

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

MAKING IN THE DARK: A SOUTH SEA ARCHIVE

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree

Master

of

Fine Arts

At Massey University Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Jasmine Togo-Brisby

2022

ABSTRACT

This exegesis will address Australian South Sea identity through the lens of contemporary art. It will discuss Moana Nui a Kiwa as the waterway which is both connection to land and people of Oceania but also as slave trade middle passage. My practice looks at the vessel as the birth place of a new culture that I claim as my own cultural medium. The vessel also takes place as human form with the South Sea female body is an archive and a site of resistance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For granny and grandfather,
I am forever grateful of your courage, strength and resilience.

For my daughter Eden, for being you.

For my mother Christina for showing me the way.

For the firm embrace and acceptance
of the Aotearoa Māori and Pasifika community.

For the understanding, support and patience of my supervisors,
Rachael Rakena & Shannon Te Ao.

CONTENTS

2) ABSTRACT

3) ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

5) LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

8) INTRODUCTION

11) VESSEL / BODY / ARCHIVE

36) MOANA NUI A KIWA / MIDDLE PASSAGE / ARCHIVE

52) CONCLUSION

55) BIBLIOGRAPHY

56) APPENDIX: EXHIBITIONS COMPLETED IN ASSOCIATION
WITH MFA 2019 – 2022

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1) Mackay cemetery, Australian South Sea Islander grave.
Source: Jasmine Togo-Brisby personal collection.

- 2) *Passage*, 2022
Crow wings, crow feathers, mixed media, plexiglass and stained wood.
1740 x 1020 x 320 mm

- 3) *Absented Presence I*, 2022
Crow wings, stained wood, plexiglass, brass
1740 x 1020 x 320 mm

- 4) *Absented Presence II*, 2022
Crow wings, stained wood, plexiglass, brass
1740 x 1020 x 320 mm

- 5) *Ceiling Centre, IV (Blak)*, 2022
Plaster, oxide, fiberglass, stain
70 x 550 mm diam

- 6) *Ceiling Centre, II (Blak)*, 2020
Plaster, oxide, fiberglass, stain
60 x 440 mm diam

7) *The Ships Stole our People, 2018*

Collodion on glass

258 x 305mm

8) *South Sea Heiress I, 2019*

Collodion on glass

258 x 305mm

9) *Tidal Transitions, 2019*

Collodion on glass

258 x 305mm

10) *Inheritance, 2019*

Collodion on glass

258 x 305mm

11) *Post Plantation Heir II, 2019*

Collodion on tin

213 x 164mm

12) *Into Something Else, 2021*

Crow feathers and mixed media

270mm x 2450mm diameter.

13) Detail of Mackay chronology mural

Source: Jasmine Togo-Brisby personal collection

Captured, 2019

14) *Mother Tongue*, 2020

Single channel video, colour, sound

16:9, 9min 30sec.

INTRODUCTION

This exegesis articulates Australian South Sea Islander Identity through the lens of my artistic practice. South Sea Islanders are the Australian born descendants of Pacific islanders who were taken to Australia as a result of slave labour policies employed by the Australia government between 1847 and 1903. I am a fourth generation Australian South Sea Islander with ancestral lineage to the islands of Ambae and Santo of Vanuatu. South Sea Islanders are frequently underrepresented and misrepresented, our culture and existence are not common knowledge to most in Australia or the Pacific. To identify as South Sea Islander is inherently political, leaving you open to both debate and explanation with the expectation to hold all knowledge.

There is much dispute between historians and our South Sea Islander community on the 'truths' of the slave trade and our ancestors experience. Colonial data is used as imperial knowledge that suppresses our oral histories. Defending the legitimacy of our ancestors' experience is frequent and harmful for our communities, we are often called upon to talk about our identity, experience and history, we are asked to repeat the racial violence of the archive, and then do our own analysis of that violence.

This mode of representation and presentation is not a form of liberation for us, it continues to keep our experience siloed in history and keeps us from what Toni Morrison calls 'doing our work'. For me, it is vital for my survival and development as person and an artist to not engage with discourse which denies our truths.

Searching through the structures, documents and writings which harboured our ancestors through another legal slave trade is painful, laborious and often paralyzing. The colonial process of 'research' picks at our ancestors' documents like vultures scraping at bones, and our South Sea existence is perpetuated as specimen. In most cases I'm required to sift through historian texts in order to extract and reclaim our ancestors' voices.

There is little to no writing on contemporary South Sea Island identity, we have no theories written by South Sea Islanders (or others) on our Pacific slave diaspora experience. There is no written grounding of where and how we fit into the world, not that I claim we need that to learn who we are, but more so to hold agency on who and what is written about us and we can be our own experts.

I write from my own personal experience and bring together multiple texts, stories and songs to help unpack my identity and arts practice. I draw upon thinkers and researchers from different fields and geographical areas including the Pacific, Caribbean, Canada and America. I use Australian South Sea Islander voices wherever possible with the hope to insert South Sea identity within Pacific and Australian dialogues but also to locate us globally.

'The work' is to create awareness of our South Sea existence and help project our cultural identity into the future. I consider my creative practice to be a site of resistance and I utilise the gallery to create spaces for South Sea belonging, encouraging empowerment and liberation through visibility.

This text will not be able to say and do all the things that need to be said on my culture and my arts practice, but this acts as a foundation to give an understanding of my place in the world the impetus of my practice.

South Sea identity is to speak out and give acknowledgment

- Nagas, M (2nd generation South Sea Islander)¹

¹ SLQ edge. (11 March 2013). *Matthew Nagas - Australian South Sea Islanders 150 years: what does it mean?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm3iFvkXYx8>

VESSEL / BODY / ARCHIVE

The vessel is a reoccurring theme throughout my practice, I utilise colonial ships as an aesthetic strategy to anchor my work, South Sea identity and culture, in order to reveal our unique position as Pacific slave diaspora. A 'chronotope'² is a term employed by theorist Mikhail Bakhtin which refers to the co-ordinates of time and space that are invoked by a given narrative. For me the ship acts as a 'chronotope' a marker of both space and time, which grounds my work in the narratives of the Pacific slave trade/Blackbirding trade. I use the symbol of the ship as a medium to create uniquely South Sea Islander artworks.

Earlier this year I took my daughter Eden on a three hour glass bottom boat tour at Te Whanganui-A-Hei (Cathedral Cove) Marine Reserve. Pathetically, I got sea sick from looking down at the marine life through the glass window on the bottom of the boat. It was a particularly rough day; we were booked to go the day before but it was cancelled due to such extreme conditions. The movement of the water was relentless, pushing against the little boat as though to eject us from the sea. I sat there trying not to throw up, trying not to let Eden see that I was in absolute misery. I forced my eyes to the horizon and wished the time away.

² Mikhail Bakhtin's original term, 'chronotope,' referenced by Paul Gilroy. Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.

I thought of my ancestors.

Three months.

Darkness.

Movement.

Sickness.

