

ISABELLA LEPOAMO

## **TENDER MONUMENTS – SACRED ORDINARY REVISITED**

THE OBJECTS ARE NEVER JUST OBJECTS  
THE BUCKET IS A PRAYER  
THE CAN IS A MEMORY  
WE BUILD ALTARS OUT OF TRASH  
A RETURN TO ORIGIN  
THE HUM OF THE DIASPORA  
A LOVE LETTER IN COMMODITY FORM  
A CRITIQUE WRAPPED IN SATIN  
WE MAKE MEANING THROUGH MATTER  
WE MAKE GODS OUT OF KITSCH

THE THEMES ARE ALWAYS THE SAME  
BELONGING – MEMORY – RESISTANCE  
AN OBSESSION WITH THE INVISIBLE  
THE ACHE TO BE FELT – TO BE SEEN

### ACTS OF CARE

I grew up understanding love through actions, through food. For Samoans in Aotearoa, visiting someone's house means bringing something to share. No one leaves hungry. At family dinners, children are served first, their plates loaded, as a gesture of care. We collect *kai moana* together, we prepare food together, and we cook together even when the ingredients come in a Salvation Army box. Despite displacement, these rituals continue in the New Zealand context, where traditional language, clothing and ceremony are sometimes absent, transferred from traditional kitchens to plastic trays and foil wraps. Food is one of our strongest living ties to cultural identity. I've seen it in my Thai flatmate, in my Māori whānau and in many diasporic communities. Everyday practices quietly hold people together. My art emerges from a space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews are in constant dialogue. It is a space shaped by the

principles of Te Ao Māori, the persistence of Māori activism and the responsibilities that come with inhabiting this whenua. Because this place is unsettled, active and contested, I, as a base line, have the freedom to create in ways that feel both anchored and exploratory—a freedom I acknowledge as a privilege. In many parts of the world, political thought that challenges the status quo is not only discouraged but actively suppressed. The ability to question, reflect and speak through creative practice is not something I take for granted. It's about recognising the layered context I live in, where Te Tiriti o Waitangi offers an ongoing framework for negotiation and responsibility, but where my values as an artist are also grounded in simple, inherited acts of love, sharing and survival.

This article is a reflection on my installation at the Dunedin School of Art in November 2024. Taking the form of a personal, autoethnographic narrative, it counters a reading of the work's various packaged-food-related objects that draws only from critical theory. That intellectual reading, I suggest, is liable to result in the judgement of a marginalised cultural group as passive consumers of inauthentic mass-produced commodities. I argue instead for embracing the contradictions the items embody, whereby they are equally signs of disconnection and connection for Samoan New Zealand families.

The installation, *Sacred ordinary*, used everyday objects to explore the intersection of memory, family and cultural heritage and consumerism. Bronze hands, a life cast of my grandfather's hands, poured water into a KFC bucket, a symbol of commodified culture transformed into a vessel of tradition. A bronze kava bowl, a family heirloom, symbolised the continuity of Samoan rituals. Fragile fish-and-chips paper, painted with a Samoan turtle in *lama* (traditional ink), replaced bark-cloth tapa, emphasizing the delicate balance between preserving cultural identity and adapting to contemporary life. The turtle, a symbol of family in Samoan mythology, reinforced the theme of heritage. A coconut tree, constructed from coconut cream cans, symbolised the blending of tradition with the realities of immigrant life in New Zealand, while a self-portrait in plasticine served as a reference to my childhood. Objects drawn from my upbringing became symbols of both familial legacy and the tension between modernity and cultural preservation, embodying the personal and collective experience of navigating displacement, memory and belonging.

## THE INVISIBLE

Tensions of ancestry, of place, of accountability are not resolved in my work, but instead held open. The art becomes a space where contradictions are welcomed and allowed to sit alongside each other, where judgement is suspended and where I try to honour the mana of the communities and legacies I'm in relationship with.

My curiosity about people, what shapes their experiences and brings them together, has been a way to make sense of myself. What I find so powerful about exploring this through making art is that it gives language to the intangible, the unseen emotional and spiritual spaces that exist between individuals. These spaces are often difficult to grasp, especially when we are young, yet they shape so much of how we connect and interact.

ISABELLA LEPOAMO, SACRED ORDINARY,  
2024. SITE. INSTALLATION VIEWS

Photographs: © Zac Whiteside.















Culture itself is built on these spaces and interactions, on the invisible threads of influence that shape our perceptions and the fluid nature of human connection, like spilled milk: warm, messy and somehow always landing on the one thing you cared about.

Finding my voice as an artist has often felt risky. I internalised the pressure to sound 'critical,' to make work that fitted neatly within academic discourses. There's a kind of safety in aligning your language with theory, in quoting the right thinkers, in appearing clever. But I began to question what gets excluded when emotional sincerity, cultural memory or even so-called 'naïve' approaches are treated as intellectually suspect. In that sense, the risk wasn't about rejecting academic frameworks altogether, but about confronting their provisional limits and learning to let things in that might be seen as sentimental, uncritical or even embarrassing. That's where the work started to feel honest. I'm not making art to prove I understand theory. I make it to stay connected to the people and stories I care about—my family, my history, my community. The work comes from love. And sometimes, love feels like the most radical thing I can offer.

## MIRRORS AND MONUMENTS

Early on, I learned how easily certain kinds of aesthetic experience were dismissed as 'low,' 'ugly' or 'kitsch.' I remember being told that the subject matter of Pop Art was tacky, that objects like canned goods or celebrity memorabilia had no place in serious discourse. It made me feel ashamed; the things I'd grown up with, the things I loved, were signs of bad taste. This was devastating, because I had excellent taste in two-minute noodles and celebrity perfume. The shame, though, was formative. It taught me how ideology operates not just through discursive frameworks but through feeling—through embarrassment, pride, recognition and rejection. This did not lead me to reject academic frameworks altogether. Rather, I wanted to find the ones that resonated with my lived experience.

