critique. It is an aesthetic system that has enabled the transference of cultural knowledge for thousands of years. The incorporation of Tongan technologies in his contemporary art practice allows Tohi to do what artists have done forever – use patterns to disseminate knowledge, to make sense of their environment, and to communicate their position amongst themselves and with others. *Lalava* is an aesthetic, a philosophy; it is Filipe Tohi.

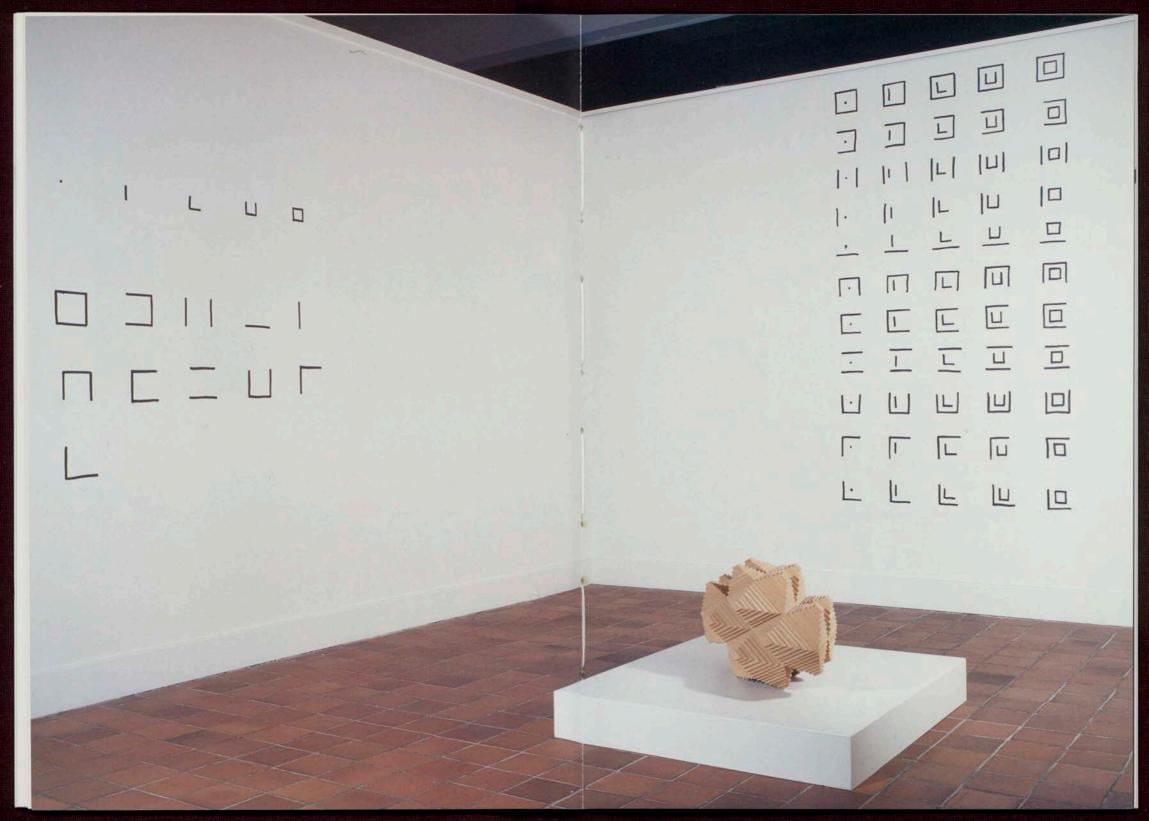
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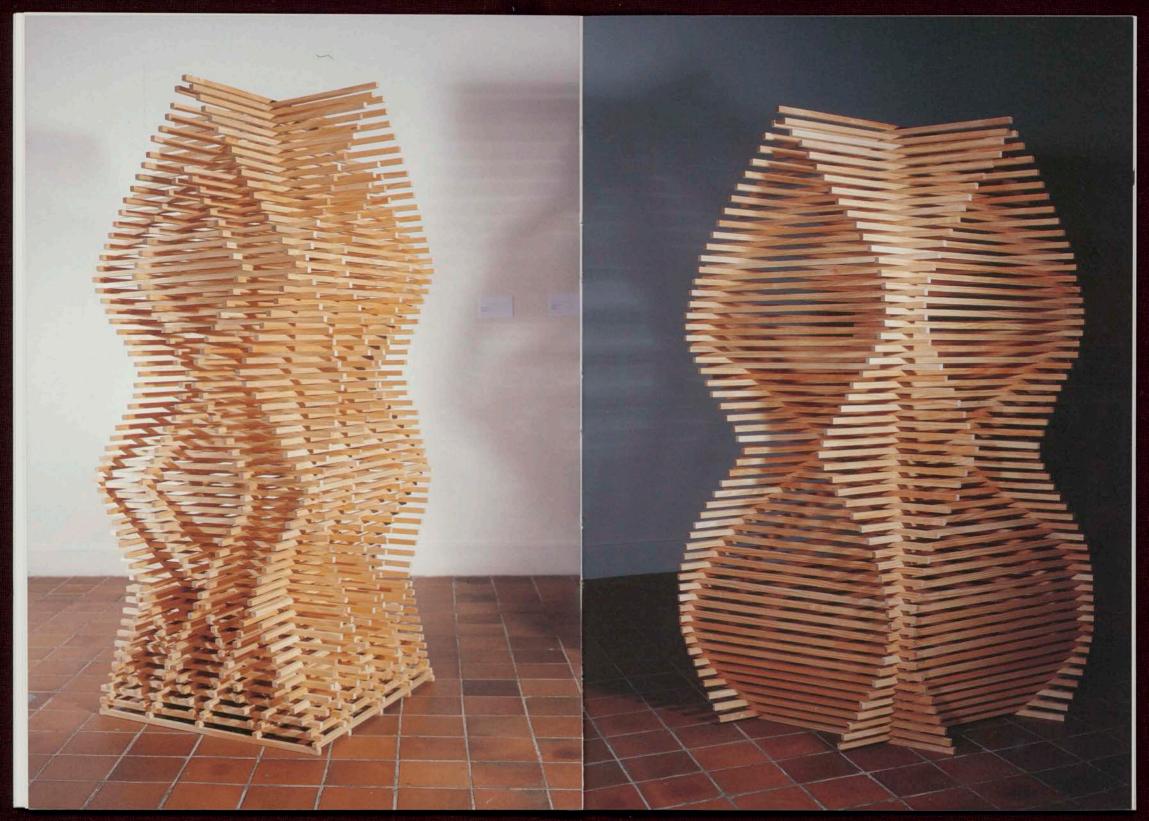
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- 2. Filipe Tohi, Ibid.
- Adrienne Kaeppler, 'The Structure of Tongan Barkcloth Design: Imagery, Metaphor, And Allusion,' in *Persistence, Change and Meaning in Pacific Art*, Herle, Stanley, Stevenson and Welsch, ed.s, Crawford House Publishing, Adelaide, 2002.
- 4. Adrienne Kaeppler, Ibid.

