

## WORKING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN: PACIFIC ARTISTS IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

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*Graeme Whimp*

**I**n 1991, cultural theorist Paul Gilroy warned that the Black political project in Britain was threatened by two conflicting perspectives—essentialism and pluralism—each of which sought to remedy the weaknesses of the other, yet nonetheless failed to engage directly with each other (1993, 120–145). On the one hand he criticized the ethnic absolutism of essentialism, while on the other he accused the pluralist perspective—which simultaneously emphasizes the particular and the complex—of reducing Blackness to an open signifier, whose signified is fragmented to meaninglessness. Gilroy found each perspective equally productive of an insidious cultural “insiderism” (1993, 122–124). In this, he was drawing on, and to some extent critiquing, the work of Stuart Hall, summarized in his 1988 article “New Ethnicities” (1996). Hall identified a counter argument that focused on difference rather than essential characteristics, thereby signaling the “end of the essential black subject” (1996, 444). More recently, Nicholas Thomas contrasted the essentialism inherent in official exhibitions such as the 1980s cultural renaissance milestone *Te Māori*—which focused on traditional New Zealand Māori art and culture—with the pluralism of *Te Moemoea no Iotefa*, an art exhibition that highlighted the wider Polynesian migrant experience in the contemporary period (1996a, 297–298). Art historian Peter Brunt has extended the argument to two exhibitions of Māori art held in the 1990s—*Taikaka* and *Choice!*—in relation to neoliberalism, official biculturalism, and postcolonialism in Aotearoa/New Zealand (2004, 215–242).

In this essay, I survey the work of several visual artists of Pacific Island origin who have been practicing in Aotearoa/New Zealand for the last two decades, and I explore the extent to which they have been influenced by essentialist and pluralist impulses. I also attempt to locate the particular cultural space in which these artists have been able to establish their expressive identities.

FATU FEU'U

Fatu Feu'u, the first of the artists surveyed here to be recognized as a Pacific Islander/New Zealand artist, had already been painting in Apia, Sāmoa, before emigrating to New Zealand at the age of twenty (Mallon and Pereira 1997, 14–16). While Feu'u maintains close and regular links with his birth village of Poutasi on the island of Upolu (Mallon 2002, 126), and is emphatic about his personal adherence to the fa'aSāmoa (Samoan way) (Feu'u 1995, 62, 67), his practice, references, and iconography suggest something much more complex than the simple reproduction of Samoan culture. While Feu'u has referred to culture as a backbone, he has also argued that it is one that “can be recreated and shaped to the demands of our society” (1995, 67).

Certainly there is more than a hint of re-creation and shaping in his iconography, which is often described as pan-Polynesian (Mallon 2002, 125; Stacey 1987–88, 48; Thomas 1996b, 322)—featuring as it does a blend of sculptural forms referencing Rapa Nui and the Caroline Islands (Vercoe 2002, 192), and images that are inspired by pre-Columbian art (Griffin 1992, 85). Further, in describing his artistic journey, Feu'u has acknowledged that his discovery of Oceanic form was by way of Picasso, and achieved only at the urging of Pākehā artists Tony Fomison and Philip Clairmont (Panoho 1990, 22).<sup>1</sup>

The full complexity of both Feu'u's resources and concerns is evidenced in such paintings as *Nuanua Malama* (1988), which has been referred to as a “kind of national narrative for New Zealand's Polynesians” (Thomas 1995, 327) due to its explicit geographical references to Auckland, a city that boasts the largest population of Polynesians in the world. Conversely, in his mixed media work *Tulai'i Tamasese* (2000), Feu'u uses text that specifically references the Samoan Mau Movement and the events of Black Saturday, counterposed with an equally explicit reference to American artist Jasper Johns.<sup>2</sup>

I do not want to suggest for a moment that such borrowing and innovation is alien to Samoan or Pacific cultures. Rather, I want to highlight the productive tension between the Feu'u who returns regularly to his village for inspiration and spiritual and sensual enrichment (Mallon 2002, 126), and Feu'u the New Zealand-based artist, who grapples with the complexities of that location and the challenge of creating art that can be understood by those who live in New Zealand. Significantly, at the heart of Feu'u's aspirations lies the desire to

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“modernise Polynesian/Pacific art/Samoan art because I believe if it’s not done then the artform will die” (Panoho 1990, 22).

### ANI O’NEILL

Ani O’Neill—who is of Cook Islands and papa’a (European) descent—celebrates and draws inspiration from her Rarotongan heritage while at the same time acknowledging her urban Polynesian status (Stevenson 1996, 65–66). Art historian Karen Stevenson has perceived artists such as O’Neill as discriminately selecting from elements of their heritage in order to establish their place in contemporary art practice, and O’Neill herself as catapulting into the contemporary art world from the springboard of her culture (1999, 67).

Art historian Susan Cochrane regarded O’Neill’s transference of “traditional” Pacific crafts into the contemporary gallery as an opportunity to re-view the old through the perspective of the new (2001, 123). Echoing Cochrane’s sentiments, curator Karla Bo Johnson has added that by drawing on the “skills of traditional Rarotongan craft” to produce her crocheted pieces and elevating them on contemporary gallery walls, O’Neill “bridges the gap between her two cultures and the boundaries between fine art and craft” (2001, 25).

