

Folina Vili

My ancestors are here with me in my blood my bones my spirit

A response to the exhibition *iLakolako ni weniqia* by The Veiqia Project

We came here on water it is in us like blood
connects us islands, us past present future
there is no beginning or end
Drawing lines, marks that rise and fall beneath the skin,
Marks that rise and fall beneath the earth, the ocean,
Through the door and along the walls, the wooden floor, the plinths and perspex.
We have arrived.
No longer kept hidden in pages
Looked-over or overlooked in perspex display cases.
We are here. We have arrived.
Our markings are proof that never fades
Our skin, our bodies.
We are here.

Hear our call
Chant, call forth the ancestors
Hold this space
Let the voices wash over you
Into your blood, bones, wombs
The birds on land sea and sky
We are here.
Welcome home.

As a New Zealand-born Sāmoan raised and based in Christchurch, I am accustomed to walking into a gallery space and feeling like a minority. On the opening night of The Veiqia Project's *iLakolako ni weniqia* I did not feel like this. At the restricted numbers opening of this show in September, it was refreshing to walk in and see skin (and hair) like my own, and to see work made by Moana practitioners and about the female Moana experience.

My social awkwardness at times causes me to retreat from the group and I made my way past those present to the relative solitude of the gallery's second space, and the visual comfort of a floor to ceiling projection of *En route to Kia* (2021). Watching as the outboard motor-powered boat carrying the women skimmed across

the blue of the ocean towards the island in the distance, it was a strange feeling to stand within the white-walled, wooden-floored gallery space and feel a sense of familiarity. A sense of homecoming. I was taken back to the villages of my family in Sāmoa. The easy smiles and saunter, the dirt paths and humble dwellings, random dogs roaming. It made me realise that while the island of Upolu may not be Kia, it is still in many ways the same. Connected.

In Sāmoan myth there is a story of the female twins Taema and Tilafaiga, who purportedly swam from Sāmoa to the oceans of Fiji to learn the knowledge of tatau (tattoo) given by women for women. My own research and artistic practice has delved a little into the marks used in traditional Sāmoan tatau, the female malu and male pe'a, but the implication of the myth and connection to Fiji had entirely eluded me prior to this show. I was ignorant to the existence of tattoo in traditional Fijian culture, let alone the existence of veiqia. The fact that these at times dense markings ranged across the length of the body, from head to buttocks—in comparison to what I've observed as sparser marks of the malu confined to the upper legs in Sāmoa—really impressed me. What a gift of enlightenment knowledge can be!

While the arrival of Christianity and colonialism in Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa suppressed much of this knowledge of traditional belief and custom, in reviving it today, The Veiqia Project are sharing what they've discovered with all of us. Reclaiming and re-connecting. Traditionally, Moana peoples view time as circular rather than linear. The past is present is future. Space is not finite; the physical and spiritual planes intersect. To me, *iLakolako ni weniqia* embodies these ideas beautifully, while also, importantly, honouring and celebrating the female body and an ancient feminine tradition. This perspective was apparent to me throughout the exhibition, from Margaret Aull's Matakau, to the voices of the collective and the incantation of *Vucu* (2017) resonating within the gallery space, while in the video work *Markings* we see members of the group receiving their weniqia. The skin is punctured and blood and ink intermingle. Marks drawn from the past are brought with sharp resolve into the now.

My ancestors are here with me in my blood, my bones, my spirit, and in the natural world around me. This show, to me, is about connection and belonging. Connection and belonging as a woman within my own skin but also connection and belonging to my body as it exists within time and space, with the past and present.

At the time of the show there is still protocol to complete; showing the interviews The Veiqia Project recorded on their trip to Kia back to those participants, before making them public. I look forward to the culmination of Luisa Tora's work, bringing the stories of the village elders of Kia to a wider audience.

Folina Vili is an Ōtautahi-based first-generation New Zealand-born Sāmoan also of Pākehā descent. She is an artist and musician who works across media and genres. She holds a Bachelor of Design in Applied Visual Art and a Master of Creative Practice (Distinction) both from Ara Institute of Canterbury. Her recent Master's research involved the use of multiple print mediums and other markmaking methods to explore her Sāmoan-Pākehā identity, the concept of vā and other ideas relating to liminality and the interconnectedness of time and space, and the physical and spiritual.

iLakolako ni weniqia: A Veiqia Project exhibition by Dr Tarisi Sorovi-Vunidilo, Margaret Aull, Donita Vatuinaruku Hulme, Joana Monolagi, Dulcie Stewart, and Luisa Tora was shown at The Physics Room from 25 September - 31 October 2021. See our [website](#) for more details.

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