

KAMOAN MINE

Katherine Higgins and Andy Leleisi'uao

KIWI + SAMOAN = KAMOAN

In February 2007, “Lost Kamoans of the Godly and Godless,” an exhibition of paintings by New Zealand-born Samoan Andy Leleisi'uao, opened at Whitespace contemporary art gallery, Ponsonby, Auckland (figure 1).



FIGURE 1. Selection of works from “Lost Kamoans of the Godly and Godless,” 2007.

“Lost Kamoans” drew from symbols and narratives relating to Leleisi'uao’s earlier works to focus on the “conflicts inherent in being a New Zealand-born Samoan” (Leleisi'uao, 2007). As Ron Brownson—the senior curator of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki—stated, the artworks address “issues about education, ethnicity, the Christian Church and social relationships between people which attempt to transform you into someone you’re not. So, Andy’s art is really a visual primer for the social experience of Samoans” (pers comm, Nov 2008). “Lost Kamoans” did not succumb to the clichés often associated with Pacific Island art, such as paradisiacal scenes of island beauty and representations of traditional motifs. Leleisi'uao’s portraits of New Zealand-born Samoan males are confrontational and emotional narratives about “the problems associated with trying to be a spiritual person without necessarily being religious, of being culturally aware without having to be politically correct, the ties to the church

through our parents and the necessity of respecting their beliefs without giving into the often onerous burdens associated with these or having to live up to ideas of individualistic success without losing the ethos of a group-orientated culture” (Leleisi’uao 2007). In a powerful way, the works represent the experience of Leleisi’uao and his generation living in the space between two cultures.

To distinguish between the unique circumstances of New Zealand-born Samoans from those of Island-born Samoans, Leleisi’uao coined the term *Kamoan*—a hybridization of the terms *Kiwi* and *Samoan*.¹ Kamoans—Samoans born and raised in Aotearoa/New Zealand—are the focus of this article. The exhibition “Lost Kamoans” is only one point of reference among many for exploring this ongoing negotiation of identity.

Leleisi’uao was confronted with the task of negotiating his identity when his parents and other Samoans like them left Sāmoa for opportunities in New Zealand. Their journey from home island to an adopted homeland challenged and changed them. Adjusting to a place, language, and lifestyle foreign to their own upbringing, Island-born Samoans found refuge through fa’a Sāmoa (the Samoan way of life), religion, and connections with their loved ones back home. It has not been a trouble-free transition, and many issues faced by migrants like Leleisi’uao’s parents continue today. Racism as well as language and cultural differences are just a few of the obstacles Samoan migrants have had to overcome in their efforts to create a place for themselves in Aotearoa/New Zealand. New Zealand-born Samoans have been faced with their own challenges. They are confronted by a reality markedly different to that of their cousins in Sāmoa, and of their Kiwi peers (that is, those born and bred in New Zealand, Māori and Pākehā [Europeans] included). For all intents and purposes, they exist in the space between. Although this dual identity requires constant negotiation, Kamoans have been creating their own space for their voices to be heard. In Leleisi’uao’s case, he articulates his thoughts and experiences through his art.

The term *Kamoan* is not applicable to all New Zealand-born Samoans. While we acknowledge the histories and struggles of Island-born Samoans as they have adjusted to life in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the importance of fa’a Sāmoa, it is our intention to support the notion that Kamoans—those who do not feel any particular affiliation to Kiwi culture and who recognize the vast difference between themselves and their relatives and friends in Sāmoa—constitute a distinct type of Samoan that should be recognized. Traversing unfamiliar cultural landscapes, Kamoans must overcome the confusion, cultural anxieties,

and complexity of their unique identity. We seek to position this identity as a source of strength, and examine issues that surround a generation that inherited responsibilities and expectations placed on them by Island-born Samoans whose cultural, monetary, and religious needs are, at times, unrealistic. These responsibilities include the long-held tradition of fa'a Sāmoa, which some Kamoans have been left to negotiate without the infrastructure and support their Island-born parents were raised with.

Alienation from their cultural roots and from their Kiwi peers, along with uncertainty over their identity, often leaves Kamoans with emotional and psychological burdens that hamper them from realizing their full potential. Despite the fraught space they are forced to navigate—indeed, *because of it*—Kamoans constitute critical role models for guiding the next generation. These responsibilities can be daunting, but recognizing them will instill a level of confidence for Kamoans to understand their important role in society. In this article, we raise issues relating to migration, life experience, and social awareness in the hopes of creating a base for Kamoans to empower themselves, and foster positive relationships and opportunities.

