

KAREN STEVENSON

Johnny Penisula (1941–2023), A Few Memories . . .

Abstract

Karen Stevenson's memories of the Aotearoa New Zealand-based Sāmoan artist Johnny Penisula (1941–2023).

Keywords: *Johnny Penisula, Sāmoan art, sculpture, Aotearoa New Zealand, contemporary art*



Figure 1. Nigel Brown, *Johnny Penisula*, 1996. Acrylic on canvas board, 340 x 270 cm. Courtesy of the Penisula Family

It was a great privilege to have had the opportunity to know Johnny. He was one of the sweetest, kindest, and most giving persons whom I have ever met.

My association with Johnny began through his art. The exhibition *Bottled Ocean* opened in 1995 at the McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, shortly after my arrival in New Zealand. It was the first travelling exhibition of contemporary Pacific art in New Zealand, and it astonished the general public. Johnny's contribution was *Matai*, a striking artwork made of wood and greenstone that offered a critical commentary on the matai system of Sāmoa.

Johnny's work, always exquisitely crafted, reflected his memories of Sāmoa and the cultural knowledge that he held so dear. In particular, he enjoyed creating work relating to the sea and to the stories around the foundations of his village.

I had the pleasure of getting to know Johnny over the years—at sculpture symposia, conferences, and during his residency in Christchurch as the Macmillan Brown Artist in Residence in 2007. When he was not attending these activities, he was working in Invercargill. To many, Johnny seemed a “fish out of water” living at the bottom of New Zealand in a coldish environment. But his family and his memories of Sāmoa kept him warm.

Perhaps the most magical time I spent with Johnny was when he and his wife Mavis welcomed me into their home and we talked and talked and talked, Johnny sharing his life, his art, and his dreams.

I will miss you, but will never forget you, my friend.

Karen Stevenson, of Tahitian heritage, moved to Christchurch in 1995 to take up a position at the University of Canterbury. Her writings include Johnny Penisula, Re-inventing Tradition (Suva, Fiji: USP Press, 2016).



Figure 2. Johnny Peninsula, *Fa'i*,
1989. Beef bone, 300 cm.
Courtesy of the Peninsula family



Figure 3. Johnny Penisula, *Family 3*, 2007. Stainless steel, approximately 5 ft H. Commissioned by the city council of Kumagaya, Japan. Photograph courtesy of the Penisula family



Figure 4. Johnny Penisula, *Octopus 1*, 1989. Black argilite, approximately 12 inches H. Courtesy of the Penisula family.