The word 'kitsch' comes from German, from the nineteenth century, where *verkitschen* meant 'to cheapen' or 'make trashy.' It has been used to draw a line between 'authentic' art and mass-produced commodity culture. Think of Theodor Adorno or Clement Greenberg, who saw kitsch as the manipulative 'other' of 'high art.'<sup>1</sup> But others, from Pop artists to postmodern theorists, have unsettled this binary, showing how those distinctions are socially produced and ideologically loaded.

When I first proposed using KFC iconography in my work, specifically the iconic red-and-white share buckets, I was cautioned against it. I was told it might come across as stereotypical, even offensive, if it suggests that people from displaced cultures are vulnerable to the cheap products of global corporations, compelled to consume what can only do them harm. That critique left me feeling unexpectedly sad. For me, those buckets weren't ironic props or aesthetic shortcuts. They were repositories of memory. They reminded me of Sunday afternoons with my grandfather, family meals where everyone reached in together, laughing, eating, living. The association wasn't abstract, but deeply personal. And, yes, maybe that image of consumption is stereotypical. But is it necessarily an image of failure? Perhaps the problem lies not in the image itself, but in a refusal to see its depth. Dismissing it outright reveals more about Western intellectual discomfort than about the image's meaning in 'other' cultural contexts.

My attitude to post-1960s artists like Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol, who represent items of mass culture, isn't necessarily one of admiration, but of recognition. Their work reveals something unsettling and true: that what we deem 'poor taste' often reflects cultural proximity to working-class or racialised communities, where value is mapped in different ways. A KFC bucket or a piece of fish-and-chip paper is disposable, but that doesn't mean it's devoid of emotional resonance. In displaced Pacific households like the one I grew up in, such items are tied to memory, migration, celebration and survival. These objects sit at the messy intersection of fantasy and materiality. They're not simply tools of capitalist domination. They're that, but they're containers for belonging too. That contradiction is where my practice lives.

Warhol grew up in a working-class immigrant family in Pittsburgh. When he was a child, he spent long stretches sick in bed. To pass the time he cut pictures of celebrities out of magazines, pasting together his own private gallery of mass-produced fame. He also lived off canned tomato soup—literally. His family didn't have much, and a tin of Campbell's was cheap, filling and familiar.<sup>2</sup> Warhol's art is not full of elite cultural references, but of the everyday stuff of his life. I don't want to speculate too much on what the soup meant to him personally, but what matters is that the image of that can carried weight—a memory folded into the everyday. Warhol never explained his work, never offered a narrative. His simply held a mirror to the world around him, soup cans, Marilyn Monroe and all—the surfaces of mass culture.

Pop Art wasn't just a clever aesthetic. Warhol understood that what's popular, what's mass-produced, is what surrounds us, feeds us and shapes how we see ourselves. That immediacy and specificity—the refusal of narrative—is what made his work so sharp. He turned the everyday into serious cultural currency.



Figures 2 and 2a. Isabella Lepoamo, *New Zealand Commercial Fish Species*.  
Photograph: © Zac Whiteside.

# NEW ZEALAND COMMERCIAL FISH SPECIES



Cod / *Gadus morhua*



groper / *polypterus argenteus*



Squid / *Illex argenteus*



Snapper / *Pagrus auratus*



Salmon / *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*



Bluefin Tuna / *Thunnus orientalis*



Tarakihi / *Nemadactylus macropterus*



Chub mackerel / *Scomber japonicus*



Red Gurnard / *Chelidonichthys cuculus*



Crab / *Brachyura*



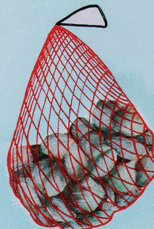
Hoki / *Macrurus novaezealandiae*



Sardine / *Sardinops sagax*



Prawn / *Decapod crustacea*



Sea urchin / *Austrovenus stutchburyi*



Mussel / *Perna canaliculus*



Sea urchin / *Evechinus chloroticus*

My own art follows this same thread, but from a slightly different angle. It begins with the fish species posters you see pinned up in fish-and-chip shops around New Zealand—bright grids of snapper, blue cod, crayfish. Instead of painting those species, I replaced them with the versions I have actually encountered: mussels in a supermarket punnet, tuna in a can, frozen fillets in branded plastic. These are the forms that feel most familiar to me, just as Campbell's soup cans did for Warhol. But where his paintings and prints reflected the everyday as it appeared, mine are found objects that I modify and integrate into a particular narrative about a diasporic culture. The changed poster reveals what's been lost—the fresh species replaced by packaged products, the abundance of the sea compressed into brands and barcodes.

## FAMILIAR / LOST

Jeff Koons' *Celebration* series, begun in 1993, takes the everyday objects of childhood—balloon dogs, party hats, Play-Doh, cakes, shiny eggs with bows—and blows them up to monumental scale. They're not just toys or decorations anymore, they're memorials to joy itself. Koons has always said he wants to stay positive, to reclaim the things that brought him happiness growing up. Where Warhol painted a soup can, Koons would make it enormous, gleaming, inflatable in spirit—a monument to the ordinary, reframed as something beautiful.

That optimism carries through to works like *Puppy* (1992), a giant dog made of flowers outside the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao. It's a sculpture that requires constant pruning, held together by a self-watering system and an intricate internal frame—the technology behind it is as elaborate as the idea is simple.<sup>3</sup> But that's the point: he takes things that are generally and intuitively loved—puppies, flowers—and turns them into obscene spectacles that are alternately enjoyable and uncomfortable. In *Hulk (Tubas)* (2004–18), a giant inflatable of the eponymous Marvel character—scaled to human size but already cartoonishly overblown—is surrounded by massive golden tubas that fan out like peacock feathers. The work is interactive: visitors can come up and blow into the instruments, filling the space with a booming anthem. Hulk's power is multiplied by the audience who bring the sound to life. It's absurd and spectacular. It feels like the anthem of Marvel itself—that massive, inflated culture wave of superheroes and comics we've grown up with. There is no evidence that the piece should be taken as a critique from some 'outside' position.<sup>4</sup> It reflects the times exactly as they are: proud, shiny, loud and unapologetically inflated.