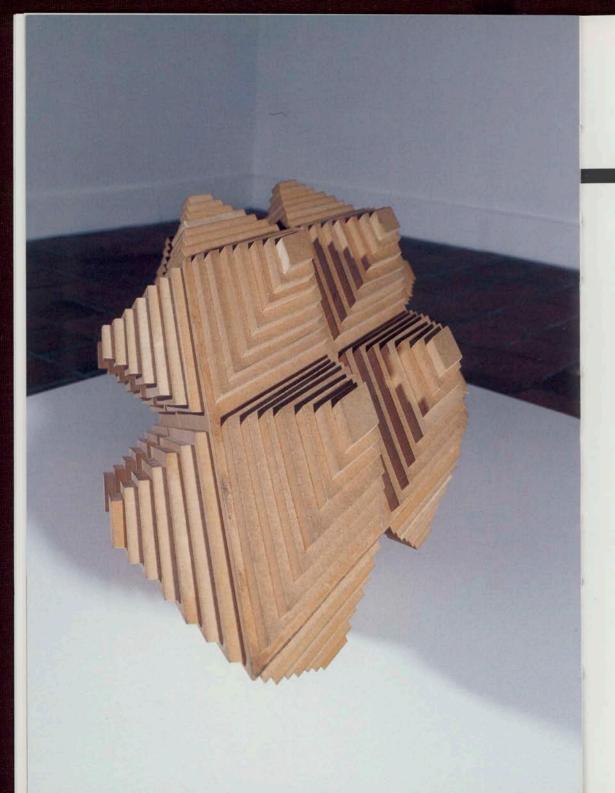












Glossary of Tongan terms

'akau wood.

