

iLakolako ni weniqia: A Veiqia Project exhibition

Exhibition runs: 25 September – 31 October 2021

In 2018 members of The Veiqia Project travelled to Yaro Village on Kia Island in northern Fiji to spend time in talanoa with people there about the traditional Fijian female tattooing practice of veiqia. The Veiqia Project is a collective of artists, curators, researchers, and academics based in Australia, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa New Zealand: Dr Tarisi Sorovi-Vunidilo, Margaret Aull, Donita Vatuinaruku Hulme, Joana Monolagi, Dulcie Stewart, and Luisa Tora.

Collective member Luisa Tora has committed the period of her Creative New Zealand / University of Canterbury Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies Artist Residency to editing a series of interviews filmed during the 2018 visit. This work is ongoing throughout the residency period, after which there will be a screening in Fiji with all those interviewed, before the film is shown publicly. Tora writes, "During these filmed interviews, village elders named their grandmothers and described seeing their weniqia. This corrects a historical oversight suffered by Fijian women who were rarely identified in colonial records. We were also privileged to visit the Village qara ni veiqia (cave where Yaro women and girls received their weniqia)."

Three matakau, female ancestral figures, hold the main space of the exhibition, accompanied by the sound of the vucu, a chant sung by the collective and written by Joana Monolagi. The matakau were carved by Margaret Aull (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Rarawa, Fijian), who writes, "Matakau are part of our material culture that can give an insight to our past, with many carved or having ink traces of weniqia applied." The side wall is painted a vibrant orange in recognition of the nawanawa flower, with its symbolic connection to fire, life, and uses as dye and for salusalu. The nawanawa tree's seeds may be eaten during famines, its branches used as fire starters, and its trunk for bowls and wooden utensils. Across the orange wall runs a design by Dulcie Stewart, drawn from the footprints of a seagull on sand.

In the second space, a short film focuses on the arrival of members of The Veiqia Project to Kia Island in 2018. As Fijian women living in diaspora, the collective's work is marked by arrivals and departures, thresholds crossed, or, in the context of the moana, reefs or cakau. The collective writes of this moment of arrival, the sight of the reef, "A familiar and welcome sight for Fijian travellers past, present, and future. The beginning, middle, and end of several journeys. For The Veiqia Project members going to Kia, it was the end of the long trip there but also the beginning of a new journey of talanoa and exchange."

Curator Ioana Gordon-Smith, who worked with The Veiqia Project on the exhibition *names held in our mouths* (2019) at Te Uru Gallery, writes "Working primarily outside of formal institutions, these modes of revival and transmission, which range from transnational exchanges, museum studies, and close reading of texts, often depend upon and result in a collective impulse. They also expose a number of oscillating

concerns, such as the twin needs of protectionism and open sharing; revival and adaptation; local and global influences.”

The collective’s work continues despite the practice having been deeply impacted by colonisation, capitalism, and migration. At the heart of this is a commitment to sharing their findings with a wide community, within which iTaukei (indigenous Fijian) women are primary. Dr. Karen Jacobs, author of *This is not a grass skirt* (2019), has noted, “Liku and veiqia were closely related to their female wearers, yet became alienated in museums where they were translated, classified and sometimes further exchanged. Separated from their original context they are potential connectors that have the ability to cross temporal and spatial separators and can express different ontologies (Tapsell 1997; Māhina 2010; Ka’ili 2005).” It is this capacity to connect, to cross space and time that separate, that gives purpose to the exhibition, and the project as a whole. In the years since The Veiqia Project’s 2018 visit to Kia, and including sending relief packages following Cyclone Yasa and a book donation in collaboration with Vunilagi Book Club, this collaboration continues to involve the women of Kia and their families.

Luisa Keteiyau Tora (Kadavu) is an interdisciplinary artist who focuses on indigenous, queer, and feminist themes. She lives in Ōtāhuhu. She stands in solidarity with a free West Papua.

The Veiqia Project is a creative research project inspired by the practice of Fijian female tattooing of veiqia. Five contemporary Fijian women artists based in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and Hawai’i collectively research veiqia to inform the development of new artwork. The Veiqia Project are Joana Monolagi (Serua), Dulcie Stewart (Vasu Bua), Donita Vatuinaruku Hulme (Nadroga), Luisa Tora (Kadavu), Dr Tarisi Sorovi-Vunidilo (Kadavu), and Margaret Aull (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Rarawa, Fijian). Past exhibitions include *The Veiqia Project*, ST PAUL St Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau (2016); *The Veiqia Project*, (Margaret Aull, Selai Buasala, Mereula Buliruarua, Elizabeth Edwards, Donita Vatuinaruku Hulme, Katarina Lesumai, Joana Monolagi, Dulcie Stewart, Laurel Stewart, Luisa Tora and VOU Dance Fiji artists, Mere Rosi Navuda, Elizabeth Tanya Sidal, Bernadette Kaulotu Suiqa, Koleta Dravuni Tobeyaweni, and Ta’Arei Weeks), Fiji Museum, Suva (2017); *names held in our mouths* (alongside Sosefina Andy, Nikau Hindin, Louisa Humphry, Wikuki Kingi, Pacifica Mamas and Kaetaeta Watson), Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau (2019); and *Marama Dina* (Margaret Aull, Torika Bolatagici, Donita Vatuinaruku Hulme, Yasbelle Kerkow, Joana Monolagi, Dulcie Stewart, Salote Tawale, Luisa Tora, MC Trey aka Thelma Thomas, and Emele Ugavule), Campbelltown Arts Centre, Campbelltown, New South Wales (2019).

This exhibition is a result of the ongoing partnership between The Physics Room and the University of Canterbury Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies to present work and research produced during the residency.

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