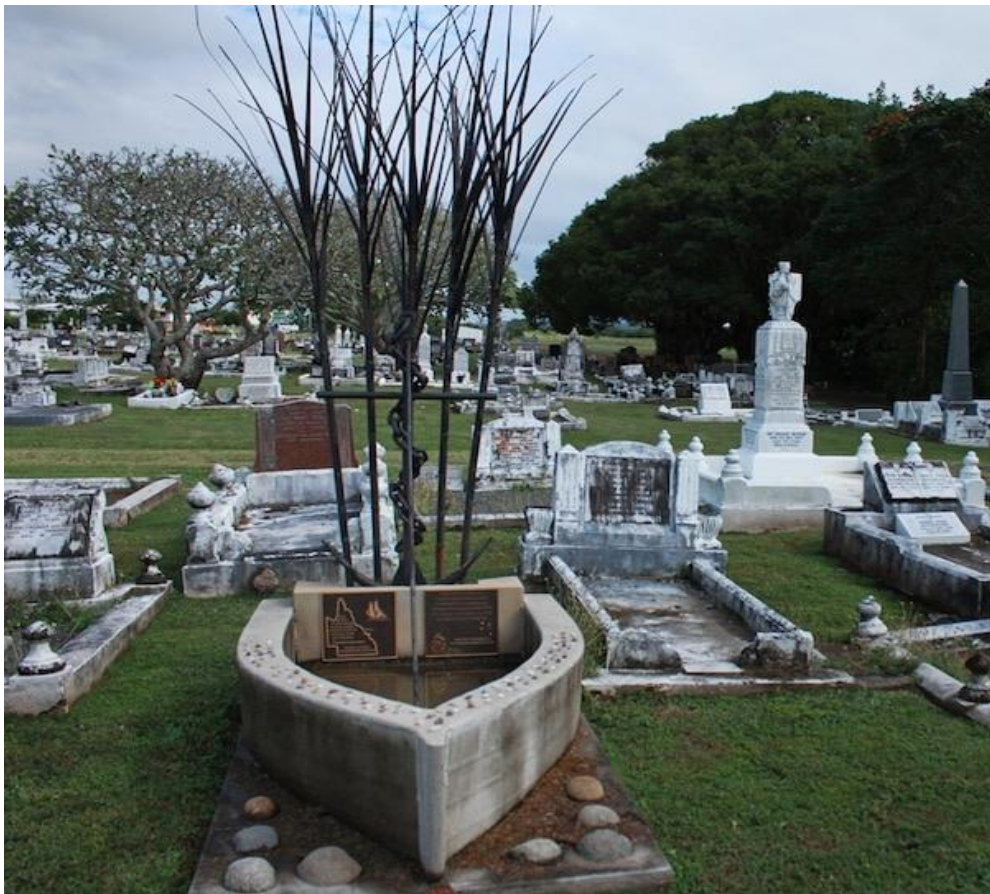
Stench.

It's inconceivable. The ship packed full of damaged and sick bodies, strangers from different regions, sharing in the suffering together, language muted, *thrown into a melting pot* into the bellies of ships. The ship is an *abyss*, the initial space of rupture, the bringing together of many nations and tribal groups which would otherwise be disconnected, now into a new, shared entity. In that bondage birthed a new culture, a collision of cultures – some aspects adopted, others lost – that would ripple down the generations.

Like many other creation stories, ours started in darkness, but it's different when your genesis is at the bottom of a ship. My mother says, "we are floating", adrift...in both time and space. We are Australian South Sea Islanders, the Australian-born descendants of the Pacific slave trade, the movement of our people is a jarring juxtaposition to the free migration of other Pacific peoples, most of which is centred around fearless ancestors navigating sophisticated voyages across vast stretches of open sea on waka, not restrained on colonial ships. Displaced and disenfranchised, for those of us in the afterlives of slavery, the journey is genesis.

I think of Uncle Jack Marau, a South Sea man who handcrafted a model replica of the vessel which took him on the journey that he would never return from.

Unfortunately, there is little to be found on his life, an image of him³ and his vessel floats within a sea of numbers (our ancestors' bodies as figures), 'facts' and trade routes compiled by the historian who captured his image. All I can do is imagine what this act of making was like for him. How his body compelled to expel and release the things that cannot be or haven't been spoken about, there isn't enough words or the right words or the right language. Uncle Jack's ship is a radical act of reclamation and resistance, in a time when Australia was trying to eradicate our people through mass deportations, Uncle Jack made the intangible visible.



Mackay cemetery, Australian South Sea Islander grave
Source: Jasmine Togo-Brisby personal collection

³ Moore, C. (2017). *Making Mala: Malaita in Solomon Islands, 1870s–1930s*, ANU Press

The act of reclaiming the vessel can also be seen in our cemeteries, headstones take shape as the hull of a large vessel. Adorned with sugarcane and anchors. In their departure of this world, they proudly insist on being seen. In the island representations of the vessel is found in many Kastoms⁴ including the repatriation of South Sea families to their ancestral village and homelands. The South Sea family is wrapped between palm fronds which create the shape of a ship, they then walk with the ship draped around them back into their village, they are welcomed with singing and celebrations of their return. I see both the tombstones and the ceremony as modes of return, perhaps an attempt to retrace our steps and reboard the vessel we may recover and reclaim what was lost/stolen, either in this life or the afterlife, to make our way home to the motherland.

On my ancestral homelands of Vanuatu, in the wake of the ships the people of Tanna continue to fear the ocean, and are often not allowed at the beach by themselves in fear of abduction. On Vila, commemorative re-enactments of blackbirding abductions take place, a big truck is dressed in the appearance of a ship, it slowly drives through the main street where locals onboard play the role of slavers, grabbing young men and children off the street and pulling them onto the vessel, parents run after the ship screaming and crying for their abducted children. Ni Vanuatu political figure and poet, the late Grace Molisa states, “When I was growing up, the village elders would talk about the sailing boats. They would call them ‘people stealing boats’ or ‘steal ships’”⁵.

⁴ Kastom – Bislama for custom

⁵ Graham, T. (Director). (1995). *Sugar Slaves*. Annamax Media Pty Ltd Film Australia Limited.





Passage, 2022

Crow wings, crow feathers, mixed ,
media, stained wood, plexiglass

1740 x 1020 x 320 mm

The memory and trauma of the slave trade is passed down through stories and songs on the impacted islands. The women of Pentecost perform a dance and song that laments the theft of our people. As part of the ritual the women hold wooden rods with miniature schooners on the end, they dance and push the schooners in the air, chanting:

*the ships stole our people
and we don't know where they have gone
the ships stole our people
and they've disappeared*

The visual of a ship invokes fear and is used a warning sign, as an act of remembrance, yearning for those who were taken, it is a practice of care, a plea to not forget a past that has not yet passed. These vessels are an ever-present part of our culture, we are tethered to them, and them to us.

Throughout my practice I create from my South Sea perspective, with these people in mind, with their representations and ways of approaching our shared story. For us as the descendants the visual and cultural material of Blackbirding and the sugar industry are central to the formation of our diasporic cultural identity. Crows are commonly used as a symbol of the blackbirding trade and more commonly have been popularised in film and literature as symbols of evil and often perceived as ominous, connotations which are not lost on the practice of blackbirding. As part of my arts practice, I use taxidermy crows, crow wings and feathers as materials which speak to our South Sea experience and used as material culture (also see page 40).



Absented Presence I, 2022
Crow wings, stained wood, plexiglass, brass
1740 x 1020 x 320 mm

Researching Pacific slavery means spending countless hours in museums and archives, searching through log books and photographs. In 2019 I was on residency at Dunedin School of Art, and spent time at the Port Chalmers Maritime Museum researching the remains of the Don Juan, the first Pacific slave trade vessel to enter Queensland in 1863 (see also page). During my time there I experienced racism and ignorance from the institutions staff and it was evident that there was no space for South Sea stories nor would room be created for our perspectives. In response I created my solo exhibition *Birds of Passage*, a suite of photography sculptural forms. The sculptures are created from crow wings and are formed to create the shape of a vessel. I appropriate the craft and tradition of Western model ship making and culture by using materials and modes of ship display.

