Threads of the Island, Threads of the Urban

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Abstract
A Polynesian cultural aesthetic has developed over the past 3000 years, changing as new materials and methods became available. As the Polynesians navigated the oceans, lashing and plaiting technologies became essential to their wellbeing. As they spread to inhabit islands with clay, pottery developed into an art form that they used to disseminate cultural knowledge. With the arrival of the European, metal tools changed the way men carved, and imported cloth diminished the necessity of textile production. In each of these phases Pacific artists quickly learned to incorporate and manipulate introduced technologies into their arts in order to preserve the function of the artefact — it enabled the passing of cultural knowledge from one generation to another.

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A Polynesian cultural aesthetic has developed over the past 3000 years, changing as new materials and methods became available. As the Polynesians navigated the oceans, lashing and plaiting technologies became essential to their well-being. As they spread to inhabit islands with clay, pottery developed into an art form that they used to disseminate cultural knowledge. With the arrival of the European, metal tools changed the way men carved, and imported cloth diminished the necessity of textile production. In each of these phases Pacific artists quickly learned to incorporate and manipulate introduced technologies into their arts in order to preserve the function of the artefact — it enabled the passing of cultural knowledge from one generation to another.

The apparent dichotomous demands of remaining steadfast to tradition and being innovative has inspired Pacific arts for centuries. This is because at the heart of these art forms is an aesthetic based on patterns; patterns seen visually in the arts, heard orally through narration, and observed through movement in dance. Interpreted in various ways, patterns used as mnemonic devices have sustained their importance and value as a means of disseminating cultural ideals. For example, delineating space and then filling it in, is an aesthetic factor found in Lapita pottery, bark cloth production, tattoo, and carving. These art forms, as well as navigational and architectural technologies, have become icons of Pacific cultures. The patterns created embody the use of metaphor and demonstrate a Pacific way of conceptualising space and the world at large. There is a balance between male and female as they both employ the same aesthetic.

In the past fifty years, another change has taken place as Polynesians have, again, begun to migrate. Just as their forefathers carried a cultural and aesthetic knowledge from island to island, so too have these recent migrants. Women, typically the purveyors of cultural traditions, have carried their art forms — bark cloth, tivaevae, plaiting, and lei — with them. Through textile production women created wealth, symbolised relationships, and demonstrated both a personal and cultural aesthetic.

These art forms are central to their lives, so much so that their identity is entwined in their production. These works move beyond the utilitarian, beyond the decorative; they embody all that is valued within the culture itself. Due to the cultural value of these objects, they have remained integral to Pacific life today. As such, tivaevae and plaiting are art forms that reinforce cultural values. They create the opportunity to learn, to transmit cultural information, and to socialise younger generations into a culture that is fast changing. As such, tivaevae
practitioners offer stability in an unsteady world, instilling a sense of cultural pride and allowing for the continuation of a culture through the assertion of a Pacific identity.

This essay will look specifically at the effects of Pacific peoples’ migration to New Zealand, and how this aesthetic, which is found in a variety of culturally important art forms, has enabled the transference of cultural knowledge to a new land. More specifically, it will discuss how contemporary Pacific Island artists — Ani O’Neill, Niki Hastings-McFall, Filipe Tohi, John Pule and Fatu Feu’u — are incorporating these skills and abilities into new art forms. Employing the patterns and ideologies seen in bark cloth, plaiting, tivaevae, tattoo and lei, contemporary artists have created a way to navigate their urban environment.

It is these threads of knowledge that many contemporary artists draw upon. Even though these threads often reference women’s art forms there is also an implicit reference to their male counterpart — for a balance is always necessary. The patterns of tivaevae, of plaiting, of bark cloth are also clearly found in tattoo, carving and lashings. As such, there are two distinct strands of Pacific art that are currently practised in New Zealand which reflect a social and geographical reality: an older generation tied to the islands of origin or ancestry, and a younger generation exploring the vitality of their urban New Zealand environment. The result is the continued practice of a valued tradition as well as the reinterpretation of these traditions in a contemporary manner. These strands are bound together by a cultural aesthetic that encourages both the maintenance and preservation of textile technologies, and inspires their innovation.