'akau fakalava

wooden cross.

faiva lit. 'to do time and space'; performance art.

fe'unu fine threads / 'lines' made from dried leaves for weaving.

fötunga form.

founga style.

ha'a professional class.

ha'a punake class of performance artists.

ha'a tufunga class of material artists.

havala form of thinking, i.e., thinking about anything and everything.

hohoko genealogy.

kafa sinnet made from coconut fibres / 'lines' for lineal-spatial intersecting,

kālava blood vessels.

kohi line; writing; older form of tohi.

kohi 'a Velenga line / 'book' of Velenga, god of navigation and voyaging.

kohikohi multiple lines; writing; older form of tohitohi.

koka black dye made from treated sap of koka trees.

koka'anga bark-cloth making; ngatu-making.

kula red, brownish colour.

kuongamu'a lit. 'age in the front'; past.

kuongamui lit. 'age in the back'; future.

kupesi design,

lala older word for sex.

lālanga intersection of line and space; mat weaving.

lalava intersection of line and space; kafa lashing.

lotolotonga lit. 'age in the middle'; present.

maka ston

noa state of purity, harmony and beauty.

sino body.

punake master performance artist.

ta time; tempo; beat; rhythm.

tohi see kohi.

tohi lālanga making fine threads / 'lines' of dried leaves for weaving.

tohi ngatu painting / 'making lines' over bark-cloth designs with black dye

koka and tongo.

tohitohi see kohikohi.

tongo see koka; black dye made from treated sap of tongo trees.

tufunga lit. 'to do time and space'; material art or artist.

tufunga fo'uvaka art of boat-building; boat-builder.

tufunga lalava art of intersection of line and space; lineal-spatial sculptor.

tufunga langafale art of house-building or architecture; house-builder.

tufunga tāmaka art of stone-cutting; stone sculptor.

tufunga tātatau art of symmetry-beating (of body); tattooing; body sculptor.

tufunga tātongitongi art of wood-carving; wood sculptor.

tufunga tongi'akau see tufunga tatongitongi.

'uli black.

va space; social relations.

vaitohi black ink.

vaitohi'uli black ink used in tatooing.

vavalo form of thinking, i.e., ability to tell the future.

vavanga form of thinking, i.e., critical thinking.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Cover: Haupapa (female) 1998, customwood, detail

Pages 8, 10-16: Genesis of patterns 1998, pen on paper

Page 20: Manuua (hihifi) 1999, wool, wood and Manuua 1999, kafa, wood

Page 21: Fakahoko (hihifi) 2001, acrylic, canvas

Page 22: Kupenga ila (dots) 2001, acrylic, canvas

Page 23: Colour of creation 2001, acrylic, canvas and Fakalavaepuha (male) 2001, customwood

Page 24 and 25: Haulea (alphabet) wall paintings and Fakalavaepuha (female) 2001, customwood

Page 26: Haupapa (male) 1998, customwood

Page 27: Haupapa (female) 1998, customwood

Page 28. Fakalavaepuha (female) 2001, customwood

Filipe Tohi

1959 Born Ngeleia Nukualofa, Tonga
Lives and works in New Plymouth, New Zealand

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2002 Pacific Notion, Sydney College of the Arts Gallery, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Pacific Ways of Knowing, the Macy Gallery, Columbia University, New York, USA

Albany Stone Sculpture Symposium, a public art event, Massey University at Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Te Kupenga, public stone sculpture event, The foreshore, New Plymouth, New Zealand

2001 Tautai, public stone sculpture symposium, Queen Elizabeth Square, Auckland, New Zealand

000 5th Biennale D'art Contemporain, Lyon, France

1999 Pacific Vision Festival, the Aotea Centre, Auckland, New Zealand New Reeds: Pacific Art Beyond 2000, Manukau City Council in association with Pacifika Institute of Arts Manukau, and Creative New Zealand, Auckland, New Zealand Tareitanga Sculpture Symposium, the Tareitanga Trust, Wellington, New Zealand

1998 Navigating Pacific Art, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand Tautai Pacific Contemporary Sculpture Symposium, National Maritime Museum, Auckland, New Zealand

1995 International Festival of Stone Sculpture, Fujimi Sculpture Park, Fujimi, Japan

1994 Bottled Ocean, City Gallery, Wellington, Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand

RESIDENCIES

2000 Macmillan Brown Artist in Residence, llam School of Fine Art, The University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

RESEARCH

2001 The Tongan History Association Conference, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY

The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is a museum that fosters the development and interpretation of contemporary art.





NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Dr. 'Okusitino Māhinā is Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Auckland. He is a specialist in Tongan history and politics.

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