LAND OF STINGING MILK

To understand Kamoan identity, we must begin with the migration of Samoans to New Zealand. During the post-World War Two labor shortage, New Zealand needed unskilled workers for factories and development projects (*Auckland Star* 1976, 19; Fairbairn-Dunlop and Makisis 2003), and Samoans were the largest group of Pacific Islanders to answer this call.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, many Samoan families sent young adults to work in New Zealand, the “land of milk and honey.” They were welcomed to work in factories and other low-waged industries where skills such as facility in English or familiarity with machinery were not prerequisites. The wages these young men and women earned helped support their 'āiga (family) in Sāmoa. Those who migrated often maintained an image of New Zealand as the land of opportunity, sending home remittances and encouraging others to follow them. However, the reality of acclimating to a foreign place and culture was not so simple. Samoans were confronted with racial discrimination, employers reneging on promised jobs, culture shock, and language barriers while trying to fit into a

New Zealand way of life. The pace and lifestyle of their adopted country was vastly different from the rooted matai (chiefly title) system and communal villages of Sāmoa.

It was the harsh reality of monotonous and unsatisfying work routines compounded with the emotional distress of separation from 'āiga that drew Samoan migrants to the familiarities of church. Church extended past being a place for religious observance to become a refuge in a society that often did not understand them. It created and supported a network for Samoans to identify and empathize with one another's experiences, to speak in their own language, and to maintain their culture. Church provided a mixture of social and religious comforts that included sports, singing, stage performances, and other type of social gatherings.

These networks became increasingly important, especially as New Zealand's economic downturn began in 1973 and Pacific peoples were portrayed as scapegoats for "a state-manipulated migrant problem" (Anae 2004). After more than a decade of having been casual about enforcing visa regulations to ensure the flow of cheap labor from the Pacific Islands, in the 1970s the New Zealand government began to tighten its immigration laws. During this traumatic era, those who overstayed their visas were arrested and often deported, even Samoans from Western Sāmoa who had been considered New Zealand citizens when their country was a colony. The arrests often occurred at work sites or, more alarmingly, at homes before dawn with the aid of police dogs—thus giving rise to the infamous term *Dawn Raids*.

During those years, the low cost of housing and employment opportunities propelled families further out of the cities and into more suburban areas in what has come to be known as the *Brown Flight*. In Auckland, many moved from inner-city neighborhoods such as Grey Lynn and Ponsonby to areas further south such as Otara and Mangere. These suburbs became the Pacific world that informed Leleisi'uao and his generation.

NEW ISLANDERS

In South Auckland, as in other working-class areas where Pacific migrants had settled, a brown alter-indigenous awareness emerged. "Although their parents had mainly resisted assimilation, clinging to their own church and social groups,

these children were undeniably New Zealanders, by birth, education and association. They knew no other home" (Lay 1996, 13). Well-known columnist and journalist Tapu Misa—who is herself a New Zealand-born Samoan—has also commented on the enormous pressure that was placed on her generation by their families: "'We come for the education,' my father kept reminding us, and as we grew up we were never in any doubt of our parents' enormous expectations of us. Their drive for us to succeed was as great as the pressure we felt to do so. As Samoans our achievements belong not just to us, but to our parents, our church, our community and our people" (1987, 40).

It was under these circumstances that Leleisi'uao's generation emerged. At home they were raised Samoan, but at school they were taught in English. For many, this dual identity and dual reality began on their first day of school. Samoan parents' esteem for Western education and a better standard of living for their families took precedence over the menial employment opportunities they filled. Parents wanted more for their children and encouraged them in school because education was viewed as the key to success in the palagi (white/European) society that was now their home. However, the embracing of a Western education often meant subconsciously forsaking Samoan language and fa'a Sāmoa. The interactions and communication necessary to learn and understand fa'a Sāmoa were difficult when parents worked multiple jobs, shift work, and extended hours just to make ends meet. The lack of quality family time left many Kamoans to navigate their own way through adolescence. Leleisi'uao's generation sought comfort where they could find it, for example in television, radio, and music. As Kamoans engaged with American and British pop culture—which they merged with their Samoan heritage and their New Zealand experience—they were simultaneously drawn into the artificial world of Western consumerism.