Tivaevae are not simply women’s work or crafts, but are an essential link between contemporary and traditional values in Polynesia. The art of appliqué was introduced by missionary wives, and was immediately embraced as it could easily be adapted to reflect an age-old Pacific aesthetic. The small square patterns built up in tivaevae pa’oti reference both plaiting and lashings. Today tivaevae are essential to the creation and perpetuation of a strong identity within the islands themselves; however, this role increases exponentially as these same issues of identity surface in a new homeland. The multi-coloured, floral patterned, embroidered tivaevae are easily recognisable as ‘Cook Island’, so much so, they have become an icon of identity for Cook Islanders in New Zealand. The style with the positive/negative design relationships is easily transferred to other mediums and products.

Ani O’Neill, of Cook Island heritage, has based her art practice on Cook Island tivaevae and plaiting technologies and aesthetics. While sitting at her grandmother’s knee, she learned the skills involved in these processes. She also witnessed firsthand the manner in which cultural knowledge is transferred — by watching and listening. What is unspoken can be as important as information conveyed. With these skills, O’Neill’s art does not perpetuate the Cook Island textile traditions (tivaevae, embroidery, plaiting), but references and reinterprets
them to push their boundaries to new meanings within a new island environment. O’Neill focuses on two distinct traditions: plaiting, a technology used to make sails, mats, baskets, and more recently hats; and a skill introduced by missionary wives, crocheting — a decorative addition to the tivaevae tradition. O’Neill’s plaited works or crochet paintings offer an urban take on an island ideology. She incorporates technology and ideology to move beyond the tradition. Two lifestyles, both appreciated, are woven together to exert a vibrant Pacific culture in New Zealand.

An interesting aspect of the tivaevae aesthetic is the positive/negative space — figure/ground reversal — that allows for the dynamic interaction of colour and pattern. Combining this aesthetic with plaiting techniques O’Neill has created Kua Marino Te Tai (Figure 1) — a piece that references mat and hat production, as well as navigational knowledge as suggested by the patterns of stars revealed in its negative space. In the postmodern world this negative space can be reinterpreted to suggest the absence of that traditional knowledge in current Pacific lives, or alternatively this knowledge may be equated to the necessity of a street-wise sensibility that the stars/city lights reference in an urban environment. It is this interplay between contrary interpretations and the myriad possible meanings that balance traditional cultural knowledge with contemporary ideologies.

Niki Hastings-McFall, though not referencing tivaevae, also utilises the aesthetic of negative space in her work (Figure 2). In The Coming of the Light — Fishnet Series, Soul Catcher II and III (2001) Hastings-McFall uses plastic sushi fish, sterling silver, and acrylic rod to create a net as a symbol of ‘catching souls, fishing for Christ and as a symbol of mankind’s attempt to capture enlightenment’ (Personal communication, 2002). The fish, though an obvious image from the Pacific has become a generic symbol of Christianity. The star patterns formed by these fish refer to the importance of navigation in the Pacific. Hastings-McFall, however, takes this a few steps further. The negative space of the net forms a cross pattern and as such continues the religious reference. But the nets — again, important to Pacific cultures — are also ‘reminiscent of net curtains, and the use of suburban detritus references an urban twenty-first-century reality’ (Personal communication, 2002).

The utilisation of pattern and positive/negative space enables Hastings-McFall to integrate modern materials with traditional ideals. These patterns not only resonate with traditions of aesthetic systems, they balance a traditional past with an ‘imported’ belief system. By combining objects that reference the Pacific (fish, nets), which are also acknowledged metaphors of Christianity, she draws upon her dual identity as an urban Polynesian. As such, she alludes to clichés and ideological issues through her use of these icons and symbols. These reinforce relationships to histories, genealogies, stories, and memories, which in turn, strengthen a contemporary Pacific identity today.
Figure 1 Ani O’Neill, *Kua Marino te Tai* (detail), plaited florist ribbon, 1994. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2 Niki Hastings-McFall, *The Coming of the Light — Fishnet Series, Soul Catcher II and III*, plastic soy sauce containers, sterling silver, acrylic rod, 2001. Image courtesy of the artist.
Both O’Neill and Hastings-McFall create work that yields a multiplicity of possible meanings. One could suggest that this stems from a lack of specific cultural knowledge — an unfamiliarity with the island referents that inhere in these symbols. Yet what is intriguing is the fact that they are so easily reinterpreted and understood by a new generation on a new island. A key example of this is O’Neill’s use of lei in various installation pieces. These lei, sometimes composed of candy, sometimes comprised of shell, are no longer a symbol of welcome and generosity, or a Pacific celebration of life; rather, they have become symbols of what is not. As the artist herself observes in an exhibition flyer,