"I am what I am," Koons says.<sup>5</sup> If his world was filled with bright, punchy cartoons and consumer objects, then it feels right to him to celebrate and uplift them. Rather than making judgement, both Koons and Warhol unapologetically reflect back what is. And, in a way, we all do, even when we try not to; what we reflect outward is our own participation and embeddedness in commodity culture, even if we seek to critique that culture.

## COMFORT COMPLICATED

Like Warhol and Koons, I draw on what's familiar—KFC buckets, fish-and-chip wrappers, fish posters reworked into packaged products. But for me, these objects are also tied to memory, to family, to the traditions I grew up in. In Pacific households, such objects carry values passed down through elders—*alofa* (love), *tautua* (service), *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *feagaiga* (covenant between siblings and others) and *usita'i* (discipline). A bucket of chicken is never just a bucket of chicken; it's part of a gathering, a form of sharing, a vessel for community.

But now, I feel a deep conflict. The materials that once felt comforting and close are also bound up in systems I cannot ignore. Tinfoil, for example, is wrapped in contradictions: coated in plastic, hard to recycle and mined through environmentally destructive processes. What once carried the warmth of my childhood also reminds me how Pacific communities, already displaced, are further entangled in extractive, unsustainable economies. The same is true of food. These meals are tied to joy and belonging, yet they also carry harm: health problems in my own family and corporations that profit from marginalised groups in New Zealand. The stereotype that reduces Pacific people to 'fat and greedy' erases this reality, skipping over the machinery of industrial food systems, the impacts of class and global capitalism's funnelling of cheap, unhealthy products into vulnerable communities, then blaming those very people for the consequences.

I see this so sharply because of the values that shaped me. Growing up, I immersed myself in *Planet Earth* documentaries; I cared about ecosystems and the fragility of life. Later, in my other career as a professional athlete, I had access to nutritionists, health coaches and sports psychologists. Ideas of balance, wellbeing, and respect for the body became part of how I understood myself. So, when I look at a KFC bucket, I see a site where culture, community, memory, health and the environment collide. And I have a conflicted relationship to its materiality. The plastic-coated bucket is like the glossy magazine pages Warhol cut up and Koons' balloon dogs polished to a mirror sheen—all symptoms of the same industrial system that fills landfills and oceans as easily as it fills supermarket shelves. To me, the materials aren't neutral surfaces. They carry the story of extraction, waste and ecological damage beneath their cheerful, mass-produced shine.

## DECOHERENCE

My work doesn't sit in pure celebration like Koons, nor in the detached immediacy of Warhol. It reflects the familiar, but it also critiques. It points to what has been lost, what has been imposed and what continues to be overlooked. What I'm interested in is contradiction: unhealthy and joyful, disposable and sacred, capitalist and cultural, everyday and planetary.

At the same time as I was wrestling with kitsch and cultural value, I found myself drawn to the garden—not metaphorically, but literally. I was becoming aware of what I now think of as my own ideological 'filters,' the structures that shape how I perceive not just art, but nature, intimacy and reality itself. Last year, I became acutely aware of my own disconnection, mainly from 'nature,' plants and the non-human, but subsequently, upon reflection, from people, from place, from myself. I wanted to recover the sanctuary

I remembered from childhood, when simply being outside, sitting in the sun or walking through a garden filled me with peace. I understood, intellectually, that I *am* part of nature, that disconnection is an illusion, yet emotionally I felt separate, misaligned.

Unintentionally, it was at Nichol's Garden Centre that this feeling I had been searching for returned to me. Decided to just sit amongst the orderly rows of potted plants in a moment of peace, my body was filled with wistful emotion. I realised this place sparked a nostalgic feeling for Invercargill, the town where I grew up. But it wasn't just Invercargill itself, but the beautiful spaces I shared with family, mainly my grandparents. Nichol's Garden Centre shares a beauty like my grandad's garden, on which he worked tirelessly. The red bricks were the same as the ones at Queen's Gardens and Elizabeth Park, where we fed the ducks. I remembered times when grandad would drive us to McDonald's or Moon's for takeaways to eat back at his place. Ironically, I found all this at Nichol's Garden Centre, a place where 'nature' is arranged in an anthropocentric fashion, organised to meet human needs.

This led me to the concept of plant decoherence, which I've explored as a metaphor for how cultural ideologies 'collapse' the complex, quantum-like multiplicity of living systems into simplified, human-centred categories. Just as decoherence in physics describes how particles lose their quantum potential when observed, so too does our framing of nature through anthropomorphism, commodification, or aesthetic control reduce it to something digestible, manageable and ultimately disconnected from its aliveness.<sup>6</sup> Even gardening is bound up in this logic. Plants are sorted into categories of 'good' and 'bad,' ornamentals versus weeds, reflecting an aesthetics that is coded middle-class and colonial, rather than ecological imperatives.

Nichol's Garden Centre subconsciously reconnected me with childhood memories of family gardens. These spaces offered a kind of sanctuary. But I am also aware of the capitalist logic at play: garden centres exist to sell. They manufacture and elicit a desire to connect with 'nature'—a desire both authentic and shaped by market forces. The same contradiction also helps me make peace with the memory of fast food.

