

About the Artist: Visesio Poasi Siasau

Visesio Poasi Siasau—or Sio, as he likes to be called—comes from a hereditary guild of Tongan tufunga or tohunga. He self-identifies as a tufunga‘i practitioner and draws on Tongan epistemologies as his pathway to understanding things passed down by traditional knowledge keepers. Indeed, his efficacy as an indigenous practitioner is worldly in a contemporary sense within knowing in a traditional sense.

A promising artist of his generation, Sio’s creative ambitions are directed toward the sculpted wooden Tongan divinity forms, which he remakes in a range of styles, stances, and materials including Perspex, glass, stone, wood, and bronze. His twenty-first century approach to an old form presents a challenge for contemporary Tongan Christian politics, as he is critical of the Church’s negative impact on Tongan stories, thinking, and traditional ways of life. Furthermore, his sculptures carry a message beyond his politics: they hold and express his personal responsibility for teaching specialized knowledge.

Sio’s art practice delves into the context of divinity figures in order to explore their making, meaning, and function in Tongan society and the intersection between this type of deity and Christianity. Thus, the form comes with uncertainty regarding its status as a ceremonial object, a post-contact emblem, a symbol of contempt, or something imbued with ancient knowledge. Sio has sympathetically carried the early nineteenth century figures into the present-day, perhaps unwittingly claiming a position for historic circumstance within a milieu of Western happenstance and interpretations of indigenous forms. The vitality found in Sio’s sculptures is present, palpable, and physical. These things appeal to our heart, mind, and spirit.

NGAHIRAKA MASON

Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tāmaki

MANULANI ALULI MEYER

Te Wānanga o Aotearoa

The art featured in this issue can be viewed in full color in the online versions.



Ngatu, by Visesio Siasau and family members, 2013.

Paper mulberry bark (ngatu) and natural dyes. 107 cm x 357 cm.

For this work, Visesio Siasau learned to make ngatu from family members and added forms to signify Tongan heritage and cultural values offset by symbols of the diverse values in modern Tonga. Photos by Serene Tay.