

SIU I MOANA **REACHING ACROSS** **THE OCEAN**

Artwork labels

© COPYRIGHT

This document remains the property of the National Gallery of Victoria and must be returned upon request.
Reproduction in part or in whole is prohibited without written authorisation.

Siu i Moana: ***Reaching Across the Ocean***

Robin White and Ruha Fifita, working collaboratively and in association with the women of Haveluloto village, Tongatapu, have taken the art of Tongan *ngatu* (painted barkcloth) into new territory, moving beyond tradition to find new forms and styles.

Siu i Moana, from which this exhibition takes its name, traces the migration of sea creatures and people across the Pacific. Made in 2011, *Siu i Moana* acknowledges the centrality of the sea to life in the Pacific and celebrates the practice of reciprocity and exchange that characterises Oceania. Continuing the theme of movement and interconnectedness, *We are the small axe*, 2015, portrays links between Pacific cultures, alludes to the struggle of indigenous peoples against colonial rule, and suggests an alternative view of power and influence.

Ko e Hala Hangatonu: The Straight Path, 2013–16, extends the concept of a pathway to connect East and West, past and present, the everyday and the transcendental. In *Seen along the avenue*, stylised motifs of crisis and victory, of life and death, represent alternating rhythms and patterns of life. *The garden* rises above the commonplace concerns of the avenue while, beyond *My father's house*, the fathomless black of *The crimson sea* signals a state of completion.

**'The sea is our pathway to each other
and to everyone else, the sea is our
endless saga, the sea is our most
powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us.'**

Epeli Hau'ofa, 2008

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

Rangitahua

from the *Siu i Moana: Reaching Across the Ocean* series 2011

earth pigments, natural dyes and *tuitui* (Candlenut soot) on *ngatu* (barkcloth)

The University of Auckland Art Collection, Auckland, New Zealand
Purchased 2012

This dark-toned barkcloth, or *ngatu ta'uli*, references the Kermadec Islands, located between New Zealand's north island and Tonga. Two zones of blackness are interrupted by a red vertical band suggestive of a fracture in the earth's crust, which could suggest the heat and friction of two forces confronting each other or evoke the calmer processes of coming together. The work also serves as a memorial to those who remain on Raoul Island, ranging from Tokelau slaves who were buried there last century to two Department of Conservation workers who died in the 2006 eruption.

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

Tonga to New Zealand

from the *Siu i Moana: Reaching Across the Ocean* series
2011

earth pigments, natural dyes and *tuitui* (Candlenut soot) on *ngatu* (barkcloth)

The University of Auckland Art Collection, Auckland, New Zealand
Purchased 2012

A *halakafa* – both a pathway and, traditionally, a place for tying rope – runs through this *ngatu*, signifying the length of the underwater volcanic ridge that joins Tonga and New Zealand. The work represents elements from Tongan culture that are exchanged with people in New Zealand, notably the ‘umu pak’ – an empty container into which Tongan people pack foodstuffs to send to family. Also present is the logo of the national rugby team, the *ikale tahi* or sea eagle, and sandals, commonly worn across Oceania. The flying fish, which live between physical and spiritual worlds, introduce another element.

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

New Zealand to Tonga

from the *Siu i Moana: Reaching Across the Ocean* series
2011

earth pigments, natural dyes and *tuitui* (Candlenut soot) on *ngatu* (barkcloth)

The University of Auckland Art Collection, Auckland, New Zealand
Purchased 2012

This work, traversed by eels, flying fish and long-finned tuna, traces the exchange from New Zealand to Tonga. The *vaka* (canoe shape) symbolises travel from New Zealand to Tonga and signifies a container in which commodities and cultural objects for exchange are placed. It features the logo from Palm corned beef, which includes the motto 'Pass the Palm please' that suggests many connections. Beyond the traffic in foodstuffs, a palm could be offered in a handshake or could signify the palm tree of many Pacific Islands, alluding to the work's underlying themes of reciprocity and connectedness.