The crow ship forms are hybrid, they are both living and dead, fixed and moving. The feathered vessels have no stern, they're able to move both backwards and forwards simultaneously. I look to Edouard Glissant's seminal text *Poetics of Relation*, in which he discusses the slave ship as being a living entity *a womb abyss a space of cultural creation, this boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you*⁶. *The ship embodies both death and rebirth the ship is a central organising symbol of slavery and a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion*⁷. The hybrid crow wing ships are a physical manifestation of the Blackbirding trade and speak to the notion of the slave ship as both coffin and womb, a site of death and also new life. The ship embodies

⁶ Glissant, É & Wing, B. (1997). *Poetics of relation*. University of Michigan Press.

⁷ Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic : modernity and double consciousness*. Verso.



Absented Presence II, 2022
Crows wings, stained wood, plexiglass, brass
1740 x 1020 x 320 mm

both death and rebirth simultaneously, he states *This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death*⁸. Similarly In Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* he asserts that *the ship is a central organising symbol of slavery and a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion*⁹. The hybrid crow wing ships are a physical manifestation of the Blackbirding trade and speak to the notion of the slave ship as both coffin and womb, a site of death and also new life.

The well-known image of the slave ship which represents the crowded lower deck is an illustration embedded in the minds of those who live in the wake of slavery. The illustration is of the slave ship *Brooks*, and the printed engravings trace back to the eighteenth-century British abolitionist 1789. The illustration uncovered the inhumane slave ship conditions of the stowage, and exposed the hold of the vessel, portraying the conditions of transport for as many as 609 abducted Africans to the Americas. More than 7,000 engravings were printed as images to shock the public and create awareness of the abolition campaign to end transatlantic slavery.

The enduring image of the ship is what art historian Cheryl Finley describes as the 'slave ship icon'¹⁰ and is frequently used within the contemporary art practices of artists who identify as slave diaspora. The slave ship icon helps the beholder "understand their relationship to the present" through their return to the past. I draw upon the slave ship icon in a series of black plaster sculptures influenced by the ornamental tin-pressed and plaster ceilings created by the

⁸ Glissant, É & Wing, B. (1997). *Poetics of relation*. University of Michigan Press.

⁹ Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic : modernity and double consciousness*. Verso.

¹⁰ Finley, C. (2018). *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.



Ceiling Centre, IV (Blak), 2022
Plaster, oxide, fiberglass, stain
70 x 550 mm diam

Wunderlich company. I explore the material history of the Wunderlich family, who enslaved my great-great-grandparents as house servants from 1889. The Wunderlich family established a company in 1885 and produced pressed metal ceiling tiles and plaster ornamentation which can be found in civic buildings including Wellington Town Hall and Antrim House (Wellington) amongst countless others. Today, these ornate architectural features are painstakingly preserved as heritage materials, the preservation and adoration of these decorative ceilings mask the fraught history of the Wunderlich's direct involvement with the Pacific slave trade.

I repossess the image of the slave ship in what Finley calls a '*symbolic possession of the past*.'¹¹ Within the moulded plaster ceiling roses I have replaced the opulent patterning with representations of the body as tightly arranged dolls. The ceiling rosette acts as vessel itself with the composition of clustered dolls laying, some faced up, others face down, imitates the views of the human cargo hold illustrations.

I employ the slave ship icon as a symbolic indicator that relates to the passages of slavery and equally to the myriad of genealogies that connect to this present moment. By borrowing from the iconic slave ship illustrations, I align myself and Pacific slave diaspora with artists who descend from the transatlantic slave trade incorporating our stories into global slavery narratives.

¹¹ Finley, C. (2018). *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.



Ceiling Centre, II (Blak), 2020
Plaster, oxide, fiberglass, stain
60 x 440 mm diam

In creating the black plaster rosettes I also make reference to Australian first nations artist Destiny Deacon who uses dolls within her multimedia practice to represent the body. Deacon also coined the term *BLAK*, her intentional misspelling of 'black' subverts colonial language, asserting an expression of contemporary urban Aboriginal identity. *BLAK* is now commonly used by first nations peoples globally amongst all disciplines. Similar to Deacon, the dolls hold special personal memories in my family, my grandmother still loves them and holds a collection in her nursing home room. It is a passion that is shared amongst my family, and I believe it comes from being the only blak bodily representation in Australia at the time.

While South Sea bloodlines are not indigenous to Australia, nor are we often regarded as indigenous to our island homelands either, we have a kinship and intermarriages with our first nations brothers and sisters and shared experience of being Blak in Australia. This however can be difficult for outsiders to understand, as we identify as Blak, in a part of the world where blackness frequently means indigeneity. By referencing Deacon's use of dolls and her declaration of 'Blakness' I reaffirm our shared Blak experiences in colonial Australia, using both a visual language and literal language to insert contemporary South Sea identity within Blak Australian politics and visual culture.

When my great-great-grandparents were taken from Vanuatu, the only possessions they took with them into the hold of the ship was held within their bodies. All that is known, all that cannot be known, the unspeakable and intangible. Those stories and memories have been passed down and embedded within our contemporary bodies and impacted and influenced the creation of our



The Ships Stole our People, 2018

Collodion on glass

258 x 305mm

South Sea culture. Our bodies are an archive, a thick text to never fully comprehend or transcribe. Written in a language that bends and warps backwards and forwards in time.

Marianne Hirsch calls this “Postmemory”, the memories of previous generations passed onto future generations through stories, images, and behaviours. Events from the past continue to impact the present and the future, she states that *these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right*¹² and to grow up with *overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors*¹³

My mother’s body can tell me more about who I am and where I come from, and where I belong than any other archive. The women in my family are generally the knowledge keepers, I have also witnessed this more broadly within other South Sea families. We are the vessels that hold and release information. A notion which I share with artist Simone Leigh who creates sculptural forms that speak directly to the female as vessel, she states that *women are the containers of knowledge and trauma*¹⁴, she also says that she *utilises the black female form as a kind of material culture*¹⁵. Similarly, and perhaps more didactically I use the South Sea female form as cultural medium.

¹² Hirsch, M. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012

¹³ Hirsch, M. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012

¹⁴ Leigh, S. *Knowledge as Collective Experience*. Creative Time Summit 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q31nf3_f3is (accessed 20/04/2022)

¹⁵The Art Newspaper.