## VESSELS

As an adult, having moved away from quiet Invercargill to study in Dunedin, immersed in intellectual spaces I'd never encountered before, I became ashamed of the things I used to take pride in. The parallels were clear. If garden centres curate what counts as 'nature,' fast food chains curate what counts as 'food.' Both promise sanctuary—a return to something warm, familiar, communal—but both are deeply entangled in capitalist economies. Now, reframing this contradiction in the objects of my childhood, my KFC buckets, fish-and-chip paper or coconut cans aren't simply junk or kitsch; they are alive with meaning because they are part of relational sanctuaries. The KFC buckets I shared with my grandfather aren't symbols of bad taste, but vessels of belonging. My attachment to them isn't ideological failure; it's a human feeling shaped by love.

I remember waiting with mom and aunty until just before 11pm, when KFC was about to close, so we could get extra chicken. We'd drive around 'Invers,' dropping chicken off to family, and receive the same gesture back a week later. These were small rituals, but they meant everything. Within a Western paradigm, and often without full cultural

or physiological adaptation, this tradition of food-sharing is taken advantage of by capitalist models that prey on emotional resonance. The KFC bucket is a commercial innovation marketed specifically toward Pacific communities. Stores are strategically placed in more densely Pacific and lower-income neighbourhoods. This has contributed to disproportionate health issues within Pacific communities, revealing how cultural adaptation can be both empowering and harmful.

In my work, the symbols of the KFC bucket is a modern surrogate for the *kava* bowl, both representing communal values of sharing. But they also expose the paradox of cultural survival, where the attempt to preserve tradition and identity is in tension with stereotypes and worsening health impacts. Living in Aotearoa, I've witnessed how Samoan culture adapts and transforms when displaced into a Western context. Packaging—KFC buckets, coconut cans from Vietnam, fish-and-chip paper, foil takeaway wraps—becomes more than just wrapping. These objects are vessels of memory, meaning and identity for a community striving to maintain connection to home.

*Bronze Cast of My Grandfather's Hands* (2024) emerged from my fear of losing him—the person who remains my strongest living connection to Samoa. Casting his hands was an attempt to hold on to something I know I will one day have to let go of. It feels miraculous that he is still struggling with his health. Despite the solid weight of the bronze, this work acknowledges that I can never truly preserve him. It's not about stopping time, but about honouring the impermanence of life and the intimacy of memory.

In *My Grandfather's Hands to KFC Fountain* (2024), *suavai* (water), the spirit of life, becomes the central force. In Samoan belief, and across the Pacific, water is not passive. It is its own being, both spiritual and physical: a cleanser, a sustaining force that renews and baptises. When my grandfather's hands pour water into the pyramid of KFC buckets, the act elevates them. The buckets are no longer just disposable containers or symbols of 'poor taste.' Through water, they are temporarily sanctified, placed on a higher status as vessels of community and care. The spirit of life brings vitality into objects otherwise seen as kitsch and stereotypical, low and off-putting. It washes and reclaims them. For me, this is not metaphor alone, but belief: water acts as an agent, a living force that carries alofa (love), tautua (service), fa'aaloalo (respect), feagaiga (covenant) and usita'i (discipline). By allowing water to flow through the buckets, I'm trying to contextualise and reclaim the stereotypes that flatten Pacific imagery into clichés. Instead, the work repositions them as complex cultural signifiers, containers of memory and community. The piece is not only about loss and mourning, but also about renewal through the life-giving force of *suavai*.

## CURRENTS

Jane Bennett's philosophy of vital materialism, outlined in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010), argues that matter is not inert but alive.<sup>7</sup> Bennett writes about how non-human materials and things, as small as metals or food scraps and as vast as waterways and power grids, have their own agency, constantly shaping the world around us. In her view, water isn't a passive backdrop. It is an active participant in the web of life: it carves landscapes, sustains ecosystems, influences cultures and holds political weight in struggles over access and use. Water has meaning and vitality beyond its utilitarian function.

Bennett's text is received as rigorous philosophy, taught in universities, cited in academic texts (just as I am compelled to cite it here). For me, that is both affirming and frustrating. Affirming, because I recognise in her language something I already know: *suavai* is not just a resource but a spirit, a life-force with its own agency. Frustrating, because when I say the same thing—that I was baptised in water, that it cleanses and renews, that it carries values of *alofa*, *tautua*, *fa'aaloalo*, *feagaiga*, and *usita'i*—it risks being dismissed as cultural, sentimental or naïve. Bennett's philosophy and my Pasifika belief system align, but hers is legitimised, while mine is marginalised.<sup>8</sup>

This tension becomes clearer when I think about Judy Watson's work. Watson, a Waanyi artist from northwest Queensland, also treats water as an active collaborator in her practice. In Waanyi language, one aspect of water is called *dumularra*—the current, the flowing water. For Watson, this current carries not only vitality but also memory, including the painful histories of her family. She works with water directly: soaking and staining canvases, letting it shape her pigments, acknowledging its presence as an agent in the work.

Watson's understanding of water is grounded in Waanyi traditions, where land, water, and kinship cannot be separated. For generations, Aboriginal water knowledge has guided seasonal use, sharing practices and community relationships. These values are central to spiritual connection and survival. Unlike Western law, which divides land and water into separate entities, Aboriginal knowledge systems insist that water is inseparable from Country, bound into creation stories and the responsibilities of care.<sup>9</sup> Yet, like Pasifika belief systems, this knowledge is often undervalued until it can be reframed in Western terms, whether as philosophy, environmental science or commercial research value. Institutions are quick to seek out 'Aboriginal water knowledge' for climate models or new ecological insights, but slow to recognise the spiritual and cultural frameworks that hold that knowledge in place.

Bennett, Watson and my own practice are all speaking to water's vitality—but from different genealogies. Bennett writes it as theory, Watson paints it through Waanyi heritage, I work with it as *suavai*, the spirit of life.