[It] is a reminder of loss, as each lei, painstakingly made, was given by someone to someone after a holiday in the tropics, and then somehow has ended up in an op-shop or garage sale! Then you realise that each little shell once had a living creature in it … so it’s also about life and death and the present. (n.p.)

Hastings-McFall draws upon the lei in quite a different fashion. In her Urban Lei series, works such as Nosy Neighbour Lei or Mac Lei demonstrate a sense of

Figure 3 Niki Hastings-McFall, Urban Lei series, ‘urban detritus’, 2000. Image courtesy of the artist.
humour and double entendre. Although lei immediately speak Pacific, Hastings-McFall places them firmly in New Zealand. Her lei are made from MacDonald’s throw-aways, soy sauce containers, or weed-eater nylon (Figure 3). They combine the delicacy of the tradition with our throw-away culture thereby commenting upon our realities as urban Polynesians.

Another manifestation of traditional textile technologies that is seen in contemporary art is the ‘lalava-ology’ of Filipe Tohi. Tohi has spent the last decade studying the complexity of Tongan lashings — design patterns that create, in essence, a cultural language. Tohi is not attempting to revive lost knowledge; rather he is trying to better understand the complexities of the knowledge embedded in this art form. 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’ (n.p.).

Tohi defines lalava as the ‘intersection of two strings that form patterns as they spiral up and down. Without both strings (lines) there are no patterns, both must go together’ (n.p.) Looking at these designs one finds a balance that can be equated with male and female; the lalava becomes a metaphor for the ways people and cultures interact. It is this notion of balance — of the interaction of two entities that so intrigues Tohi. He has attempted to demonstrate this in his models of the lalava designs. Expanding the patterns into three dimensions allows the viewer to see the geometric nature of the patterns, and more importantly to see them from multiple perspectives. In Fakalava (Figure 4), Tohi creates a pattern in three dimensions that represents man. Ideally woman must also be present, as the balance is always necessary. In this association, the two lines intertwine, and at once, both the complexity and simplicity of the pattern is revealed.

Thus these three-dimensional patterns offer a visual allusion to the cultural metaphor Tohi depicts. Adrienne Kaeppler has noted, ‘Tongan aesthetic philosophy (is) based on heliaki, to say one thing but mean another’ (293). The use of metaphor and allusion enable the transference of cultural knowledge as contexts change and meanings shift. 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’ (293). This is not just an artistic penchant; it is a philosophy and a way of life. Deconstructing these patterns, Tohi offers insight into a system of knowledge. As such the deployment of these patterns provides sustenance to a changing culture. As times change, metaphors may change, but the pattern remains.

According to Tohi, these patterns have been modelled into symbols of human interaction. The designs tell us/teach us how to live/to interact/to be. Grappling with the idea — with the cultural history and now the multi-lingual/bi-cultural reality — of New Zealand, much seems to have been lost in translation. As these lashings were used on canoes they often refer to navigational knowledge that was transferred both orally and by demonstration. The names of the patterns
Figure 4 Filip Tohi, *Fakalava*, wood, 2001. Image courtesy of the artist.
allude to guiding stars (the Pleiades, the Southern Cross, Venus), fish, and conceptual knowledge. They preserve knowledge acquired by watching and experiencing. They "formalize the nonformal" meaning they give form (pattern) to the placement of stars, of currents, of fish and birds, which combined, comprised navigational knowledge (Kaeppler 1997 26). More than just a Tongan fascination with subtlety, this Polynesian way of speaking with metaphor reiterates the importance of pattern; patterns in the spoken word, patterns in dance and movement, patterns in art forms — patterns as mnemonic devices of cultural knowledge.