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/04/24/simone-leigh-now-in-the-spotlight-contemplates-the-theme-of-invisibility>



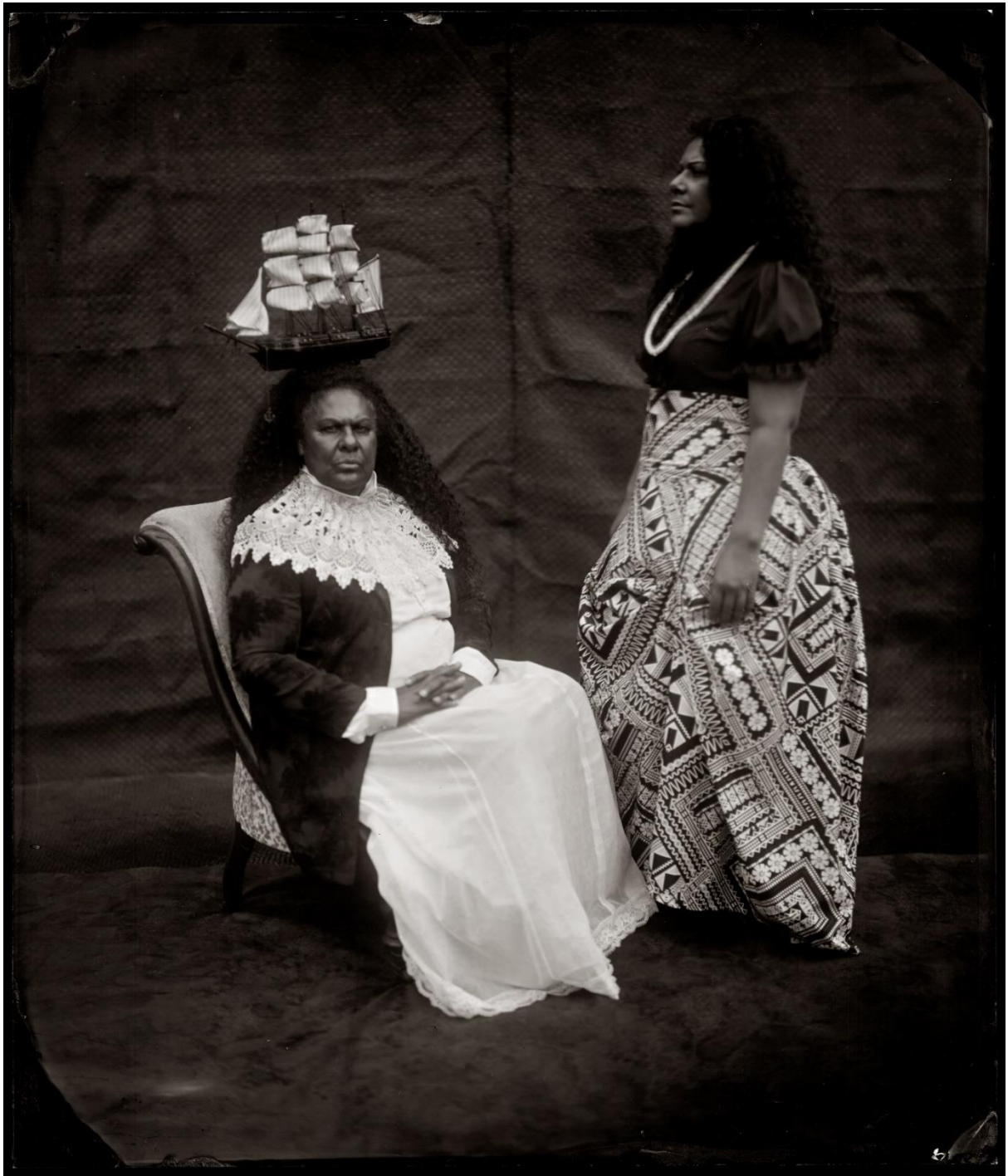
South Sea Heiress I, 2019
Collodion on glass
258 x 305mm

My families trigenerational bodies are a reoccurring theme through my practice, and in particular through a series of analogue photographs. 'Adrift' 2018-19, is a suite of wet-plate collodion photographs on tin and glass that replicate nineteenth century studio portraits. The medium was originally used during the colonial photography period and was used as a tool of enslavement.

South Sea archival images were originally captured as documentation, staged evidence, specimen, performed ethnography and labour trade mug shots, through this series I look back to the archival representations of our bodies and to the notions of performance and power within imagery to create a body of work which I consider to be a counter archive. The works are a photographic intervention, an unapologetic repetition of the South Sea female body encouraging healing and empowerment through visibility. While the photographic process engages within a historical conversation, the work sits somewhere between the past, present and future.

The family portraits capture three generations of women—myself, my mother and my daughter—holding or wearing model ships in our hair or on staffs. The model ships act as headdress and adornment that we proudly assert our genealogical connections to the Pacific slave trade and use as motifs of our contemporary culture. Through these works I'm utilising the female south sea body as medium and as vessel, I'm interested in intergenerational transmissions and inheritance through the females in my family and culture.

Admittedly I feel slightly uneasy to speak on the female body politics. The impetus of my practice is to liberate and uplift all South Sea bodies, and to separate our experience based on gender feels like an indulgence which for us



Tidal Transitions, 2019

Collodion on glass

258 x 305mm

as a people, perhaps have not progressed to yet in terms of visibility and acknowledgement. According to Hortense Spillers when we crossed the middle passage in the holds of ships destined for enslavement, we became genderless.

Under these conditions we lose at least gender difference in the outcome and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political manoeuvre not at all gender-related, gender-specific¹⁶

Gender however was always a consideration in the business of Pacific slavery. According to the data only 5% of the people taken in the Pacific slave trade were female, with that said my great great grandmother was never documented or accounted for. The reason women weren't sought after was not due to chivalry or physical strength, and in fact South Sea women were the only females to be enslaved on sugarcane plantations globally. However, the reason our women avoided abduction was because it was recognised by the Australian government that South Sea women would/could birth offspring which would and/or could stay permanently in Australia. Opposed to slavery in America where black women were seen as 'the machine of slavery', birthing a new generation of field workers. White Australia recognised the birth of a new generation and the racial implications of this plantation model and mitigated the risk of permanent black bodies.

¹⁶ Spillers, H.J. (1987). *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*. *Diacritics*, 17(2), 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>



Inheritance, 2019
Collodion on glass
258 x 305mm

The Pacific slave trade was designed to be temporary or as Tracey Banivanua-Mar states *Black in order to be cheap, natives in order to be black and available, but from somewhere else in order to be temporary.*¹⁷

The South Sea female body had/has the power to produce a new and unwanted culture in Australia and were considered a threat to the nation.

I'm interested in transgenerational relationship between females, that is women who birth women. Partly from my own lived experience, growing up with a single mother, of a single mother and surrounded predominantly by female role models in my family. The biology of women who birth women is worth discussing, womb-ception is the fact that the egg which eventually became me grew inside my mother while she was growing inside of my grandmother's womb and when my mother held me in her womb, she also held my daughter. I like to think of the of a set of Russian dolls, a secret filing system, hiding in the wombs of our grandmothers stored away until needed. It's remarkable but also makes a great deal of sense, even that perhaps this is why we all get on each other's nerves, because we have actually been together for longer than our physical forms have been in the world.

In the scientific research of Dr Dias and Dr Ressler in 2013 they proved that the transgenerational epigenetic effects of trauma can be transmitted across multiple generations. The trauma of a generation impacts the nervous system, physiology and reproductive biology of their descendants.

¹⁷ Banivanua-Mar T. (2006). *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade*. University of Hawaii Press.



Post Plantation Heir II, 2019
Collodion on tin
213 x 164mm

This transgenerational phenomenon contributes to *neuropsychiatric disorders, such as phobias, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder*¹⁸. Making our ancestors' experiences quite literally embedded in our everyday life.