## CARRYING BOTH ACROSS

Water has always been central in my life, not just symbolically, but physically, socially and emotionally. Some of my earliest and strongest memories are of being with my family at the beach, collecting *kai moana*, swimming, laughing, eating. The ocean was our meeting place, our playground, our pantry. Later in life, I became a professional swimmer and synchronised swimmer, deepening this connection. Water became my medium, my discipline and my grounding. It held me, challenged me and taught me rhythm, stillness and flow. But, in contrast to Bennett's theorisation of water as a vibrant, relational force, the currents of meaning that sustain me, rooted in family, culture and emotion, are liable to be judged as sentimental. Is sentimentality necessarily naïve? What makes an artwork—one, say, that emerges from this sentimentality—either kitsch and 'bad taste' or of intellectual substance? When are images of Pacific life taken as clichés or read as complex cultural signifiers? My work explores these dualities.

The word 'philistine' is an old insult used for centuries to sneer at people who supposedly don't understand art. In their 2002 book, *The Philistine Controversy*, Dave Beech and John Roberts suggest that philistine modes of attention and representation, on the part of artists and audiences alike, have value in relation to contemporary art insofar as they have the potential to unsettle social hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> They argue that identifying philistinism—branding someone or something tasteless, crude or outside culture—tells us less about the so-called philistine and more about the way art worlds police their boundaries. Judgements of taste are never just about taste; they're about drawing lines between insiders and outsiders, between those with cultural capital and those without, and being blind to the overlaps and contradictions that confound such simplistic distinctions.

It is interesting to me when my work has been regarded as being at risk of being 'obvious' or 'sentimental.' These descriptions line up with other judgements, such as 'unrefined,' 'too simple,' 'not up to standard.' They reveal something about the cultural positions from which judgements are made. Rather than reject these labels, I began to consider how an artwork might disrupt the cultural gatekeeping of contemporary art. In embracing objects and imagery considered lowbrow or stereotypical, I wasn't being defiant; I was trying to re-centre a language of art-making that spoke to the lives of people like my family, who feel like they can't engage with a lot of contemporary art. After all, the visual language that surrounds them, from takeaway menus to church hall posters, might not be gallery-curator-approved, but it's rich with care, humour and meaning. I am reminded of a comment by Samoan New Zealand photographer Edith Amituanai in 2009: "I do have to live with this work, with my family and friends, so I have to remember that I can't make work that they don't believe and I don't believe. I can imagine that if I were to do something that really was contemporary art—whatever that is—I'd just get laughed at in my house."<sup>11</sup> Amituanai admitted at the time to feeling 'embarrassed' about her relationship to the art world, but she has been consistent in basing her work in the social and material realities of Pasifika culture, without losing face as a 'contemporary artist.'

Here I think about Frantz Fanon, whose writing put language to something I was already living. Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique, wrote in his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* about internalised inferiority, the psychological violence of colonialism.<sup>12</sup> Fanon insists that the colonised subject is taught to mistrust their own image, taste, body, language and culture—a process I recognised not just in the classroom, but in how I had come to doubt the cultural value of the objects that surrounded me growing up. I remember being afraid to be seen with my mum in certain spaces because she was brown, because people treated us differently when we were together. If I was on my own, or with other parents, I wasn't treated the same way. I think it echoed the pressure to adopt the ways of this place, to erase parts of ourselves in order to fit in. Perhaps my dyslexia also added to that internalised inferiority. As a kid, my mum would remind me that my brain was "wired differently" because of it. She meant it kindly, but it added to the quiet suspicion that I was operating slightly askew from everyone else. It fits with Fanon's internalised, psychological violence: the way you come to experience yourself as the problem, failing to line up with the world's expectations. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek might call it the comedy of subjectivity, where even your own mind comes with a user manual you can't quite read.<sup>13</sup>

When I entered art school, I felt like I had stepped into another world. People spoke in a language of books, films and exhibitions I didn't recognise, and I assumed the problem was me. My background, my family, our food, our humour felt like it could never measure up. No one told me outright I didn't belong; the coldness of the space said enough. Warmth and familiarity no longer seemed to count. Maybe that's why I turned to the symbols that were familiar—the KFC buckets, fish-and-chip posters and takeaway menus.

## MATERIALS THAT BEHAVE

If *suavai* let me see how meaning flows through a bucket, the rest of the works in the installation—from foil and coconut cans to bronze and plasticine—asked me to pay attention to how materials themselves move, resist, hold and change. I was drawn to materials like aluminium foil and coconut cream cans not just for what they represent, but for how they behave. Tinfoil is like water; its shimmer and fragility, the way it bends and holds, feels alive. It carries itself with a quiet insistence. The coconut cream cans—too shiny, resilient, mass-produced, yet intimate—seem to store memories, relating to my own associations with family meals and the material traces they accumulate over time.

Growing up, I learned about cooking from a family in the Islands using coconut leaves, banana leaves and fresh coconuts, all of which returned to the land. That practice was cyclical, respectful and holistic. But here in Aotearoa, those materials are often out of reach. What replaces them are industrial substitutes: tinfoil instead of leaves, canned cream instead of fresh. The tree I've created is both a tribute and a critique. It speaks to the creativity and resilience of Pacific families who continue to uphold cultural practices using what's available. But it also points to the cost of that adaptation: the severed relationship with land, the environmental compromises we absorb and the tension of living between worlds. The coconut tree, reconstructed from non-traditional and unsustainable materials, tries to hold on to its original function as a 'tree of life—but it does so imperfectly. That imperfection is the point. Why are leaves read as 'authentic' and tinfoil as 'cheap,' when both can carry the same ritual labour?

