

John Puihiatau Pule

Mahina (Moon) 2004 lithograph on Velin Arches white gsm paper 765 x 565 mm

Personal style:

John Pule born in Ulumago, Niue was raised in Otago and Grey Lynn, Auckland from the age of 3. He returned to Niue as an adult and has built a home on ancestral land in Kavaka. Pule is self-taught and his artwork includes painting, drawing, film-making, performance and printmaking. In his work Pule combines both the traditional masculine pursuit of working with hard materials such as stone and wood with the feminine through the ancient Polynesian art of drawing on tapa or bark cloth/ hiapo. From the beginning his work has mixed imaginary and real, modern and traditional methods and has included Niuean cosmology and Christianity, as well as perspectives on the effects of migration and colonialism. He once said "I made paintings that were anti-war, anti-nuclear, anti-Christ, anti-anything that I saw as a threat to my beloved Pacific..."



How has the artist used formal art principles?

The image is **symmetrical**. It is **balanced** by the use of uneven grids. There is **contrast** – bright red and black against a flat white background. There are **fine curvilinear lines** and **thick black lines**. The image is **flat** with little receding **space** or **depth**. It uses **symbols** to tell a story.

Add more if you see them – use the Art terminology help sheet/link in slides.

What compositional conventions does the artist use?

Symmetry yet uneven grids suggest out of balance. The church crouches in the bottom right hand corner. The black lines of vines draw the eye upwards via the black clouds, that could be celestial or nuclear, towards the Mahina/moon in the centre suggesting that Niuean cosmology is eternal and continues.

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 *Mahina* the image is both symmetrical and asymmetrical. It is balanced through using a grid but the spaces are uneven. Parts of the composition are arranged by using the grid as lines of vines to separate ideas and as a framing device to create stories of duality within the whole e.g. the Ratana type church with two domes below two black clouds, two planes, two vines, two feathers and so on. There is strong tonal contrast with e.g. black being used to depict clouds, which could be celestial or nuclear, and bright red for other elements. They are similar to the colours used in tapa and hiapo. Dark tones are used over a white background which allows objects and line to stand out dramatically and clearly from each other. A flat picture plane is used and elements are arranged on the surface of the composition with little attempt to create an illusion of receding space. Fine, thin lines are used to describe objects creating a graphic quality in the work and suggesting growth within destruction. Thick black lines shock and emphasize the clouds and crosses overlaying island life. There is a narrative element and images of symbols, structures and stories are interwoven in this work. Colonising influences thread upward e.g. churches, a chair, bombs, planes and so on. However, the moon/ Mahina is lasting, eternal and central.

What are the techniques and processes used?

Pule has used lithography an old and highly technical printing technique using stone on Velin Arches white gsm paper. This requires many different layers of colour. It is a technique that allows for many reproductions and the wide sharing of images and information. Lithography was used in the 19th century when Europeans first came to settle in the Pacific.

Symbolism and meaning?

Pule has taken images from traditional tapa/ barkcloth/ hiapo and Niuean cosmology to suggest island life – he has overlaid a red chair, black crosses, black clouds, churches and so on to depict the effects of the church, nuclear testing and colonisation on that life and environment.

Read the interview for *Flash Frontier* March 30, 2018 where Pule explains his methods and motivations.

<https://www.flash-frontier.com/2018/03/30/john-pule/>

What and who has influenced the artist?

Pule is a self-taught artist and his early, simple, direct pieces were influenced by looking at traditional Niuean hiapo, a cloth beaten out of mulberry bark, felted into rectangular sheets and then painted freehand within a grid-like pattern. Later the influence of Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere can be seen in his work partly in the way he includes words, often taken from his own writings. Like McCahon, he uses the ideas and images of religion to deal with wider social and political issues, not because of a religious belief but that they provide a useful set of images with which to tell stories and make comments. Another influence appears to be aboriginal art with works like *Clear the Pathway to Walk on* (1999) where he uses the long strips of colour and pattern employed by aboriginal artists. These paintings are also akin to the work of Shane Cotton, who used a similar layered landscape approach that also included a story-telling element.

Over the past 20 years Pule has created his own set of geometric motifs and figurative elements. Some of them come from the Niuean hiapo, some from Pacific traditions while others are from European and Maori sources. With all of them he has made adaptations and transformations in much the way that many contemporary artists appropriate other works of art. In the end, however, they are all filtered through the artist's own imagination. The set of lithographs *Restless Spirit* (2000) with texts from his novel *The Shark That Ate the Sun* is like medieval illustrated manuscripts combining words and illustrations. These works read like a cross between a set of biblical quotations and private diary entries.

Large recent works such as *Another Green World* have coloured clouds that could be celestial or nuclear. They hover over landscapes full of human and mythological activity. Much of the imagery revolves around war and destruction and the blight of religion. The largest of these take on some of the characteristics of the giant altarpieces of Medieval and Renaissance Europe and are attempts to cope with big issues and concepts.

Pule has also collaborated with others and in 2005, he co-wrote *Hiapo: Past and present in Niuean barkcloth*, a study of a traditional Niuean artform, with Australian writer and anthropologist Nicholas Thomas.

Production Value

Pule is considered one of the Pacific's most significant artists and 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.

Sources: <https://www.nbr.co.nz/article/john-pules-life-and-vision-over-20-years-125278>

<https://www.art-newzealand.com/Issue99/Pule.htm>

<https://thecentral.co.nz/artists/28-john-pule/overview/>