When my daughter Eden came into this world is when I decided to be an artist, it was when I made a real effort with my life to attempt to better her world. When she turned 8 years old she was the same age at which our Granny was kidnapped off the beach in Vanuatu and taken to Sydney where she was enslaved by the Wunderlich family. I was able to see and feel not only what it was like to be the mother of a daughter and imagine her disappearance but also see that little girl's innocence and vulnerability and imagine her experience of being abducted never to return again. That year I cried a lot more than usual and could not unsee or unthink my way out of my Granny's story. It was then that I invited Eden to be part of my practice in my first moving image work 'White Pirates', 2014. Today Eden is prominent throughout my practice, along with my mother and myself, our South Sea bodies are used in repetition, as a medium, as vessel and living archive.

¹⁸ Dias, B. G., & Ressler, K. J. (2014). *Parental olfactory experience influences behavior and neural structure in subsequent generations*. *Nature Neuroscience*, 17(1), 89–96. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3594>

MOANA NUI A KIWA / MIDDLE PASSAGE / ARCHIVE

*We are sixty-five percent water...Our brains are eighty per cent water.
We are more water than blood. So our water ties to one another are more
important than our blood ties!*

We carry within us the seas out of which we came

– Wendt, A ¹⁹

My arts practice is anchored in contextualising South Sea identity and experience amongst Pacific dialogue. Within theories our Pacific Ocean and waterways are central in locating Oceanic identity and fittingly so as 71% of the earth's surface is water and the Pacific Ocean is the largest and deepest of all, taking up more than 30% of the worlds surface. Moana Nui A Kiwa is the deepest ocean in the world, if we were to combine all of the worlds land masses into one form, the Pacific Ocean would still be larger and denser.

As Pacific peoples we were/are shaped by our moving seas, our ancestors navigated sophisticated voyages and formed relationships between archipelagos, the ocean is our single common identifier, that brings us together as one people of Moana. Within Epeli Hau'ofa's fundamental text *The Ocean Is Us* he states that *the sea is our pathway to each other and to everyone else*²⁰ and that we as Pacific Islanders have a special relationship to the ocean, our mythologies are grounded by the ocean, we dance to the rhythm of the sea and sing melodies of majestic salt-water voyages. We are the custodians of this

¹⁹ Wendt, A. (1991). *Ola*. University of Michigan.

²⁰ Hau'ofa, E. (2008). *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*. University of Hawaii Press.

enormous waterway and are inherently connected as one people, not alone as individual islands and islanders, but together in the belief and origin of our common heritage as the sea. According to Hau'ofa for us in Oceania, the sea defines us, what we are and have always been common heritage as the sea. According to Hau'ofa *for us in Oceania, the sea defines us, what we are and have always been*²¹.

For South Sea Islanders we share these notions and connection to the ocean, but also fundamental to our identity as a unique Pasifika people, Moana Nui A Kiwa was also the middle passage. A complex site of loss and rupture that was used as a critical tool in the displacement and enslavement of my ancestors. Hau'ofa discusses people who are removed from Oceania as having an illegitimate existence:

*To remove a people from their ancestral, natural surroundings...is to sever them not only from their traditional sources of livelihood but also, and much more importantly, from their ancestry, their history, their identity, and their ultimate claim for the legitimacy of their existence.*²²

madness from the middle passage. While fundamentally our culture started far beyond the madness of the middle passage, the creation of our unique Pacific Island identity began with the ruptures. As Australian South Sea Islanders we do not come from one island or archipelago, nor do all South Sea Islanders have the knowledge of their ancestral home lands. Our memories and ways of connecting are through dispossession and colonial impositions, we more than

²¹ Hau'ofa, E. (2008). *We Are the Ocean*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

²² Hau'ofa, E. (2008). *We Are the Ocean*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

often do not know our island kustom and traditions, and for people of Moana Hau'ofa calls this 'sacrilegious', to not know the age-old stories of our ancestors. Similarly, Edouard Glissant argues that as result of permanent exile and loss of self and identity and the inability to make sense of one's position in the world creates a *madness...madness in the middle passage*. In my family our Ni Vanuatu kustom's and traditions began to dissipate from my family in 1899 when my great great grandparents were abducted from their islands. Today there is little trace of our Kustom Vanuatu culture and language.

Our diaspora does not relate through the connection to ancestral language, culture and belonging to one mother land but rather through the routes of the slave trade, the disconnect, dislocation, and experience of being Australian Pacific slave diaspora. There is a Wantok (one talk) phrase which speaks directly to this connection "yu me two fella one scoon", meaning two people who shared the journey to Australia on the same schooner, and is used as an expression of union which is expressed beyond kinship between abducted islanders.

Katherine Mckittrick's *Demonic Grounds* focuses on black women's geography during and after the Transatlantic slave trade. In relation to placelessness and connection she states that *Black sense of place is always a struggle for liberation, not a demarcated location, it is a verb, it's something that we do, it's not a specific place.*²³ I consider these ideas throughout my practice but specifically through, *Into Something Else*, 2021 which was commissioned by Perth Institute of Contemporary Art.

²³ McKittrick, K. (2020) *Curiosities, Wonder, and Black Methodologies*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68gIZJpt7rY>



Into Something Else, 2021. Crow feathers and mixed media. 270mm x 2450mm diameter.



According to Hau'ofa the ocean is our greatest metaphor, and I use it accordingly to unpack the complexities of our existence. *Into Something Else*, 2021 speaks to the creation of South Sea identity which began while crossing the Pacific Ocean, the transformation of Oceanic people, to something else, something other, other to the other. It is a transition of loss and rebirth, a metaphoric journey that articulates the perseverance of enslaved peoples who survived.

The removal and relocation to new unknown and isolated land was critical for the slave trade, it was an important tactic in creating racial dominance and ownership over South Sea bodies. The establishment of the Australian sugar plantations relied on strategic governmental policies for imported free/cheap labour. Furthermore, and also critical was the deportation of islander bodies from Australia after the establishment of the sugar industry. The White Australia policy (1901-1950) commenced mass deportations of islanders, not always taken to their rightful homelands, but often further displaced on nearby islands others suffered the ill-fated indolence of captain's not willing to make the voyage, concluding in mass executions at sea.

For those who remained, 'White Australia' struggled to differentiate between islander and indigenous bodies and South Sea Islanders and were forced to forfeit their Island identity and assimilate as indigenous Australians. By 1934 we were absorbed into *The Aboriginals Protection Amendment Act of 1934*, which broadened the category of 'Aboriginal' to include people of Pacific Islander heritage.

According to archaeologist Lincoln Hayes our people were:

marginalised politically and socially, they ultimately disappeared from historic records and from public consciousness. Their identities blended into those of local Indigenous communities, with whom many 'of them intermarried. By the early 1970s, the Islanders had been, for all intents and purposes, absent from written records for over 60 years²⁴.