## UNFINISHED

From there, I moved to another material: plasticine. A self-portrait sculpted from white plasticine—a direct return to the first sculptural material I ever encountered—represents me at nine years old. The figure is unpolished, small, reaching toward my grandfather's bronze hands while gazing down at the silhouette of a *kava* bowl. The malleability of the plasticine reflects an identity still forming, still in flux, evolving through time, memory and experience. Positioned alongside the solidity of bronze, leaning towards it, the plasticine draws out a contrast between permanence and impermanence, between the 'groundedness' of heritage and the instability of personal memory. Like the aluminium foil and coconut cans, plasticine is a material with its own agency—not through durability, but through vulnerability. It absorbs dust, fingerprints, marks from the air and touch. Over time, it becomes marbled by its environment, just as identity is shaped by contact with place, culture and history. In this way, the piece carries both the emotional imprint of my younger self and the interpretive distance of the adult I am

now. It is a bridge between two ways of seeing: one immediate and intuitive, the other reflective and uncertain.

But there's something different from the plasticine I used as a child. Back then, my mum would buy me colourful multi-packs, and I'd recycle pieces constantly, adding new colours as I went. But in this work, the plasticine is entirely white. This was the only choice that felt true. It captured how I felt at the moment of making: unfinished, searching, lacking definition. The absence of colour signals the potential for transformative renewal. Tradition isn't necessarily locked into specific materials; it lives in the care, intentions and adaptations we make. In this case, the adaptation is colour itself: a shift from the playful excess of childhood products into something pared back, fragile and unresolved. Here, plasticine's 'schoolroom' stigma becomes a method. Within an art school lens, plasticine is only a transitional material, something temporary, not a finished work but waiting to be cast 'properly' in traditional bronze or something more 'cutting edge,' like fibreglass. By refusing that expectation, I leaned into its supposed incompleteness. Its openness to touch, dust and time became the meaning. Bronze and plasticine, placed side by side, suggest resolution and process respectively, offering an ideological as well as formal contrast. Who decides what counts as 'complete'? Why is permanence valued over vulnerability, polish over touch?

## YIELDING

Where plasticine yields, bronze holds. Unlike materials I had been drawn to for their emotional proximity—tin foil, coconut cream cans, fish-and-chip paper—bronze was unfamiliar, distant, even intimidating. Yet I found myself turning to it out of necessity. The everyday materials I once surrounded myself with are fading, becoming harder to find or hold onto. In this sense, bronze became a kind of substitute: not because it carries the same warmth, but because it might endure where the original cannot. It's not what I grew up with, but it's what I have.

The bronze cast of the *kava* bowl is my attempt to memorialise an object that once embodied communal ritual, but now risks becoming a decorative relic. I chose bronze because it has long been used to preserve what matters—statues, memorials, things meant to endure. It can last past my lifetime just as with the bronze cast of my grandad's hands. Traditionally, the *kava* bowl was a vessel for connection, a symbol of presence, sharing and cultural continuity used in ritualistic contexts. However these traditions have been displaced or overshadowed in my upbringing by global symbols of convenience and speed. I paired the bowl with a fish-and-chip paper tapa cloth, a material that speaks more directly to my childhood memories of communal meals and improvised rituals. If materials have agency, then durability and fragility are not grades of value but different ways memory insists on materialising.

## TRANSLATION

From behaviour to belonging: once I trusted what materials do, I could admit what they mean in a diasporic culture—how translation, not substitution, keeps ceremony alive.

Following the exploration of plasticine, a material tied to my childhood and shaped by touch, I found myself returning to the familiar again, this time through a very different