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

Ebonie Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1984

In my father's house

from the *Ko e Hala Hangatonu: The Straight Path* series
2013–16

2014

earth pigments, natural dyes and *tuitui* (Candlenut soot) on *ngatu* (barkcloth)

Collection of the artists

Tongan *ngatu* is a special form of barkcloth made collaboratively by women who beat the softened inner bark of the *hiapo* (paper mulberry tree) into thin sheets of paper skin. As the sections of barkcloth are assembled and pasted in a repeated action, many women rub the upper surface with natural dyes over *kupesi* (pattern blocks) to bring out nuances of the pattern from the raised elements of the *kupesi* beneath. Motifs are heightened by hand-painting, creating an oscillation between patterned and plain sections, as in this work in which an elaborate geometry of pattern unfolds against the raw barkcloth.

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

Ebonie Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1984

Keiko Ma'asi

Tongan born 1974

Seen along the avenue

from the *Ko e Hala Hangatonu: The Straight Path* series

2013–16

2015–16

earth pigments and natural dyes on *ngatu* (barkcloth)

Collection of the artists, Auckland

This floor-based *launima* (*ngatu* of huge length) was inspired by the Tongan design of the Hala Paini (Pathway of Pines) that represents the road, fringed with Norfolk Pines, leading from the King's palace in Tongatapu to the royal tombs. The 'avenue' references Ben Gurion Avenue in Haifa, Israel, which leads from the shores of the Mediterranean to the foot of Mount Carmel. Stylised motifs include a dove bearing a symbolic olive branch, a hybrid coat of arms and the black taxi of the Tongan King, whereas the Israeli jet fighter alludes to the constant threat of war.

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

Ebonie Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1984

The crimson sea

from the *Ko e Hala Hangatonu: The Straight Path* series
2013–16

2014

earth pigments, natural dyes and *tuitui* (Candlenut soot) on *ngatu ta'uli* (barkcloth)

Collection of the artists

This dark-toned work is a special form of Tongan barkcloth, the *ngatu ta'uli*, traditionally made for royalty or solemn occasions, such as funerals. The colour black is produced from the soot created by burning candlenut, a plant known as *tuitui*. The production of this precious black pigment is complex and time-consuming, and the process is rarely undertaken today. The black void of this *ngatu* signifies the mysterious depths of the ocean – or that which is beyond human comprehension.

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

Ebonie Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1984

The garden

from the *Ko e Hala Hangatonu: The Straight Path* series

2013–16

2013

earth pigments and natural dyes on *ngatu* (barkcloth)

Collection of the artists

This companion work to the floor-based *launima* continues the idea of a central pathway, with steps ascending through the formal terraced gardens of the Bahá'í World Centre. This famous pilgrimage site is a place of meditation and detachment from the pressures of urban life. The cultivated beauty of these gardens presents an optimistic vision of a transformed society where people from different cultures and beliefs coexist in harmony and peace. The extensive use of black dye imbues the *ngatu* with a sense of gravitas, as well as a spiritual dimension.

Robin White

Maori/New Zealander born 1946, worked in Kiribati and Australia 1982–99

Ruha Fifita

Tongan/New Zealander born 1990, worked in Australia 2012–

We are the small axe

from *the Ko e Hala Hangatonu: The Straight Path* series

2013–16

2015

earth pigments and natural dyes on *ngatu* (barkcloth)

Collection of the artists

This work shows connections between Pacific cultures and alludes to the struggle of First Nations peoples against colonial rule. It particularly relates to the history of New Caledonia, where it was exhibited in 2015 at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Noumea. The title is drawn from the Bob Marley lyric, 'If you are the big tree, we are the small axe ready to cut you down'. It refers to a famous incident in 1984 when a member of the Kanak independence movement used an axe to smash a ballot box in a symbolic protest against territorial elections.