School accentuated the assimilation of Kamoans into Kiwi culture. Although many of their friends were of Pacific heritage, Kamoans mixed with Māori, Asian, and palagi friends. The educational and social aspects of school were very different from those at home and church, which furthered the development of their dual identity. School introduced them to new social circles and activities, which in turn widened their horizons, skills, and dreams.

Although Kamoans were drawn to the Western consumerism they had been exposed to through television, radio, and music, they nevertheless retained a

sense of loyalty to the 'āiga. However, over time, their dual allegiances to the collective as well as their individual aspirations became problematic, especially when Kamoans began working and earning money. Samoan customary expectations of giving time and money often created resentment toward their parents, fa'a Sāmoa, and the Church. Kamoans did not want to be saddled with the same financial pressures their parents experienced in trying to keep up with gift-giving obligations such as fa'alavelave (important occasions such as births, weddings, or funerals) and making church contributions. Indeed, for many Kamoans, Samoan monetary and customary obligations to the larger group seemed ironic, considering the pressing needs that existed within their own nuclear families. However, although they strived to achieve independence from these and other obligations, they were constantly reminded of their parents' sacrifice and expectations. The failure of many Kamoans to understand their parents' commitment to church and extended family, along with the linguistic and cultural misunderstandings they encountered with their Samoan culture, caused considerable angst among Kamoans. During those years, many were left to paint—both figuratively and literally—a self-portrait from borrowed cultures. In this way, Kamoans were trying to compose an image of what their parents expected them to be, what society assumed them to be, and what *they* wanted to be.

NAKED BRIDGES

Despite the challenges, Kamoans have been negotiating and claiming an identity of their own. The success of Kamoans as musicians, writers, artists, actors, athletes, and scholars provides salient evidence of the many opportunities that have been made available through the New Zealand-born experience. These men and women are carving out a space as Kamoans, generating an alter-indigenous awareness of what it means to exist in two cultures. This awareness counters the simplistic assumption that New Zealand-born and Island-born Samoans are inherently the same.

Leleisi'uao epitomizes the experiences of those who, like him, felt alienated from their Samoan culture while growing up. Although Leleisi'uao knew he was Samoan, he did not have much contact with the Sāmoa about which his parents reminisced. Through his art, he tells the story of finding strength in his identity

as a Kamoan to encourage and empower others, such as his children and future generations, to be proud of who they are. In the following sections, we attempt to get to the heart of the wider Kamoan story by exploring the layers of meaning in selected artworks by Leleisi'uao, and through a series of candid e-mail correspondences between the two authors.

Leleisi'uao's 1995 work *Dual Realities* (figure 2) indicates a critical step in the artist's own sense of empowerment after realizing that he did not need to choose between his Samoan or Kiwi cultures, but could instead strike a balance between the two—indeed, a Kamoan balance. In the piece, two heads represent the dueling personalities of an individual. Imprisoned in a pit until they are able to work together in harmony, the personalities reveal the conflict between head and heart, and the struggle of trying to negotiate and learn from two cultures.

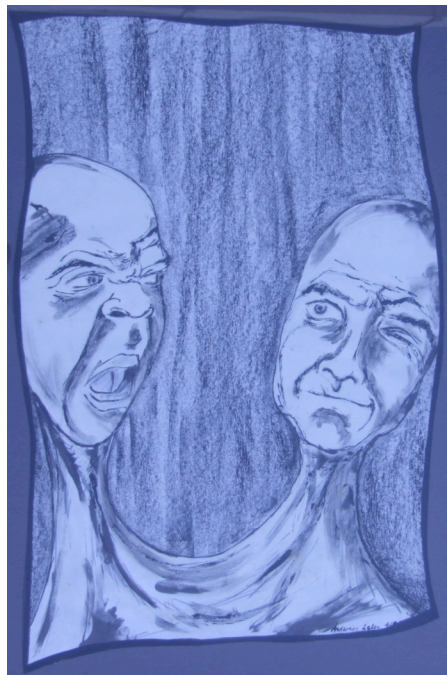


FIGURE 2: *Dual Realities*, by Andy Leleisi'uao.
Ink and crayon on paper, 1995, 60 cm x 40 cm.
Private collection.

