

Outcast: Jasmine Togo-Brisby and John Vea

20 October 2023 – 27 January 2024

Jasmine Togo-Brisby (South Sea Islander/Australia), **John Vea** (Aotearoa/Tonga)

Gus Fisher Gallery presents the first collaborative exhibition between fourth-generation Australian South Sea Islander artist Jasmine Togo-Brisby and Aotearoa-based Tongan artist John Vea. Often compared through their research-driven practices that address themes of migrant labour and the Pacific slave trade, *Outcast* enables a meeting point between the artist's work and a shared space for new conversations to emerge.

The exhibition's title alludes to the margins within which Pacific people often work and to the process of casting which the artists use as a methodology for making. Bringing together new and existing work from the artists' practices, with a focus on object-based installations, both artists employ plaster as a material to shape, mould and replicate existing forms.

Vea's Import/Export (2008-16) is extended through the addition of cast taros, resulting in an overflow beyond the crate's margins. Created in reference to the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme established by the New Zealand Government in 2007, *Vea's* installation takes on further resonance in 2023 following the catastrophic weather events in Aotearoa which led to the displacement of hundreds of Pacific workers after their accommodation was flooded. Situated in Gallery 2 is a restaging of *Vea's Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000* (2019). Informed by the artist's experience as a minimum-wage labourer at a New Zealand potato-chip plant, *Vea* has created a smoko room where visitors, staff and workers alike can take a break at scheduled times throughout the day. By examining tropes of migration and gentrification and their existence within the Pacific, *Vea's* practice prefaces the voices and lived experiences of migrant workers from a Pacific perspective.

Investigating complex relationships of power, cultural identity and political systems, Togo-Brisby examines the historical practice of 'blackbirding', the romanticized colloquialism for the Pacific slave trade. A major new installation occupies the Dome Gallery, its scale and placement mirroring the Art Deco glass dome and its sunburst design. Comprising a central rosette panel surrounded by plaster-cast Vanuatu tam tam drums, Togo-Brisby brings together significant cultural icons of Vanuatu culture and society and appropriated designs of ornate pressed-tin panels by the Sydney-based Wunderlich family. For the artist, Wunderlich designs are an enduring physical

manifestation of a colonial legacy and present a fraught personal history: Togo-Brisby's great-great-grandparents were abducted in Vanuatu and taken to Sydney, where they were acquired as house slaves by the Wunderlich family.

Also featured is a major new nemasitse (Ni-Vanuatu barkcloth) by Togo-Brisby and a joint project by the artists which draw on their shared interest in branding and labour.

Shaped by the artists' own histories and experiences, *Outcast* reflects a process of talanoa where each artwork is part of a shared story of ideas and encounters.

Jasmine Togo-Brisby (South Sea Islander/Australia)

Hold

2023

plaster

This major new multi-object installation comprises a central rosette panel encircled by miniature replica Tam Tam drums cast in plaster. Their placement mirrors the scale of the Art Deco glass dome, and the ornate details are reminiscent of the ceiling's decorative motifs.

The artist has previously used the process of plaster-casting and recently created an installation called *As Above So Below* (2023) which consisted of 369 Tam Tam drums arranged in the shape of a ship's hull. Earlier plaster-cast panel and circular rosettes by the artist relate to an ongoing examination of Wunderlich family company designs whose ornate pressed tin-panels are preserved as heritage features in many buildings across Aotearoa New Zealand. For the artist, Wunderlich designs are an enduring physical manifestation of a colonial legacy and present a fraught personal history: Togo-Brisby's great-great-grandparents were abducted in Vanuatu and taken to Sydney, where they were enslaved as domestic servants by the Wunderlich family.

Tam Tam or slit drums are tall carved drums that appear on the dancing grounds of villages in Vanuatu. Often towering at a height of more than 3 metres, these drums are used in ceremonies and when the lip of the drum is struck it is said that the emerging sounds are the voices of ancestors.

In *Hold*, Togo-Brisby has used miniature replica Tam Tam drums adapted for the tourism industry as souvenirs. By using replicas from her own collection as the mould for her work, Togo-Brisby further removes the customary drum from its original form and purpose by casting them in white plaster and muting their sound as drums. The arrangement of this installation mimics the symmetry and patterning of elaborate plaster ceilings and the organisation of bodies in the holds of slave ships. For the artist, *Hold* reflects on the grand nature of Wunderlich ceilings in contrast to the underside of slave ships to consider whose history is preserved and considered valuable.

Courtesy of the artist

Jasmine Togo-Brisby (South Sea Islander/Australia)

John Vea (Aotearoa/Tonga)

\$22.70 per hour

2023

t-shirts, boxes

This newly collaborative project by Jasmine Togo-Brisby and John Vea brings together their shared interest in labour and branding through the production of two bespoke t-shirt designs.

The t-shirts are inspired by the Australian workwear brand Hard Yakka and adapt the font and colours of their red and white logo. Each of the artists have chosen a particular phrase; Vea has chosen *Ngaue Faingata'a* which means difficult or hard work in the Tongan language and Togo-Brisby has chosen *South Sea* in reference to her South Sea Islander identity.

The t-shirts form part of a sculptural installation of stacked boxes which are stencilled with each of the phrases. The boxes relate to a previous project by Vea called *If you pick my fruit, will you put mine back?* (2019) which included multiples of UMU boxes created in reference to the specially made box for air travellers who wish to bring food cooked in an umu earth oven into Aotearoa New Zealand.