Pattern and metaphor are also at the foundation of John Pule’s work. Pule, of Niuean heritage, has used the nineteenth-century Niuean bark cloth tradition as a basis for his art practice. He revels in the fact that Niuean bark cloth had moved beyond the grid-like structure of bark cloth from Western Polynesia (Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji). This movement, as well as the use of floral motifs and historical commentary, suggest that Niuean bark cloth were ‘maps’ or stories of interactions and interventions by European explorers and missionaries. The combination of storytelling with a visual art practice by Niueans has engaged Pule. The fact that Niuean bark cloth is different from most other Polynesian bark cloth traditions in its design and use of motifs enables Pule to create from a unique resource base. He divides the overall into smaller sections, creating vignettes, which together illustrate both a map of cultural knowledge and his unique design aesthetic (Figure 5). Nicholas Thomas remarks that, ‘It has been said that Pule has created his own language … a personal iconography that is suggestive of myth without being literally connected with it’ (1999 267). His motifs include religious images, lover’s embracing, and fantastic animals with gaping mouths that seem to devour or want to devour one’s soul. The shark is ever present, as are birds — constants in an island environment; but these too have taken on new meanings, as they have been reconfigured into a language representative of, but not representing, the Pacific.

Pule has stated that he collects metaphor. (Personal communication 1998). This would suggest that his work finds its basis not only in bark cloth but also in other Pacific art forms such as oratory, lashings, and dance. Both his early paintings and his more recent work incorporate his own poetry; thus the expressive language of his art is both visual and verbal. The maps of Pule’s painted and lithographic work are just that; maps of ideas — images reinforced by a visual language and underscored by the spoken word. Through his art, poetry, and writing he speaks of New Zealand as his homeland, but he also reaffirms the associations, memories, and heritage of his spiritual homeland, Niue. This combination of the present and past, of a highly developed sense of place and history, energises his work. The creation of a modern art form that references a past, speaks to the importance of contemporary Pacific art. It draws upon a past, but is firmly situated in the present. As Thomas notes, ‘there is no deadening preoccupation with authenticity or tradition’ (1999 269).
Figure 5 John Pule, *Perturbed Visitor*, lithograph, 1998. Image courtesy of Papergraphica, Christchurch.
The reference to bark cloth, though obviously Polynesian, is over-stated in the literature on contemporary Pacific art. For example, Fatu Feu’u has frequently been slighted for appropriating Samoan bark cloth traditions; but Feu’u’s practice is neither an appropriation of a tradition nor simply a refashioning of bark cloth imagery. These motifs address social obligation, authority, and a balance of power. As such Feu’u moves to the heart of a Polynesian aesthetic that is both graphic and abstract (Figure 6). The non-representational nature of Polynesian art reinforces both the spiritual and ideological basis of these cultures. Veiled meaning and metaphor prevail as objects and motifs become representative not only of a person or a position but the ideologies and obligations they hold.

Similarly, Pule’s paintings are clearly not bark cloth; however, the cultural reference creates a relationship that is easily read by many in their new island environment. It is the combination of both — environment and bark cloth — that Hastings-McFall addresses so well in her Urban Navigator series (Figure 7). This work integrates signs that are understood within the New Zealand environment — signs or markers that aid our navigation of city streets. It is intriguing however, that road signs — recognised in the West — are so easily translatable and recognisable as the patterns of bark cloth, tattoo and tivaevae. Hastings-McFall comments:
These works have been made utilising modern systems of navigation (road signs) to draw parallels between the great ancient Pacific traditions of navigation and the 21st century urban Polynesian travels — both physical and metaphysical. By recreating these road signs and placing them in multiple repetitive patterns they become tapa, tattoo or weaving patterns; combining Urban Aotearoa and the Ancient Pacific. In referencing traditions and material culture of the Pacific, analogies can perhaps be drawn with contemporary humankind’s attempt to weave together the strands of the genealogical/historical past, constructing some kind of stability from which to navigate the future. (n.p.)

As she plays with patterns, in much the same way that early bark cloth and tivaevae artists did, her designs speak not of a specific language but of patterns that are seen in various cultures. However, it is the specific cultural meanings that these patterns convey that provide the multiple readings of her work.