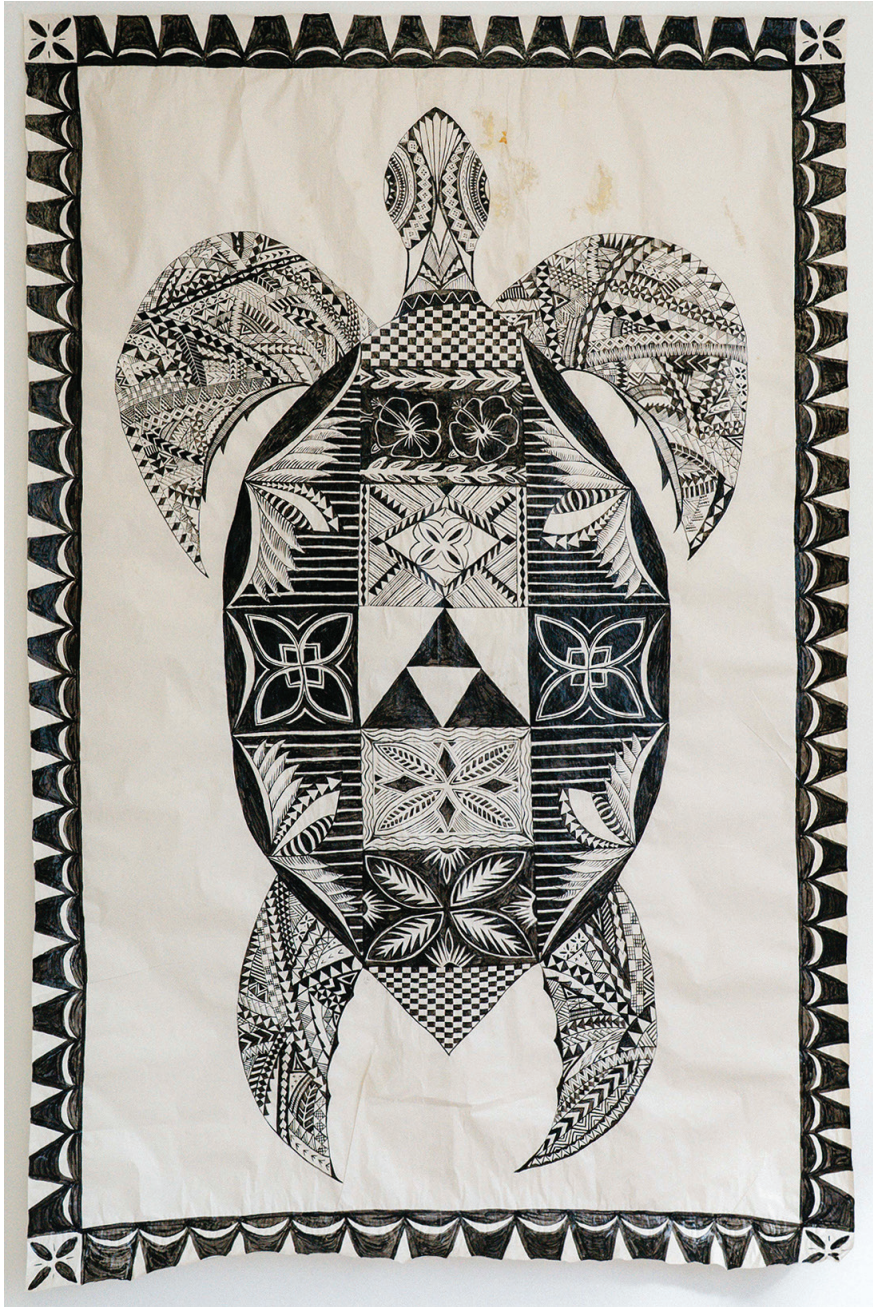


Figure 3. Studio studies, works in progress. Photograph: © Zac Whiteside.

material: fish-and-chip paper. This object, so deeply woven into my family life, carries its own quiet significance. It speaks to shared meals, not just with my immediate family but across the wider *aiga* (extended family) on Friday nights, birthdays, Sundays, when food wasn't just food, but love passed around a table. In this work, the paper becomes a substitute for tapa backcloth, not in a way that diminishes tradition, but in a way that *translates* it making space for how diasporic materials can carry similar weight and intention.

Rather than relying solely on substitution, I wanted to bring in the traditional practice of making *lama*, the deep black ink traditionally made by burning candlenuts and carefully collecting the soot. I re-enacted this process myself, drawing on ancestral knowledge as a way to feel grounded, both in nature and in my own body. There's a sensual pleasure in working with *lama*—the scent, the heat, the meditative act of soot collection, all speaking to a slower, embodied form of knowledge.

I hand-painted the fish-and-chip paper with *lama*, blending the disposable with the sacred. The act transforms paper that is often seen as throwaway into a surface of honour and reverence. Central to the work is a turtle, a symbol of *aiga*, which I painted using traditional tapa motifs. Each pattern and mark was chosen with care, carrying individual meanings tied to the rituals of food-sharing gestures of offering, gathering, fullness and gratitude. I'm not claiming that fish-and-chip paper *is* tapa cloth. I'm asserting that meaning and spirituality transcend materials themselves. It's not the material alone that makes something sacred, but the values, care, and intentions we bring to it. The paper is a meaningful adaptation, rather than merely a replacement, bridging ancestral practice with everyday experience, and reflecting how heritage continues to evolve in a new context.





## DECOHERENCE (REPRISE)

Ultimately, Nichol's Garden Centre taught me the same lesson. Plants are given order and hierarchy. The tidy border is praised; the stubborn volunteer is condemned. That's judgement at work again; taste masquerading as nature. Because I had become so aware of these judgements—and of my own, shaped by simple anthropocentric ideologies—I wanted to pay closer attention. I began watching not just the world, but my projections onto it: how I could look at a dandelion and see mess, or look at a potted orchid and see refinement, when in reality those values weren't in the plants at all, but in me.

Looking at objects, really looking, projections included, became a way for me to examine the fragile threads between heritage and modern identity, where attempts to preserve tradition are both deeply meaningful and inherently incomplete. Whether in the bush or the fluorescent calm of a garden centre, I was learning to listen for the quiet networks of meaning that pass between people, places and things, even when they don't conform to either dominant ideologies or their academic critique. I was trying to tune in. The lesson carried over into my studio: the way a KFC bucket is dismissed as 'junk' or fish-and-chip paper as 'kitsch' isn't so different from the way a dandelion is condemned as a weed. In both cases, the judgement says more about the framework of value than about the object itself or the relationships within which it gathers meaning.

## SANCTUARIES

I know now that my practice might not always be about seeing clearly, but rather about sensing differently, attuning to what is felt, reverberated, carried through my atmospheres of memory and culture. Ideas from various philosophical and cultural traditions support this realisation. British-Jamaican film-maker and music theorist Julian Henriques has proposed the notion of sonic thinking—an epistemology rooted not in vision or static representation, but in sound, vibration and resonance.<sup>14</sup> For Henriques, listening is not passive reception, but a way of knowing that is embodied and deeply relational. African-American theorist Fred Moten's call to "listen otherwise" extends this concept, with an invitation to dwell in the noise, in the excesses and ruptures where conventional knowledge breaks down.<sup>15</sup> And Buddhist teacher Ajahn Brahm's words offer a further layer to this listening: "Where you learn is by getting the lake perfectly still, because only when it is perfectly still does it accurately reflect the stars above." This, Brahm says, is how we learn that real love means loving the whole of life, rather than just the parts you like.<sup>16</sup>

Brahm's reflections on love, grief and stillness remind me that to love a thing, person, memory or place without clinging to it, is to honour its transience while recognising its lasting resonance. Like sonic vibrations or shared rituals, love continues long after the source has gone. Brahm's image of the still lake creates the conditions for clarity, not by force but by gentleness. Attempts to preserve tradition are always incomplete, shaped by both care and compromise.

Judgement is never neutral. Looking back, I realise that what I've been working through—gardens, buckets, wrappers, weeds, sanctuaries—is not just a catalogue of objects, but a catalogue of judgements: what counts as refined and what doesn't; what

is celebrated and what is dismissed. To call a bucket 'kitsch,' a weed 'unwanted' or a memory 'sentimental' is to impose a hierarchy that often misses what really matters. For me, these objects are not failures of refinement. They are fragile sanctuaries: places where love, memory and contradiction are carried forward.