Courtesy of the artists

John Vea (Aotearoa/Tonga)

Import/Export

2008-2016

plaster, wood

Import/Export addresses the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE) which permits workers from throughout the Pacific Islands to come to Aotearoa New Zealand to undertake seasonal work in the country's horticulture and viticulture industries. While RSE workers are considered indispensable, they earn minimum wage and experience excessive work hours and overcrowded accommodation.

John Vea's artwork consists of four pallets filled with plaster-cast taros. Each pallet represents a country involved with the RSE scheme highlighting the economy's reliance on cheap immigrant labour. In Vea's installation taros are reproduced through a process of plaster-casting and their shape has been created by using a traffic cone as a mould. For the artist, the cast taros allude to a food source, a unit of capitalism and Pacific workers whose labour is left largely unseen. Referred to by the artist as "urban taros" they are representative of exploited labour and migratory Pacific labour.

For Gus Fisher Gallery's iteration of *Import/Export*, urban taros extend beyond the confines of the original pallets. With every iteration of *Import/Export*, new urban taros are made in reflection of the continuation of the RSE scheme. When the scheme ends, Vea will stop making urban taros.

Import/Export takes on further resonance in 2023 following the catastrophic weather events which led to the displacement of hundreds of Pacific workers after their accommodation was flooded. In Hawkes Bay, a group of Tongan men were stranded on a rooftop and four hundred evacuated RSE workers had to be housed at a Napier church after their accommodation was deemed unsafe.

In September, over 100 workers from Bangladesh and India arrived in the country on Accredited Employment Work Visas with the promise of employment only to find themselves out of work and accommodation on arrival. The government released a support package for the workers and launched an investigation into those responsible for exploiting these workers who had paid substantial amounts for a visa and a job.

From October 2023, RSE employers must pay workers at least the minimum wage plus 10% for actual hours worked. The RSE scheme now allows up to 19,000 workers to enter the country each year.

Courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Jasmine Togo-Brisby (South Sea Islander/Australia)

Monopoly

2023

CSR plaster bags, CSR sugar bags

This newly commissioned nemasitse (Ni-Vanuatu barkcloth) is made from contemporary sugar and plaster packaging by CSR Limited. Known as the Chelsea Sugar Refinery and founded by Edward Knox in 1855 in Sydney, CSR once chartered their own vessels for the express purpose of “recruiting” labourers from the Pacific Islands. CSR were granted protections by the state government of Queensland and the federal government resulting in a monopoly on Australian sugar production and, by 1930, they were the wealthiest company in Australia with outposts like the Chelsea Sugar Refinery in Birkenhead.

Jasmine Togo-Brisby's work examines the legacies of slavery through companies like CSR whose complicity in the Pacific Slave Trade resulted in the forced removal of thousands of men, women and children from their homes to work on sugar plantations in Australia. Often kidnapped or “blackbirded” by labour agents, between 1847 and 1904 over 62,000 South Sea Islanders were taken from eighty different islands including Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and New Caledonia to carry out manual labour in the sugar, pastoral and maritime industries in Australia. Togo-Brisby's great-great-grandparents were abducted in Vanuatu and taken to Sydney, where they were acquired as house slaves by the Wunderlich family. CSR purchased Wunderlich Ceilings in 1969 and a relationship between Togo-Brisby and this family is traced through the Pacific Slave Trade. She states ‘they are the family who owned my family’.

To create this nemasitse, Togo-Brisby repurposed sugar and plaster bags from the products used in her practice; the bags are soaked, separated, beaten and bound together. The bags are used as a type of South Sea material culture, Togo-Brisby states; ‘Our community has had to reconcile the loss of customary practices and create new practices to tell our stories and ways of being.’

Monopoly builds on a previous textile produced by the artist in Te Papa Tongarewa's collection which features brown Chelsea sugar bags and makes reference to a variety of barkcloth taonga including Samoan siapo, Tongan ngatu and Niuean hiapo in Te Papa's Pacific collections.

Courtesy of the artist

John Vea (Aotearoa/Tonga)

Section 69DZ Employment Relations Act 2000

2019

mixed media

Break times:

10.30 - 10.45 am

12.00 - 12.30 pm

3.00 - 3.15 pm

John Vea's *Section 69DZ Employment Relations Act 2000* refers to an employee's entitlement to meal and rest breaks through the creation of a replica smoko room in the gallery. The installation is informed by Vea's own experience working as a minimum-wage labourer at a potato-chip plant and visually resembles the smoko room where he and his fellow workers took their breaks.

The room is intentionally drab and reflects a situation where staff have little agency over their role or context they find themselves in. Cheapness and functionality preside over any quality or comfort with plastic furniture for seating and basic kitchen appliances enabling refreshments. The walls are painted Resene Colonial White, chosen by the artist for its sickly magnolia colour as well as its name.

Vea recalls how posters advertising holidays to the Pacific Islands were often displayed on the walls of the smoko room an ill-considered context given many of the workers were from there. For this installation, Vea has created their own posters which co-opt the glorified pictures of idyllic Pacific landscapes and combine these with aspirational quotes about pride and self-determination by Pacific Island scholars including Albert Wendt, Epeli Hau'ofa and Teresia Teaiwa.

Vea's smoko room operates as an activation and is bound by set break times to which employers are legally required to grant to their employees' dependent on their hours of work. According to Section 69ZD, employers must grant employees rest and meal breaks, with an eight-hour shift warranting a minimum of two paid 10-minute breaks and one unpaid 30-minute meal break. During the gallery's opening hours, break times are scheduled daily at 10.30-10.45am, 12.00-12.30pm and 3.00-3.15pm. During these times, we encourage you to join us for a break.

Courtesy of the artist