Katherine Higgins: What prompted you to focus on identity? Is this recurring theme a reflection of what you see in your family, friends, and community?

Andy Leleisi'uao: It acts as my anchor when I need reaffirmation. I find I am constantly alert of surroundings and know when I am in synch with life around me. With this in mind, when my intuition warns me to use identity as a muse, I am ready.

KH: Who is included in your definition of Kamoan?

AL: Anyone. For me it's the naked bridge, a truce between space and cultures. Originally, it encompassed New Zealand-born Samoans and those born in Samoa but raised in New Zealand, and now it also transcends mindsets, religion, spirituality, sexuality, ignorance, etc, and it will continue to evolve.

KH: Is Kamoan your own way of dealing with your identity?

AL: The two Testaments [Old and New] didn't help and I crashed as a Presbyterian. Puberty entered and left without warning. Island-born Samoans made me smile and wince. Kiwi culture couldn't go away and identity was a frustrated cloud. "My" New Zealand was never mine and "My" Samoa never existed. South Auckland is my home. Kamoan was, for me, the growth of wings.

KH: Do you think that Island-born parents and grandparents understand the Kamoan struggle with identity?

AL: Today's Island-born parents are not much different from when my parents arrived, and their children will suffer similar identity issues as my generation. The more we address these issues in unison, the more confidence we create for our children.

Niu Zila lies on the floor, inviting viewers to step over it to look down on coconut shells painted and arranged to look like the New Zealand flag (figure 3a). In this mixed media piece, the stars of the Southern Cross located on the right hand side are transformed into frangipanis painted on the coconuts. They can also be interpreted as floating across the ocean waves, displaced from their native soil. Each coconut shell simultaneously represents a transplanted fale (home) and the

culture Samoans brought to New Zealand. The bottom right “fale” presents an anomaly; from it, two pairs of legs protrude (figure 3b). Purposefully arranged in a sexually provocative pose, the white and brown legs make a powerful statement about race and integration with a certain level of ambiguity. *Niu Zila* contemplates New Zealand’s evolving identity and the influence of Pacific people on that identity and vice versa.

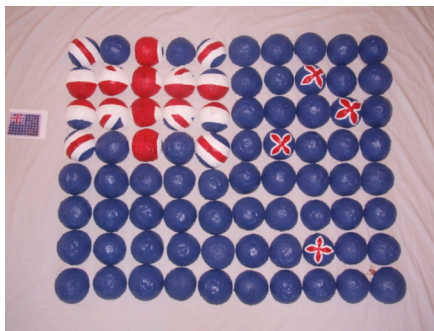


FIGURE 3a. *Niu Zila*, by Andy Leleisi'uao. Mixed media, 2003, 100 cm x 140 cm. Artist's collection.



FIGURE 3b. *Niu Zila* (detail), by Andy Leleisi'uao.

KH: What do you say to other Samoans or members of the community who disagree with your terminology and views, those who think that “Samoan” is enough?

AL: The Universe kisses in different ways. Judas kissed Jesus, Rodin gave us *The Kiss*, Captain Kirk kissed Lieutenant Uhura, Tullio Lombardo’s tender sculpture of *Guidarello Guidarelli* has been kissed by more than 5 million women in search of love, Sleeping Beauty awakens with a kiss. Prince wrote *Kiss* and there’s the Kiss of Life. Tell those Samoans to come kiss me.

KH: Is there understanding between Island-born and New Zealand-born Samoans? How can they support one another?

AL: I think there is mutual respect and more acceptance of each other these days. Both can be quite arrogant and critical of one another. This saddens me as our Samoan-ness is our unique bridge.

The story behind *Pisepleta Village on the Ufological Island of Sāmoa* begins with the launching of seven canoes (reminiscent of those that traveled to Sāmoa) loaded with Samoans escaping a civil war on the island of Upolu (figure 4). A cyclone has carried them to an abandoned island furnished with robot servants and spaceships. With the help of the robots, the displaced Samoans learn to use the island's technology. Spaceships are used to pick up mementos to learn more of other Pacific cultures such as the *moai* (stone heads) of Rapa Nui. Pick-up trucks transport the letters S, A, M, O, A while delivery trucks marked with hearts, coconuts, and small islands indicate the local trades of Pislepta Village.

