THE
PHYSICS
ROOM CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

Bring the gods in.

By Ioana Gordon Smith
A response to *TA'AI* by Nina Oberg Humphries

The first thing I see when I enter the room is a long cylindrical form lying upon a plinth. Wrapped from end to end, the only hint at what might be within are the concentric edges of materials that peek out at either extremity. A thin, wooden handle protrudes out. The work is, I learn from the room sheet, a God staff. Is it? I've never seen one before. What is one doing in the middle of The Physics Room? Whatever it signifies, there's something both irreverent and deeply revered humming through the air.

TA'AI, God staff, 2020, is the centrepiece of *TA'AI*, a solo exhibition by Ōtautahi-based artist Nina Oberg Humphries. The show represents the culmination of her Creative New Zealand / University of Canterbury Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies Artist Residency. It's a residency specifically set in Ōtautahi, specifically for Moana artists. Ōtautahi and visible Tangata Moana culture is not an immediate pairing in my mind. When I think of Ōtautahi, I think of how conspicuously brown I felt whenever my Sāmoan mum and I would visit my Pākehā nan in Rangiora. I think of the Fijian liku titled as a "skirt" in a Canterbury Museum vitrine, a common mis-labelling, or those awful dioramas. But Ōtautahi is home to part of the largest museum collection of Moana taonga. In 1948, then Director of Canterbury Museum, Roger Duff, assisted the New Zealand Government in purchasing Moana and Māori taonga amassed by the London dealer William Oldman. Totaling about 3500 taonga, the enormous collection was primarily divided between the Dominion Museum in Wellington (now Te Papa Tongarewa), Auckland Museum, Canterbury Museum, and Otago Museum.

The Oldman collection was purchased by the New Zealand government to support the growing number of Moana peoples living in Aotearoa. Ironically however, curators and ethnographers Roger Neich and Christian Kaufmann note that the collection is more well known internationally than it is here in Aotearoa.[1] Making a similar observation, Te Papa's Senior Curator Pacific Sean Mallon writes, "[t]he challenge for the current generation of curators is to make the collection accessible and to investigate it further. […] it would seem that a major exhibition is the next step in the development of the Oldman Collection."[2]

During her residency, Oberg Humphries perhaps unknowingly took up Mallon's clarion call. Working with Canterbury Museum, she invited Ōtautahi's Moana residents to view the Oldman collection. In part, this move sought to allow people to connect with taonga that otherwise live private lives behind registrar doors. In 2017, Oberg Humphries was provided access to the collection, via a museum curator's invitation, as research for the CoCA Toi Moroki summer performance series.[3] There, she could see first-hand the scale and richness of the Canterbury Museum's Pacific collection. Oldman's dual interest as both a private collector and an art dealer meant he had access to some of the best taonga circulating on the commercial market. While these exemplary taonga live near Canterbury's Moana residents, access occurs only through deliberate invitation or self-initiated requests, rather than incidentally. Until 2019, no part of the collection had been publicly exhibited. That number was raised to one with the display of a phenomenally intricate and rich Hawaiian cloak.

Driven by decolonial discourse and the pressures of repatriation, museum studies as a discipline is being forced to grapple with the politics of access, as well as the effects of suspending cultural taonga, divorced from active social contexts. One response has been to develop processes of community consultation. Here in Aotearoa, for example, the Auckland Museum's Pacific Collection Access Project undertook a community-led series of collaborations in which island nations were welcomed into the museum to reconnect with their ancestral material histories and offer advice to the museum on how to classify and care for collection items.