In 1968 this changed again with the first nations Australian referendum. Some of our greatest South Sea leaders and activists including Faith Bandler and Dr Evelyn Scott led the fight for the indigenous vote. Through this movement South Sea people believed they too would be granted similar benefits to Indigenous Australians. However, according to 2nd generation South Sea Islander Nasuven Enares :

Australian South Sea Islanders thought that they were part of the Indigenous community, until they had to identify...by proving bloodline through Indigenous heritage. Today, the division remains. Too many Australian South Sea Islanders are identifying as Indigenous Australians. This amounts to political suicide in statistics. Statistics determine the level of services awarded by governments.²⁵

We are still dealing with the repercussions of these acts today and as 2nd generations South Sea Islander Imelda Davis states in her research *the great irony of our history is that in providing recognition of disadvantage for First Nations in 1968, South Sea Islanders were not named, they were omitted from*

²⁴ Hayes, L. The tangible link: Historical archaeology and the cultural heritage of the Australian South Sea Islanders. 2002

²⁵ SLQedge. (15 Aug 2013). Nasuven Enares - Australian South Sea Islanders 150 years: what does it mean? (video). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaTnweygm34>

*the legislation and this position remains the same to date.*²⁶ These legislations fostered our erasure, and as Davis asserts it was *a form of genocide ensuring our distinct identity was lost...cultural genocide.*²⁷

This created a terrain of 'blak' political struggle which continues to reinforce South Sea placelessness today. McKittrick calls this 'black absented presence', a strategy that assures erasure through the production of knowledge. McKittrick states:

*What you cannot see, and cannot remember, is part of a broader geographic project that thrives on forgetting and displacing blackness. The spatial dilemma-between memory and forgetfulness-produces what has been called a black absented presence*²⁸

The damage from these acts often feels irreversible, mainstream Australia seldom know of our existence even though the Commonwealth Government recognised Australian South Sea Islanders as our own distinct ethnic community in 1994. We still deal with an Australia that 'thrives on forgetting' us, so much so that in 2020 the then Prime minister Scott Morrison declared that 'there was no slavery in Australia'²⁹. I use the ocean and specifically the maelstrom as a metaphor that embodies this 'absented presence' and 'spatial dilemma'. Within science fiction novels the maelstrom is often a space of transformation, once a victim is captured by the vortex, they cannot escape, it is a portal where the body will age and alter beyond recognition. I use this fantasy of time travel

²⁶ Davis, E. (2020). *Children of the sugar slaves: Black and resilient*. University of Technology Sydney Faculty of Arst and Social Sciences.

²⁷ Davis, E. (2020). *Children of the sugar slaves: Black and resilient*. University of Technology Sydney Faculty of Arst and Social Sciences.

²⁸ McKittrick, K. (2006). *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press

²⁹ 2GB, *TRANSCRIPT Prime Minister Interview with Ben Fordham*, 11 Jun 2020. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/interview-ben-fordham-2gb-4>

with the reality of my ancestors' journey and transformation on slave ships. A maelstrom is also defined as 'a situation or state of confused movement or violent turmoil'.

The whirlpool is created from thousands of black crow feathers, crows are viewed as symbolic of the Blackbirding trade amongst South Sea communities. In Mackay QLD, home to the largest population of Australian South Sea Islanders, upon the wharf wall is a mural of the chronology of Mackay over the years. The mural depicts our ancestors arriving by ship as crows and then transforming into hybrid human forms where they begin to clear the lands. Our community commonly use black crows in unity as symbolic of our ancestors experience but also emblematic of our collective memory and cultural identity. As part of my practice, I use crow products as my own South Sea material culture to convey some of the nuances of our unique identity. The crow is not only a blackbirding symbol but a significant part of the QLD sugarcane plantation landscape. The sounds of murders of crows is frequently the only sound echoing through the cane fields. Auntie Faith Bandler describes this in her novel *Wacvie*:

*The sad sound of the crows woke Wacvie those warm October mornings. At least some mornings he thought it was a sad sound; on others, it was not sad. Whether the day was good or bad, the cawing was the same.*³⁰

By using crow feathers as medium to depict the ocean, I aim to complicate notions of the Pacific Ocean and include South Sea stories via contemporary art. The triangular slave trade route between European ports, Africa, and the Americas is regarded as the middle passage. Glissant explains this as an abyss, a

³⁰ Bandler, F. (1979). *Wacvie*. Seal Books.

place where brutal acts of genocide were performed on sick and unruly bodies. In this regard I consider the Pacific Ocean as a middle passage, where our waterways were used against us to discard and dispose of our people during the voyage across the Pacific. Auntie Faith Bandler tells her father's story of being in the hold of the slave ship and what he experienced and witnessed happen to our people who were *assaulted beyond recovery by the white skins, died in the dark, foul-smelling bowels of the vessel and their bodies were given to the sea.*³¹

For Hau'ofa *We are the ocean*, is meant metaphorically, but for me, my ancestors are quite literally part of the ocean. In Christina Sharpe's 'The Wake' she discusses what became of the people who were thrown overboard slave ships.



Detail of Mackay mural

³¹ Bandler, F. (1979). *Wacvie*. Seal Books.

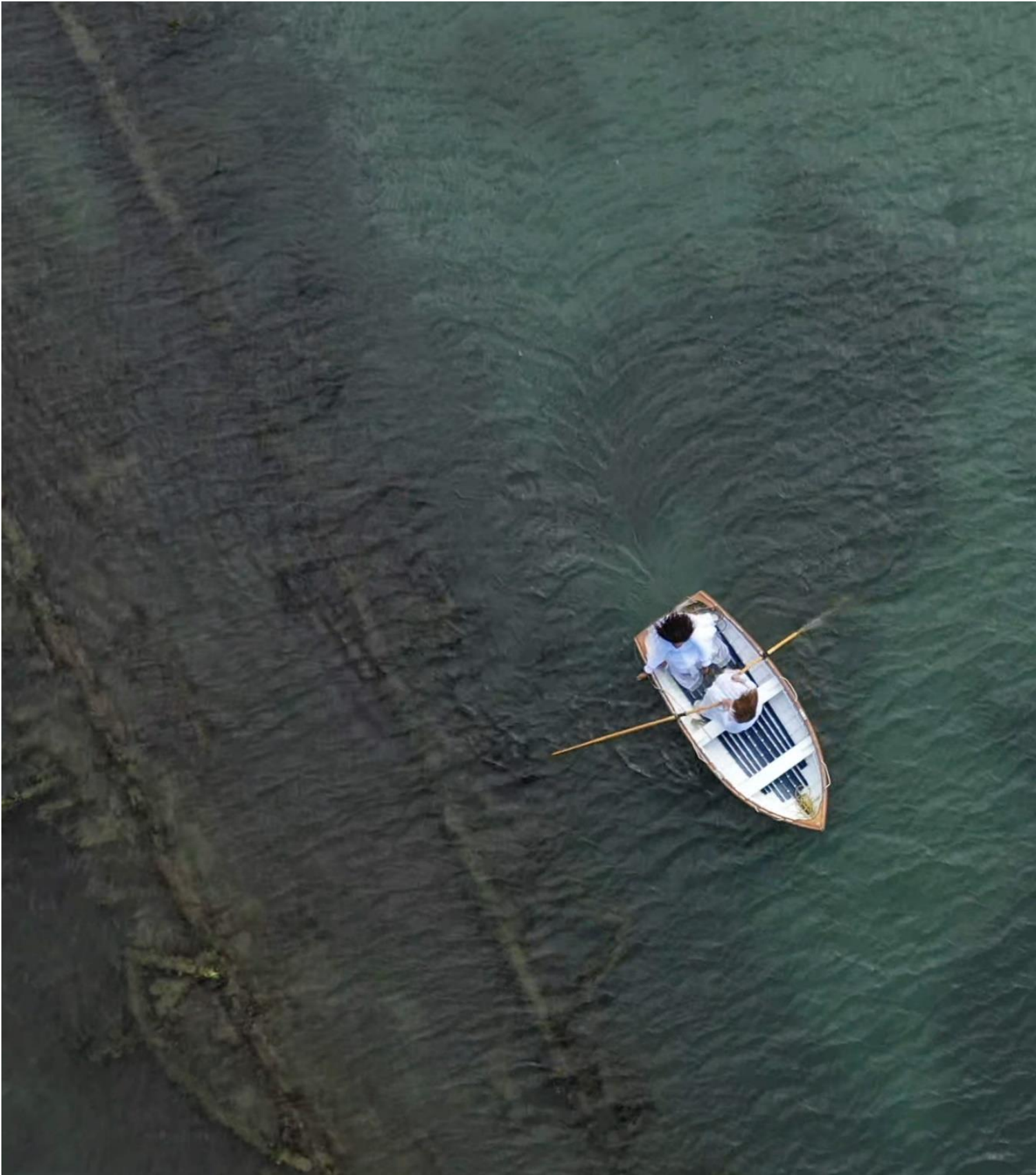
She explains that their bodies were most likely eaten by fish and other organisms which were then consumed by other organisms. The duration of time that matter enters the ocean and then exits is called 'residence time'. She explains that:

