

Fatu Feu'u

Tamilo I Moana, 2004, woodcut, 760 x 1070 mm

Personal style:

Fatu Feu'u (b.1946, Samoa) is from the village of Poutasi, Western Samoa. He emigrated to NZ in 1966. Feu'u bases much of his work on Samoan symbols and mythical stories. The cultural values of balance, symmetry, exchange and reciprocity inform ancient designs and repetition. Many of these patterns find new expression in the works of Feu'u, and to these ancient insights, he adds his own personal meanings and metaphors. His iconography is an amalgam of graphic patterns from *siapo*, tapa-making and *tatau*, tattoo; stylised elements such as frangipani, *gogo*, tern, *anufe*, caterpillar; and objects of evident symbolic potential, handprints, paddles, scales. To this mix he adds elements of personal symbolism, of which the Lapita 'mask' is a striking example. Much has been made of the use of the mask motif in Feu'u's work. The 'mask' face appeared on a 'new' form of decorated pottery found in island Melanesia, and is material evidence of a people who emerged from the west, and who over the coming centuries discovered and settled the islands of the Pacific.



How has the artist used formal art principles?

The image is **symmetrical**. It is **balanced** by the use of grids within a frame to organize the imagery. There is **contrast** with four multi-coloured masks set on a white background. There are **fine curvilinear lines**. The image is **flat** with little receding **space** or **depth**. It uses **symbols** and **significant colours** to tell a story.

Use the Art terminology help sheet/link in slides.

What compositional conventions does the artist use?

Symmetry and grids suggest balance. The undisturbed blue, black and white framing all around focuses the eye within to the four evenly spaced mysterious multi-coloured shield-like masks. Feu'u talks about his work in <https://www.art-newzealand.com/Issue111/fatu.htm>

What do you see in the artwork?

Just write down what you see. Not what you think it is about or what it could mean – just what you see.

How do the art elements and principles help the meaning and impact of the artwork?

In *Tamilo I Moana* the image is symmetrical and balanced. The colours and style used are similar to traditional tapa cloth drawings while evoking Melanesian Lapita pottery and a tradition of migration. This is enhanced through using a tightly framed grid which suggests enclosure by mountains, sea and sky. A flat picture plane is used, and the four elements are arranged closely on the surface of the composition with no attempt to create an illusion of receding space. Fine black lines are etched over bright blue, red and yellow backgrounds which allows objects and line to stand out clearly from each other. There is a narrative element and images of symbols, structures and stories are interwoven in this work plus he uses symbols from his Samoan heritage along with those invented by himself e.g. his trademark four petalled flowers and seed pods. The meaning and significance of the mask face is now unknown, however Feu'u has claimed this 'mask' for his repertoire of design elements and in navigating the disparate Samoan and western worldviews, the 'mask' has become symbolic of the quintessential spiritual ancestor, and the spiritual dimension.

What are the techniques and processes used?

Feu'u has used the ancient technique of woodcut to create a multi-layered reduction print. The woodblock reduces as you cut more away for each layer of colour. It is a complex technique that allows for many reproductions and the wide sharing of images and information.

Symbolism and meaning?

Feu'u's work is inspired by Polynesian art forms such as siapo (tapa cloth), tatau (tattoo), weaving, carving and ceremonial mask making. These binary systems can be seen throughout his work – expressing traditional Samoan ideals of balance, sacred versus secular, inactive versus active, dignified versus aggressive and so forth. He adds migration and change to this mix.

What and who has influenced the artist?

Feu'u's work is inspired by Polynesian art forms such as the tapa cloth, tattoo, weaving, carving and ceremonial mask making. In these forms he uses a rich lexicon of motifs and compositional structures. His works frequently blend traditional and contemporary elements, incorporating a range of influences, inspirations, techniques and motifs from Samoa and Aotearoa/New Zealand and more generally from Euro-American to Pacific cultures.

His love of Picasso and the early 20th century modernists is evident, but he has established a distinctive style which sees him recognised as one of the leading New Zealand Pacific artists. Fatu Feu'u became a full-time artist in his early 40s – encouraged by his friends and mentors Pat Hanly, Tony Fomison and Philip Clairmont, all major artists of the 20th Century. He now works between New Zealand and Samoa, and is known for work that blends traditional imagery with Western influences.

A fierce belief in the Kermadec Ocean Sanctuary has inspired one of his largest paintings anchoring a solo exhibition at The Diversion Gallery in Marlborough. The scale of *Ola*, stretching nearly three metres across, was a conscious decision, says Feu'u, to express the magnitude of the issue. The largest work the gallery has shown in 17 years, it is an emphatic statement about the proposed ocean sanctuary around the Kermadec Islands, stretching north of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and what it means to Feu'u both in personal terms and as a Pacific-NZ leader. Despite current controversy about the Sanctuary, Feu'u remains committed to championing it, because the concept stretches back to his Samoan ancestors, taking care of the oceans of the Pacific. This continues in the series entitled *Sekia* (meaning: high five, or awesome), unique hand painted woodcuts carry a powerful central motif of tapu areas 'protected' by squares with a cross through them, with suggestions of sails and traditional motifs in the background. The sails are sometimes faintly defined, implying spiritual guardians of the ocean resources. Later works became bigger and more vivid, reflecting the intensity of the artist's passion for the sanctuary – 'the oceans belong to the oceans... we must protect them.' *Tapui* effectively means a protection over a place or object of major significance.

In speaking about his art practice, Feu'u asserts an intention to mediate an understanding of Samoan culture and history. What is equally apparent is that Samoan culture is the filter through which Feu'u interprets all that is around him. From national issues of race relations in New Zealand, and international conservation concerns, to very personal themes of a child's struggles and personal estrangements, all are worked through a very Samoan world view (Art New Zealand, 2004).

Production Value? Feu'u is a chief and elder statesman and considered one of the Pacific's most significant artists. His work is keenly sought after. His prints have short runs which increases their value. His work is in all major Art galleries and museums in Aotearoa/NZ and overseas.

Sources: <https://www.art-newzealand.com/Issue111/fatu.htm>
<https://thediversiongallery.co.nz/artist/feuu/>
[https://www.prints.co.nz/page/fine-art/CTGY/Artists Feu%27u Fatu](https://www.prints.co.nz/page/fine-art/CTGY/Artists_Feu%27u_Fatu)