Another turn has been to invite artists to make in response to collections. As colonisation disrupted many strands of knowledge transmission, acts of making hold the potential to re-thread links through close material analysis. But perhaps more radically, re-making also moves the locus of cultural knowledge away from the museum to moments of making that occur in other social or even private spaces. In an essay on photographic archives, visual and historical anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards suggests that reproducibility enables "interactions with material to take place, not in the museum space, where it is all too easy for institutional agendas to reassert themselves when they are least wanted, but in local communities."[4]

Oberg Humphries' work in The Physics Room suggests a way in which taonga might live on in communities by way of replication and re-creation. Lined up along one wall in *TA'AI* are five Feather Gods. Ranging from bright coral, greens, and yellows through to matte purples, the works are starkly contemporary versions of Cook Island feather gods that were historically made from a selection of sennit, red bird feathers, human hair, teeth, natural fibres, wood, and pearls. On opening night, I deal with the social anxieties of small talk by testing how many materials and modes of attachment I can identify. Cable ties mimic feathers. Bands of island material cover the shaft of the Feather Gods. Blue plastic strips bind the fabric.

The room sheet records the materials used by Oberg Humphries throughout the exhibition. The list is worth reprinting in full:

> Walking stick, high vis, plastic, sticks, ribbon, zip ties, spray paints, wire,

> fimo, fibrous woven mats, plastic bags, sequins, picture hanging cord, nail polish, weed mat, nylon rope, feathers, plastic heads, shells, fabric, tivaevae, cotton, tapa, bubble wrap, wool, automotive paint, ribbon, duct tape, colonial bannisters, lamp stand, wiss, time, glue.

If seeing the God staff initially makes me uncertain, reading this list of materials is a straight up delight. The full range of mixed media feels both joyful and defiant in its promiscuity. It reminds me of nearly any Moana home I've visited, where the bigger the adornment, the more effusive the adoration. The material play also reminds me of the magpie-stylings of the Pacific Sisters. In their use of both urban and cultural materials, the Sisters embrace the experience of Aotearoa-born, bred, or based Moana peoples. Like many migrants, Moana peoples in Aotearoa have adapted to locally-available materials. We use fala made from plastic and produced in China; ula made from painted wood rather than nuts; harakeke instead of pandanus or coconut leaf. The materials change so that the practices may continue in a new geography. Adapting new materials to maintain old knowledge is a cultural survivance tool, but in Oberg Humphries' work, there's a particular surprise in how materials are transformed. There's something magical that happens in the unseen process of making, the alchemy of turning bric-à-brac into taonga.

That transformative act of upcycling bears some comparison with the manifestation of Oberg Humphries' God staff. Staff Gods have often functioned as a visual representation of something not otherwise seen. Curator and anthropologist Te Rangi Hīroa noted that Atua were invisible to ordinary people but "were seen (kitea) by the tāura priests […] The priests made material representations of the [...] gods which people could see, and which the priests could use in ceremonial procedures."[5] Making these material representations however depends on another rare inner vision. "The ta'unga [expert]", writes Cook Island artist Michael Tavioni, "is associated with an ability to 'see' or perceive what others cannot […] he sees the full picture of the vaka in his mind while everyone else only sees a log."[6]

I think back to my initial reaction to the God staff, and my unease at seeing familiar materials framed as spiritual conduits. If *TA'AI* in any way felt initially sacrilegious, then Hīroa's words suggest that Staff Gods were always about access. Rather than fostering the exclusiveness of divine vision, Staff Gods made spirituality visible for many. Access feels central to Oberg Humphires' making in *TA'AI*. Refusing to be limited, Oberg Humphries leans into the unconventional as a type of access point for remembering Staff Gods. Bordered on one side by the restrictive access to museum collections, and limited access to local, Cook Islands materials on the other, Bunnings and TradeMe offer another way into gathering, making, and transforming so that the Gods can emerge.

Wrap them up again.

The exhibition title, *TA'AI*, is taken from an inscription Oberg Humphries saw on an ipu (vessel; cup) found in the Oldman collection. In the room sheet, the meaning of ta'ai in Sāmoan is given as "the action of binding." On manuatele.net, ta'ai is translated as "to scroll (roll up)."[7] I appreciate this translation more. In scrolling, or

rolling up, there is an inferred sense of layers hidden within.