Leleisi'uao's whimsical fantasyland is a place where children climb over, hug, and rest on hearts. They ride kiwi-moas or a roller coaster that loops above a tropical forest.² Here, fairies and angels dance through the sky, birds form words like *fa'aaloalo* (respect), villagers lounge beneath *fale*, drink kava, and siva (dance). Circular rainbows radiate in the sky, "represent[ing] realized dreams . . . self-made rainbows, [and] personal halos" (Tonga 2007, 138). Hope dances throughout this work.



FIGURE 4. *Pisepleta Village on the Ufological Island of Sāmoa*, by Andy Leleisi'uao. Acrylic on canvas, 2006, 76 cm x 56 cm. Artist's collection.

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KH: What do you see as Kamoans' responsibilities towards their Samoan-ness?

AL: To educate and empower themselves with Samoa's traditions and history, especially with New Zealand's involvement. We must learn about the influenza epidemic that killed one-fifth of Samoa's population in 1918, the emergence of the Mau movement and Black Saturday in December 1929, the Dawn Raids of the mid-1970s, Falema'i Lesa's landmark court case in 1982, and other momentous events and issues so we can empathize with our Island-born brothers and sisters.³ We must recognize our Samoan history to understand why we must take advantage of the opportunities New Zealand offers us and use it to shape our identity for each other and our children.

KH: Why do you feel this responsibility?

AL: I decided I would take a stand and liberate myself rather than be stereotyped by others.



FIGURE 5. *Untitled*, by Andy Leleisi'uao. Acrylic on canvas, 2006, 130 cm x 130 cm. Artist's collection.

Leleisi'uao's daughter was the subject of the "Empowered Wallflowers" exhibition at Whitespace in March 2006. In these works, such as *Untitled*, she is depicted frozen in action, a deliberate reference to the historical images of Pacific peoples through the ethnographic gaze (figure 5). Here, the artist's daughter wrings out a Samoan flag. This action suggests the ceremonial straining of kava or, alternatively, siva movements. The pink bodice worn by the subject symbolizes her youthful innocence. In contrast, the pink and white hibiscuses that constitute wallpaper in the background are melting, dripping, or dying. The background connotes the changing Samoan culture, decisions that Kamoans face, and the implications for the next generation of Kamoans.

Adorned with a graduation cap representing his achievements, and blue overalls indicating his working-class upbringing, the young Samoan's face in *Catch a Sparkling Spirit* (2007) is divided: one half is brown and the other is white (figure 6). This division reflects his dual identity as a New Zealand-born Samoan. The young man's face reveals an inner resolve; he looks at us expectantly as if to say, "We *have* to be amazing." This underscores the pressure many Kamoans are under to succeed and thereby bring honor to their families.

KH: What can be done to foster a supportive and committed network for Kamoans?

AL: We are not growing our wings when we let ourselves be stereotyped or patronized. I believe our children's emotional and spiritual identity rests with our generation. We are the first generation of this dual Samoan experience and we must share this experience for the well-being of our children and grandchildren. We must remind them of their grandparents' struggle and that Samoa is the birthplace of our parents. Its culture, its sense of pride and duty has allowed us to inherit. Island-born Samoans in New Zealand are our responsibility to protect. Our Island-born brothers and sisters must never be made to feel insecure about our alofa [love] towards them. But as a New Zealand-born Samoan I choose who I want to be.



FIGURE 6. *Catch a Sparkling Spirit*, by Andy Leleisi'uao. Oil on canvas, 2008, 76 cm x 60 cm.

Le Onoeva (The Sixty-Nine) is a sixty-four-page graphic novel written and designed by Leleisi'uao (figure 6 provides a page sample). In the novel, the central protagonists are a group of super humans who band together to return sixty-nine escaped prisoners to the fictional island of Namua, the worst of whom are the protagonist's brothers. The story takes place in the Islands of Sāmoa and involves a mélange of heroes who are Samoan, New Zealand-born Samoan, and Māori. The cast of characters include Vetu, the leader of the heroes, who is also gay; Malo, an ebony-colored human juggernaut; Lalomauga, a jungle behemoth; Ao and Po, New Zealand-born Samoan mutants; Tiki the Māori warrior; and the cynical Pe'a. Although they have superhuman powers, the heroes' lives are far from perfect. Leleisi'uao weaves a fun and action-packed story that touches on sensitive issues. The characters ponder cultural identity, cope with alcoholism, and discuss the identity struggle of being New Zealand-born Samoan.



