

SOPOLEMALAMA FILIPE TOHI

Past and Present Ancient Futures

Abstract

Tongan artist Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi presents a pictorial essay of his work included in the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures exhibition, part of the larger project of the same name. Works include formative ones from early in his career, along with those created during the research for the project.

Keywords: *Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi, Tonga, art, lashing, lalava, sculpture, Pah Homestead, 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures*

My artistic practice has two levels. One is based in a traditional Tongan cultural practice of *lalava*, or sennit lashing. Before the arrival of metal, *lalava* lashings bound a wide variety of items around the Pacific including houses, tools, and canoes. *Lalava* were both functional and decorative; I believe that *lalava* patterns were a mnemonic device for representing a life philosophy advocating balance in daily living, and were tied to cultural knowledge. I was awarded my Samoan title, Sopoalemalama, by Tupua Tamasese Tupuola Tufuga Efi in 2004 for lashing his Fale Maota in Nofualí'i, Sāmoa. Another example of my *lalava* practice is the Fale Pasifika at Waipapa Taumata Rau|The University of Auckland.

The second aspect of my practice is more contemporary and includes working in a large variety of mediums: painting on canvas, carving in wood and stone, and designing abstract sculptural patterns in metal and other materials. These patterns are based on *lalava* and their application in other dimensional forms moves the traditional to a contemporary setting.¹

Filipe Tohi was born in Tonga and emigrated to New Zealand in 1978 with the goal of becoming an artist. In the early 1980s, he taught at Rangimarie Arts and Crafts in Taranaki. He left to become a full-time artist in 1990. Tohi regularly participates alongside other artists who work with stone at gatherings known as stone symposia around the world and his work is held in collections globally. He is a featured artist in the permanent exhibition Tangata O Le Moana at Te Papa Tongarewa, and has held residencies in Japan, Cook Islands, Fiji, England, and the

United States. In 2023, he was recognized for his lifetime contribution to the arts of Aotearoa by being presented with the John and Jo Gow Sculpture Arts Laureate Award. After living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand for forty-five years, Sopolomalama relocated his art practice to Tonga in 2023.

Notes

¹ I would like to acknowledge my wife, Hilary Scothorn, for her assistance with the production of the *'Amui 'i Mu'a* catalogue and this essay. I thank her for her ongoing management of my practice.

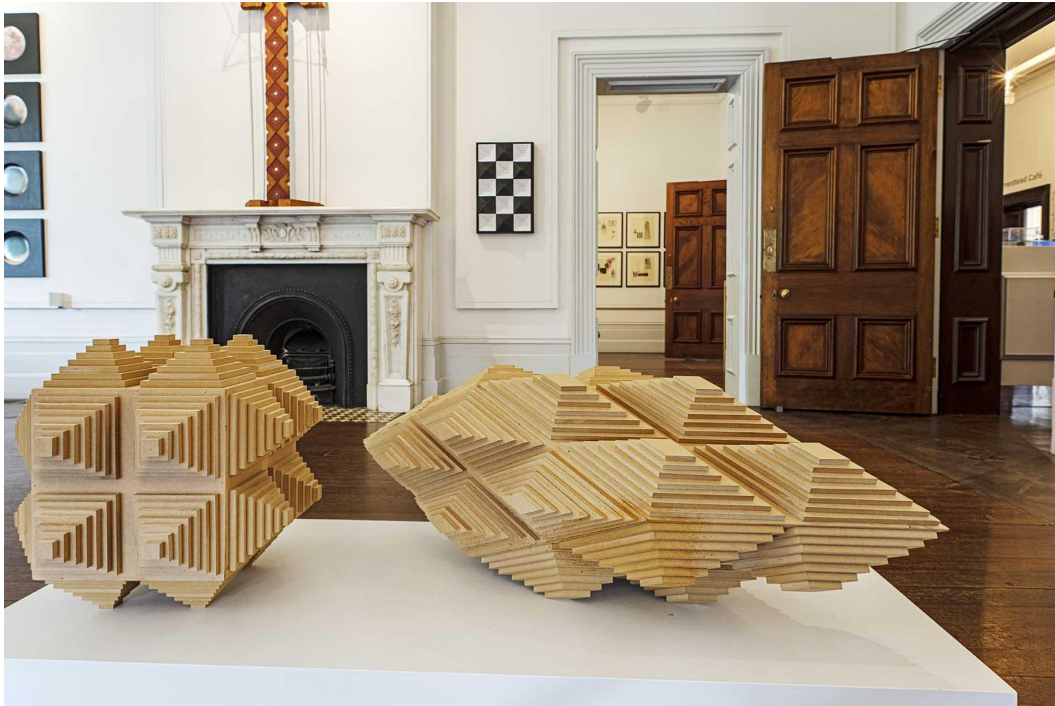


Figure 1. Sololemalama Filipe Tohi, *Haufakalava*, circa 2000. Plywood, 40 x 43 x 130 cm and 53 x 50 x 50 cm. Installation view in *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures*, Pah Homestead, 2021. Collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 2. Sololemalama Filipe Tohi, *Puleika*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 79.5 cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 3. Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi, *Pule Ngangana*, 2020. Screen print, 110 x 80 cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figures 4 and 5. Sololemalama Filipe Tohi, *Manuvaka*, 2008. Taranaki andesite, 66 x 45 x 50 cm. Installation view in 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures, Pah Homestead, 2021. Collection of Arts House Trust, Auckland. Photographs courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 6. Sololemalama Filipe Tohi, *Manutala*, 1992. Wood, steel, and sennit, 224 x 60 x 105 cm. Installation view in 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures, Pah Homestead, 2021. Collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 7. Sololemalama Filipe Tohi, *Manutala* (detail), 1992. Wood, steel, and sennit, 224 x 60 x 105 cm. Installation view in *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures*, Pah Homestead, 2021. Collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele



Figure 8. Sololemalama Filipe Tohi, *Four Kali*, 2021. Wood, sennit, and bone; (left to right) 18 x 11 x 42 cm, 14 x 10 x 34 cm, 13 x 11 x 36 cm, and 17 x 13 x 42 cm. Installation view in *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures*, Pah Homestead, 2021. Collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy of Raymond Sagapolutele