There's a lot of rolling up in *TA'AI.* In a single-channel video projection, two young women take turns binding a male figure in a siapo. Rope is wound round and round his figure, till he becomes a tall cylinder, all face and fiber. The work draws on the fact that a Staff God would often be wrapped in tapa. According to Reverend Pitman, if unwrapping tapa "brings the god into this world, wrapping him up sends the gods back to the nether world, the po."[8] The tapa acts as a way of returning that which is sacred back to a protected state of tapu, signalling the end of a temporary commune with the tangible world.

If seeing in materials the potential for transformation is an artist's unique vision, then wrapping is the way in which that significance is given visibility for the rest of us. The act of binding here demarcates the body as something sacred, worthy of being wrapped safe. Like seeing a vaka in a log, wrapping a person in tapa acknowledges their inner mana, spirituality, and latent knowledge. In perhaps the strongest act of redirecting significance from archive to living entity, Oberg Humphries defines a young person as something sacred.

In an email, Oberg Humphires tells me that there isn't a lot actually known about Cook Island God Staffs anymore: "there are only two still wrapped in the world. The rest have been destroyed or broken."[9] *TA'AI* is presented against the backdrop of a collection about which little is actually known. Even as she brought community into the Oldman collection, she acknowledges that part of her approach was to conduct "interviews with members of the Pacific community to find out what meaning and relevance, if any, these taonga still hold for them."[10] Her approach reflects a desire to engage with significance in the contemporary moment, to refuse a static past or historicisation of cultural knowledge.

Museums in many ways maintain their authority—and their revenue—through exclusive rights over taonga. The exhibition becomes a way to deal with a lack of information and the exclusivity of collections by redirecting focus to cultural mana that lies within the present, within common materials, making methods, and people themselves. She has seen something significant in available materials and brought them forth as assemblages that confirm cultural knowledge still exists in our world. She's not looking at collections as the sole source of ancestral knowledge. She's looking at Moana peoples, materials, and experiences in Ōtautahi and seeing the cultural memory that they can carry. All the components are there; they just need to be seen, bound together, and then wrapped with care. The Gods aren't held in the museum. They're already here.

[1] Roger Neich and Christian Kaufmann, “Collections Across the Divide: The Ethnographic Collections of James Edge-Partington (1854 - 1930) and William Ockleford Oldman (1879 - 1949),” *Pacific Arts New Series* 11, no. 1 (2011): 5-17.

[2] Sean Mallon, “Review: The Oldman Collection of Maori Artifacts. New Edition of Polynesian Society Memoir 14 by W.O. OLDMAN; The Oldman Collection of Polynesian Artifacts. New Edition of Polynesian Society Memoir 15 by W.O. OLDMAN,” *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 114, no. 2 (2005): 171-173.

[3] For more details about that work, see: “Summer Performance Series,” CoCA Toi Moroki website, 2017, https://coca.org.nz/exhibitions/summer-performance.

[4] Elizabeth Edwards, “Introduction,” in Alison K. Brown and Laura Peers eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reade*r (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2003), 92.

[5] Te Rangi Hīroa, “Ethnology of Tongareva,” *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin* 92 (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1932), 87, quoted in Michael Tavioni, *Tāura ki te Atua: The role of ‘akairo in Cook Islands Art*, 2018, Masters exegesis, https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/11594.

[6] Michael Tavioni, *Tāura ki te Atua: The role of ‘akairo in Cook Islands Art*, 2018, Masters exegesis, https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/11594.

[7] “Gagana Samoa”, Manuatele.NET, accessed March, 2021, http://samoan.manuatele.net/words/wordspt.html.

[8] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 113.

[9] Personal communications with artist, March 9, 2021.

[10] “UC 2020 artist-in-residence to examine museum’s Pacific taonga,” UC News, June 4, 2020, https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/news/2020/uc-2020-artist-in-residence-to-examine-museums-pacific-taonga.html.