*Human blood has a residence time of 260 million years. Therefore, it is likely that the flesh, bones, organs... (from those) who died during the crossing of the Middle Passage are still with us today. The water has a memory.*³²

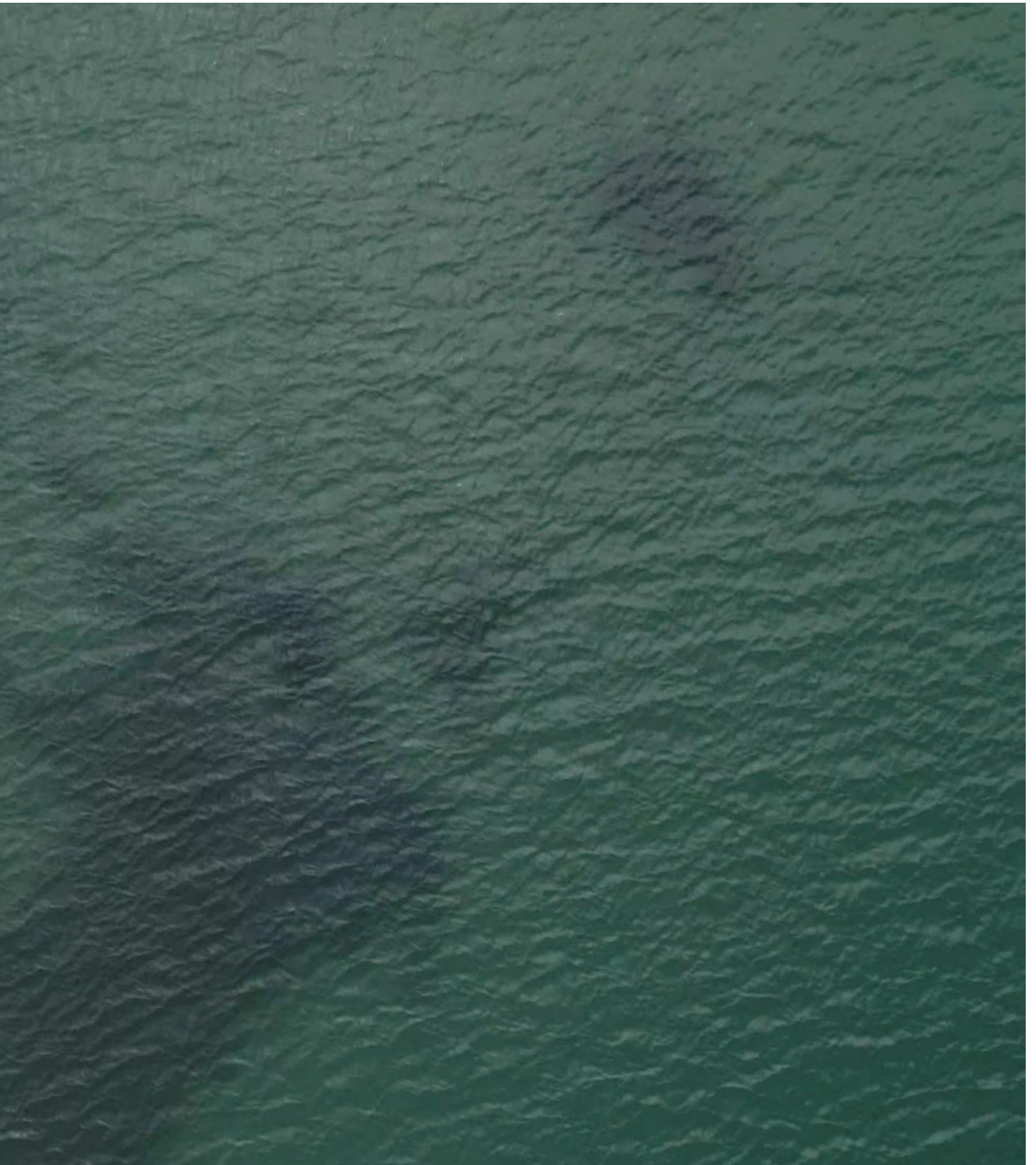
Our ancestors are not only our living memories but within the water's memory. The residence time of ancestral bodies within Moana Nui A Kiwa is why I consider the ocean as another type of archive, for what makes an archive an archive is its commitment to preservation, Derrek Walcott calls this a 'Liquid Archive'. This water archive, water memory and residence time takes place in a very tangible way at the site of the Don Juan, Deborah Bay, Aotearoa.

The Don Juan was the first Pacific slave trade vessel to enter QLD in 1863. It took 67 of our people from Vanuatu to Brisbane with plans to establish the first cotton plantation of Australia. While our ancestors were abducted and taken to Australia as early as 1847, the Don Juan's journey triggered the influx of more than 62,000 abducted islanders transported to Australia, Moana was a highway for the Pacific slave trade. For South Sea Islanders the Don Juan is a marker of our time in Australia, of our ancestors' journeys and experience, of our endurance and it is a day that we celebrate and commemorate.

³² Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.



Mother Tongue, 2020. Single channel video, colour, sound, 16:9, 9min 30sec.



I had never given much thought to what happened to those ships once they were done carrying our ancestors, in my subconscious I assumed they had all disappeared, sunken to the bottom of the deepest seas or burned, you know...things that happen in movies set in a time that I have never lived. To discover that the Don Juan still exists was and still is a shock to my system. The site is surreal, I shouldn't be able to see it, it should be further away from me in both time and in space. It is a crime scene which should be draped in police tape, as evidence of our ancestors' story and existence and yet it sits unmarked or acknowledged. Locals drive past just meters from the road unaware to its significance, for us it is a painful site of memory. It feels like I've fallen into Octavia Butlers 'Kindred', where the protagonist Danna is transported into the past to her enslaved ancestors.

When I took my mother to visit the Don Juan's remains, we stood on the edge of the road, looking out across the bay, in silence. We watched the surface of the water go from still clear glass to what looked like tiny dancing ripples and swirls glide across the bay, and they danced into the shadows of the ship where they stayed. My mum turned to me and said "they're talking to us". We went back to silence, our bodies paralyzed, and our eyes fixated on listening to a language that is not of this world.