FIGURE 7. *Le Onoeva*, by Andy Leleisi'uao (page sample).
Ink on paper, 2008, 297mm x 210mm. Artist's collection.

KH: What examples can be used to teach and empower young Kamoans?

AL: I'll tell you a story. There's an Island-born Samoan grandmother who is very much loved and respected amongst her family and friends. She is a faithful servant of God and Church. Her children have degrees and careers. Although suffering from arthritis and angina she had continued to work as a cleaner in a bank five days a week. Her daughter or son helped on separate days. They wiped the inside and outside windows, vacuumed the rooms, and cleaned the customer counters. She would always double-check they had done their work properly. She cleaned the teller counters, desks, and kitchen. The one room she refused to let her children clean was the toilet. She never allowed them in, conjuring excuses like a special cleaning mixture that she never shared. One day her children stopped asking. They realized, despite her aching joints and tiredness, her age and soreness, in her own humble way she was still

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protecting them. This was dignity. This was fa'a Samoa. Not long afterwards she experienced a stroke and survived a heart operation. Today, she continues to serve her God and Church but I think she battled and overcame her adversities on the pure will of wanting to embrace her grandchildren again. This is alofa. This is my mother.

EMPOWERING THE KAMOAN

Andy has set himself a challenge which is that he will always be a very honest artist. This is one of the reasons that I admire and cherish his work because he knows that we need to see what he is seeing . . . from his profound self realization, he sees a cultural portrait of the Samoan diaspora to Aotearoa. (Ron Brownson pers comm, Nov 2008)

The cultural portrait that Leleisi'uao creates through his artwork is representative of his personal journey; the artwork is a potential meeting point and outlet for Kamoans who have felt alienated, marginalized, and confused.

At home, church, and school, Leleisi'uao's generation was left to develop and negotiate an identity that had no precursor. Indeed, their Samoan-ness and Kiwi-ness have been fraught with cultural anxieties, the two states of being often dueling for primacy. With more patience and understanding of the inherited responsibilities and the expectations from their Island-born parents, Kamoans have learned to appreciate and respect fa'a Sāmoa and the struggles experienced by Samoan migrants. The values their parents used to guide their migration and lives in New Zealand have become a foundation for New Zealand-born Samoans. This foundation is complemented by their New Zealand upbringing and education, which helps them cope in the contemporary, globalized world.

By confronting the social, cultural, religious, and historical issues of Sāmoa and New Zealand, Kamoans are fulfilling their responsibilities to Island-born Samoans, empowering themselves and, more importantly, paving the way for the next generation. Kamoans are expressing their alter-indigenous awareness through various media. Kamoan artists like Leleisi'uao, through his exhibit "Lost Kamoans of the Godly and Godless," demonstrate the ability to adapt and unify this dynamic identity.

We are grateful to Ron Brownson for his invaluable support, Deborah White of Whitespace contemporary art gallery for her ongoing encouragement, and Marata Tamaira for her tireless dedication to ensure our voices were shared with the spirit in which we wanted to be heard.

Notes

1. *Kiwi* is the colloquial name given to those who are born and raised in Aotearoa/New Zealand.
2. The kiwi is the national bird of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the moa is a giant extinct bird.
3. Falema'i Lesa was a Samoan national residing in New Zealand who was convicted of overstaying her visa. When she appealed her conviction in New Zealand's highest court, she succeeded in winning the case. Her argument was based on the logic that since all Western Samoans born between 1924 and 1948 were British subjects, when Western Sāmoa was transferred to New Zealand in 1949, they automatically became New Zealand citizens.

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Abstract

This article critically considers the concept of *Kamoan*. Coined by visual artist Andy Leleisi'uao to identify New Zealand-born Samoans, *Kamoan* is a

hybridization of the terms *Kiwi* and *Samoan*. The authors discuss the issues surrounding what it means to be Kamoan, and the pressures Kamoans experience. Despite the difficulties they face in coming to grips with their identity, this article shows that Kamoans are successfully carving out a place for themselves in New Zealand—one that has provided a unique outlet for their voices to be heard.

KEYWORDS: Kamoan, New Zealand-born Samoan, Andy Leleisi'uao, contemporary art, identity, empowerment