Using language, especially the language of the West, as political discourse, these artists draw upon their experiences/their cultures/their identities to create an art practice that exemplifies the lived urban Polynesian experience. This lifestyle, created from a combination of the island and the urban, is exemplified by an artistic practice that is based upon the political discourse of identity. Urban Polynesians are savvy to their reality of being ‘the Other’s Other’. Their position in the New Zealand art world depends upon their identity as ‘Pacific’. The challenge is to create work that moves beyond the cultural stereotype and address the issues that inspire their practice.
For instance, O’Neill’s practice has always been based on her homage to Cook Island women’s artistic traditions. This is particularly evident in the crochet work, *Buddy System*. The floral bouquet set out on a grid not only visually suggests tivaevae, but also the communal nature and gifting aspects of this tradition. Tivaevae are often created in groups and O’Neill envisioned the *Buddy System* as such, asking others to contribute to the piece (Figure 8). The grid provided co-ordinate numbers, and people chose where they would place their contribution. This was noted along with the name and address of a recipient to whom the crochet flower would be sent at the end of the exhibition. The encoding of a cultural mindset — communal work and gifting — enhanced the dialogue and complexity of what may have seemed to be a simple and perhaps craft-like endeavour (that of crocheting a flower).

Innovation such as this affords the opportunities to transmit both a cultural aesthetic and knowledge to a new generation. Similarly, lalava explores and transmits ideas and patterns. Clearly, patterns can be named and recognised; but this does not mean that the historical knowledge held by the patterns are also being transferred. One speaks of cultural knowledge, but how does this figure in contemporary New Zealand? Tohi’s work, most often seen in a gallery, will not provide the viewer with navigational knowledge. What it does provide, however, is an insight into a way of thinking, of an aesthetic, of how Polynesians conceptualise their world.
The practices of these artists emanate from the traditional in innovative and unconventional ways. O’Neill basks in the unconventional, pushing craft into the realm of art. Hastings-McFall and Feu’u are not enhancing, but pioneering new art forms. Tohi and Pule play with ideas. The looseness with which these artists commandeer cultural icons allows them the space to play, to create anew. These artists’ practices establish relationship between the past and the present such that the traditional icon becomes a flexible metaphor. The artists highlighted here are but a few who look to the traditional/cultural aesthetic of the Pacific as a foundation for their contemporary art practice. These references come, specifically, from the Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga, and Niue, yet the art in which they are found reflects a Polynesian aesthetic that knows no political boundaries. The patterns of the modern New Zealand urban environment are the same patterns that have always been a part of this Pacific aesthetic; and so we find that in New Zealand the continued transformation and incorporation of technologies allows these artists to use patterns to disseminate cultural knowledge of both the past and present. So for Tohi every pattern seen within the Pacific aesthetic can be found in lalava. As these threads entwine in both old and new patterns, another generation is given access to the past and a means by which the present might be understood. A Pacific ideology is extended to balance relationships, to ensure the passing of knowledge, and to sustain a Pacific cultural identity in a modern world.

NOTES
1 Polynesians created ‘rope’ with sennit fibres from palms. They also utilised the palm, as well as pandanus, to plait sails and mats.
2 For further discussion see Kaeppler 2002 and Herda 1999, 2002.
3 Tivaevae are appliqués that draw upon quilt making activities introduced by missionary wives as well as a traditional aesthetic of abstracted botanical designs. These are made in two layers; a top design appliquéd to a foundational backing that enables a dynamic contrast of colour and design. For more information see Herda 1999 and 2002.
6 ‘Lei’ is a widely used term in Polynesia for garlands (of flowers and/or leaves) and breast ornaments. In a contemporary setting lei are usually floral garlands given to visitors upon their arrival in the islands. In the traditional past, lei were objects used to decorate the body as well as signal the status of the wearer. As status was an essential element in these highly stratified societies, ornaments reinforcing this system were fundamental.
7 See Stevenson 2001a, 2001b.
8 See Stevenson 2002a.
10 Writers often mention that both Pule and Feu’u draw upon barkcloth traditions in their work. The fact that Pule’s basis is Niue, and Feu’u’s Samoa, demonstrates both the differences in these traditions as well as their contemporary manifestations.
11 See Mane-Wheoki 1995.
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