As an artist I approach the submerged remains of the Don Juan as an archive, as a site and a resource that can be used to record and acknowledge our history, but through the lens of contemporary art. *Mother Tongue, 2021* is a moving image work that explores these notions of the Te Moana nui a Kiwa as a fundamental point of connection between people of the Pacific, but also water archive of the Pacific slave trade. The work is captured via drone, it is the

journey of three generations of South Sea Islander women, my mother, daughter and myself. My daughter Eden launches the rowboat into the water and then returns to the safety of the shore. I row the small boat with my mother as passenger, she holds a small bottle of oil and blesses the bones of the ship as we navigate our way around what remains.

As we row around the bay, the sound of the ocean is punctuated by my mother's singing and words of her blessing. She sings and speaks in Christian tongues, something which I've heard my mother do all of my life, and was her natural response to this space. As a child I remember asking my mother why she spoke in tongues and what it meant, and she told me that for her it was something she done when she didn't know what or how to pray for something, or even if she didn't know what needed praying for. That it was a special language that she was able to tap into between her and her god.

I consider her Christian tongues, and the loss of our mother tongue. Like many indigenous communities we too were forced to assimilate and the use of our native language was forbidden. Policies prevented our people from speaking our mother-tongue, therefore impacting their ability to impart and preserve our culture and language. According to Imelda Davis *once they were here, they were unable to speak their mother language, they were punished in terms of corporal punishment.*³³

I've often reflected on the connections between South Sea diaspora and our desire to speak our indigenous languages, I parallel this with M. NourbeSe

³³ Davis, E. (2020). *Children of the sugar slaves: Black and resilient*. University of Technology Sydney Faculty of Arst and Social Sciences.

Philip's book 'Zong', where she proclaims that a new language is created in the holds of slave ships, what she calls the 'language of the hold'. She unpacks this through the story of the Zong, a slave ship where 132 enslaved Africans were thrown overboard into the ocean. Philip's perceives the possibility of creating a new language that the enslaved can use to defy the coloniser. Philips proclaims that by using foreign languages from Europe, it denies the Africans' their true character, and capacity of expression, as though they were trying to replace their consciousness with that of the coloniser. *Mother Tongue*, 2021 speaks to the complicated relationship that we have with language yet doesn't try to resolve our current state or reclaim our ancestors indigenous language but rather displays earnestly these complexities. *Mother Tongue*, 2021 speaks to Moana Nui a Kiwa as a complex site, as a water archive that holds our histories and people – as a site of connection, separation, violence, and rupture.

You want to hear my history? Ask the sea

-Derek Walcott³⁴

³⁴ Walcott, D. (1987). 'The Sea is History', *Derek Walcott Collected Poems 1948-84*. Farrar Strauss & Giroux

CONCLUSION

When I first started this MFA course, I was optimistic that I would create the document that I wanted to read 20 years ago. Something created for us and by us, that gave me that warm feeling inside your chest when I find a small piece of home and belonging. I hope for someone I have done that. My vision for this exegesis was to say everything, all of the history, all of the nuances of my identity and arts practice, and I would walk away fulfilled, but I do not. I feel like I have only scraped the surface and there is so more to do. My work here is not done. I am forever grateful that I have the privilege to use my voice where my ancestors could not.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, J. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. University of California Press.
- Bandler, F. (1977). *Wacvie*. Rigby.
- Bandler, F. (1984) *Welou, My Brother*. Wild and Wooley Ltd.
- Butler, O E. (2003). *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Craig, C. (1997, May, 9). Faith Bandler Interviews. State Library of New South Wales. <https://amplify.gov.au/search?search=fai+h+bandler>
- D'Aguiar, F. (1999). *Feeding the Ghosts*. Hopewell, N.J. Ecco Press.
- Eyerman, R. (2001). *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fatnowna, N. (1989). *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*. Angus & Robertson Publishers.
- Glissant, E. (1997) *Poetics of Relation*. USA: university of michigan press.
- Gordon-Smith, I. (2015). *Terms of Convenience*. UN Magazine 9.2. Web. 20 April 2022
- Hau'ofa, E. (2008). *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Hirsch, M. (1996). Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile. *Poetics Today*, 659- 686.
- Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family frames, photography, narrative and postmemory* . London: Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, M. (2012). *The generation of postmemory*. Columbia University Press.

Hooks, B. (1996). *The oppositional gaze : Black female spectators*. In J. Belton, *movies and mass culture* (pp. 247 - 265). Rutgers University Press.

McKittrick, K. (2021). *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke University Press.

McKittrick, K. (2006). *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. University of Minnesota Press

MacNeill, K. (2006/2007). *Undoing the Colonial Gaze: Ambiguity in the Art of Brook Andrew*. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 179-194.

Moore, C. (1978). *The forgotten people: a history of the Australian South Sea Island community*. Sydney: The Australian broadcasting commission.

Moore, C. (2017). *Making Mala: Malaita in Solomon Islands, 1870s–1930s*. ANU Press

Philip, M N and Boateng, S A. (2011) *Zong!* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Ressler, B G & Dias, K J. (2014) “Parental olfactory experience influences behavior and neural structure in subsequent generations.” *Nature Neuroscience* 17 : 89–96. web.

Wendt, A. (1996). *Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body*. *span*: 42-43 (April-October 1996): 15-29.

APPENDIX:

EXHIBITIONS AND PRESENTATIONS COMPLETED IN ASSOCIATION WITH MFA 2019 – 2022

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022, *Mother Tongue*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery

2022, *Hom Swit Hom*, Artspace Mackay

2021, *In the Rooms of Our Bodies*, Page Galleries, Wellington

2020, *Dear Mrs Wunderlich*, 2020. Page Galleries, Wellington

2020, *If These Walls Could Talk, They'd Tell You My Name*, Courtenay Place Park Light Boxes, Wellington

2020, *From Bones and Bellies*, Centre of Contemporary Art Toi Moroki, Christchurch

2019, *Birds of Passage*, Dunedin School of Art, Dunedin

2019, *Adrift*, Page Blackie Gallery, Wellington

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022, *Declaration: A Pacific Feminist Agenda*, Auckland Art Gallery/Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland

2021, *Almost Paradise: Mis/Perceptions of Leisure and Labor in the Asia-Pacific* Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art

2021, *Nyinalanginy / The Gathering*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

2020, *Seeing Moana Oceania*, Auckland Art Gallery/Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland

2019, *Tākiri: An Unfurling*, New Zealand Maritime Museum, Auckland

2019, *Auckland Art Fair*, The Cloud, Queens Wharf, Auckland

2019, *Beyond Kapene Kuku/Captain Cook*, Page Blackie Gallery, Wellington

2019, *Plantation Voices: Contemporary Conversations with Australian South Sea Islanders*, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane

INSTITUTIONAL ACQUISITIONS

2022 Artspace Mackay

2019 New Zealand National Maritime Museum

2019 State Library of Queensland

SYMPOSIUM & CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2021, *Women, Memory & Transmission Postcolonial Perspectives from the Arts and Literature*

University of Oxford: The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities
Maison Française d'Oxford, UK

2020, *Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns*

Circuit Artist Film and Video Aotearoa
Pātaka Art + Museum, Aotearoa (New Zealand)

2020, *The Global Plantation Symposium*

Princeton University, New Jersey, USA

2019, *Forced Labour and Migration*

University of Fiji, Lautoka, Fiji

2019, *PAA's XIII International Symposium*

Queensland Museum, Brisbane, Australia