As I grew more comfortable working with materials I felt emotionally and culturally drawn to, I began to move away from traditional, institutionally valued mediums and toward those embedded in my everyday life. My materials weren't chosen to represent a narrative, but because they *already held one*.

## ARCHIVES

In the end, my work does aims to hold open, rather than resolve, the contradictions between reverence and kitsch, pride and shame, tradition and stereotype. The symbols are dulled: they evoke belonging while simultaneously reflecting the health crises that disproportionately affect Pacific communities. These objects encode the paradox of cultural survival. How do we preserve tradition without perpetuating the very stereotypes and structural inequalities that render our communities vulnerable? By recontextualising these commodities, so often dismissed as disposable or unserious, I try to restore their weight. Within displaced communities, they carry emotional and spiritual significance. They are symbolic vessels of care, memory, and resistance. They preserve the connections between present experience and ancestral practice, even as they speak to rupture and dislocation. Their contradictions are part of their power.

This body of work marks the beginning of what is, for me, a new way of thinking about materiality, about cultural equity and about how objects can function as living archives. I see it as a practice of generational restoration, bringing ancient wisdom into contemporary contexts to address the inequities of displacement. My hope is that these works create space not only for memory, but for co-presence: a shared recognition of complexity, contradiction and care.

## THE INVISIBLE (REPRISE)

Finding my voice, both as an artist and in life, has always felt risky. Early on, I absorbed the pressure to sound 'critical,' to dress my work in the right theory so it would be taken seriously. I worried that without it, I'd be dismissed. But over time I've come to see the irony: in rejecting intellectualism, I end up circling back into it, quoting authoritative thinkers even as I question why their authority outweighs lived experience. While these theories are important and add to the discussion, they do not encapsulate my practice or, indeed, any such fluid and contradictory cultural practice. It's funny: I use the intellectual frameworks to prove the worth of things that are commonly enjoyed and popular, but rejected in the intellectual marketplace, *this* marketplace. I make an appeal to the very opinions I'm challenging. Initially, I attempt to create a bridge between both worlds not because I want to, but because I inevitably have to engage with both, and over time I start to value and like what was at first confronting. And if my work is a bridge, at the centre, love is what makes it possible—love for my family, my history, my community, the most radical thing I can possibly offer.

THIS IS MY LANGUAGE  
MADE OF DUST AND PLASTICINE  
OF GREASE-STAINED PAPER, BURNT SHELLS,  
AND FINGERLICKIN' GOOD BUCKETS



Figure 4. Isabella Lepoamo outside POND Gallery, Dunedin, Opening of Ngako exhibition.  
Photograph: © Zac Whiteside.

**Isabella Lepoamo** (b. Invercargill, Aotearoa New Zealand) is a Dunedin-based artist whose practice explores memory, domestic ritual, and the intimacy of everyday materials. Working across sculpture, textiles, painting and installation, she reimagines the remnants of daily life, her works often merge humour with tenderness, balancing nostalgia with social observation. By transforming the ordinary into something devotional, she invites viewers to consider how identity is preserved and passed down through the simplest gestures.

Born in Invercargill, Lepoamo graduated with Distinction from the Dunedin School of Art in 2024, where she was also awarded Top in Sculpture. In 2025 she completed a Certificate in Māori and Indigenous Arts at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, further deepening her understanding of whakapapa and material practice. That same year, she received a Highly Commended Excellence Award at the R T Nelson Small Sculpture Awards for *Kentucky Fried Culture*—a work grown from her own kombucha scoby, playfully merging notions of consumption, care, and cultural identity.

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2. David Shulman, dir., *A Day in the Life of Andy Warhol*, BBC Scotland, 2015.
3. "At the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Jeff Koons' Puppy Gets a Colorful New Coat," Guggenheim New York, 21 June 2018, <https://www.guggenheim.org/news/bilbao-jeff-koons-puppy?utm>.
4. "Gagosian to Feature Work by Jeff Koons at Frieze New York 2025," *Gagosian New York*, 29 April 2025, PDF, <https://gagosian.com/media/gallery/press-releases/2025/2025-Gagosian-Frieze-New-York-Koons-Jeff-2025-04-28-1600.pdf>.
5. "Pop Life: Art in a Material World," *Studio International*, 9 December 2009, <https://www.studiointernational.com/pop-life-art-in-a-material-world-tate-modern-london-2009>.
6. Charlston Lin, "The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behavior" (PhD diss., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019).
7. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
8. See Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'ontology' is just another word for colonialism (Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwaci)," *uma (in)certa antropologia/An (un)certain anthropology* (26 October 2014), <https://umaincertaantropologia.org/2014/10/26/an-indigenous-feminists-take-on-the-ontological-turn-ontology-is-just-another-word-for-colonialism-urbane-adventurer-amiskwaci/>.
9. See Tarunna Sebastian and Angela Giovanangeli, "Reimagining Kinship Systems and Networks: Interconnectedness of Aboriginal Ecologies in Australia (Human and Land Rights)," *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 24 (October 2024): 64.
10. Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).
11. Edith Amituanai, in Edward Hanfling, "Am I Making Art? The Photographs of Edith Amituanai," *Art New Zealand* 130 (Autumn 2009): 20.
12. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
13. In Žižek's Hegelian reading, comedy stages the subject's mismatch with itself—the split that becomes visible when the position we took for granted flips back on us. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), especially Chapter 2, "The Comedy of Incarnation."; Žižek, "The Christian-Hegelian Comedy," *Cabinet* 17 (Spring 2005), <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/17/zizek.php>.
14. Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (London: Continuum, 2011).
15. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
16. Ajahn Brahm, Ajahn Brahm: "Why are we here? Why are we born?" 9 January 2015, <https://youtu.be/-RrCjzi74BA?si=yqNQXsJnANU9JnsP>. See also Brahm, *Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004): 245.