### JOHN IOANE

John (Ioane) Ioane has traced his personal and artistic development through a number of stages, including his surprise at discovering he was full Samoan (not part-palagi [European]) (Cochrane 2001, 117); the conceit he felt as he began to reconnect with his Samoan culture and, conversely, his rejection of “ethnic-looking stuff” (Panoho 1990, 35; Mallon and Pereira 1997, 36–38); and, finally, acceptance of his Samoan origins as a platform and a springboard rather than a source of confinement (Mallon 2002, 98). In relation to his art practice, Ioane has emphasized that his interest is in the material he uses, rather than its association with Samoan culture. In his 1991 work—*Peni/Sila*—Ioane laminated stripped and dyed tapa to hardboard; to add texture, he painted and drew on the material, while retaining some of the softness of the textile (Feu’u 1995, 66). As Ioane has commented, “The good thing about my use of it [the material] is I process it and you don’t recognise it is tapa cloth” (Panoho 1990, 34). His response to the idea

that it is a synthesis of the traditional and modern that lies at the heart of contemporary Pacific art practice is similarly ambivalent, moving from embrace of the concept in 1990 to rejection of it as sickeningly overused in 1997 (Feu'u 1995, 66; Mallon and Pereira 1997, 39).

In terms of his installation work, such as *Fale Sa* (1999), Ioane has increasingly focused on the creation of space as something more than a physical manifestation, referring instead to “a space within” where magic can take place: “For me Magic transcends human fiction: culture, language, religion, gender issues, science etc . . . even spirituality as we know it. . . . The performance part of my installation is part of the equation to the whole, trying to create a space for magic to occur” (Vercoe 2002, 205–206).

#### LILY LAITA

Lily Laita, who is of Samoan, Māori, and Pākehā descent, has been described by Caroline Vercoe as choosing to encode her works with Pacific motifs less explicitly (2002, 203). Her claim that “being of Samoan descent is part of who I am, it is not the only part” (Mallon 2002, 123) is echoed in her view that her use of Samoan text is often more of a distraction than a clue because it is a minor element of the painting (Panoho 1990, 26). However, she has also described the text she uses as a tool and as part of her integral methodology, “part of the form, the space, or the line; sometimes it’s used in terms of layering to create space” (Pereira 2003, 55). Space, and the Samoan concept of *vā*—the connecting space between—is a recurring theme in Laita’s work, as revealed in her 1997 and 2000 pieces, respectively: *Ta i va* and *Va i ta*; the latter work signaled the creation of a third space (Vercoe 2002, 204–205).

The metaphorical nature of that third space is alluded to in Stevenson’s description of Laita’s creative process as “a means of moving between different worlds, between the contradictory realities of being” (1998, 71). That movement between worlds and realities is exemplified in her 1989 painting *Pari’aka*: “It’s in three parts. On the left is my father, my father’s grandfather, Aitui Ta’avao [a member of the Mau movement] and the Mau. That represents the Samoan side. On the right is Te Whiti and Tohu, the houses. I’m in the middle, with my arms out. I’m touching both worlds” (Mallon and Pereira 1997, 55).

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JOHN PULE

John Pule's body of work—particularly those paintings that draw on Niuean hiapo (barkcloth)—are frequently but deceptively associated with “tradition.” In fact, the barkcloth tradition on which the work draws is itself a creation dating back no further than the 1880s (Neich and Pendergrast 1997, 69–70). Indeed, Pule, while asserting that his iconography is his personal creation, has acknowledged the significance of drawing on hiapo as a means by which to “recreate the knowledge lost in migration” (Cochrane 2001, 119; Stevenson 1996, 65). While Pule embraces some aspects of palagi culture, he also admits to the sudden impulse “to throw it all away and turn back towards your own culture, go into it, get what you want from it, bring it *back*, embellish it, add more to it” (Panoho 1990, 28; emphasis added). However, whether accessing the palagi or the Niuean culture, Pule ultimately feels that he does not really belong in either: “Intellectually and emotionally I relate to both New Zealand and Niue but I don't feel too comfortable in either. I feel an outsider and am often treated like one in Eurocentric New Zealand and called a 'goagoa fia palagi' in Niue, which means 'a dumb wannabe whiteman.' I slip between acceptable stereotypes in both places because traditional categories cannot organize my identity. I am nearly everybody's 'other'" (Vivieaere 2001).

In a sensitive essay centered on Pule's 1991 work *Mamakava*, Lisa Taouma ascribed the distinctiveness of his work not to hiapo, but to the fact that it reflects his personal psycho-geography, “poised in the space between the tangible and the transient” (1999, 4–5). In direct reference to Homi K Bhabha's notion of space (1994), and perhaps locating exactly the space between that Pule occupies, Taouma has also suggested that works like *Mamakava* articulate a third space, “where the elements of a displaced homeland are unreachable and only disjointed parts have been recreated in a new urban landscape” (1999, 13).

MICHEL TUFFERY

Although Wellington-born Michel Tuffery's origins are Rarotongan, Samoan, Tahitian, and Aotearoa/New Zealand palagi ancestry, he most strongly identifies with the Samoan; he feels, however, that he has acquired his Samoan identity, rather than inherited it. As he has stated, “If you're born here [Aotearoa/New Zealand], you've got no identity” (Stevenson 1996, 67).

Although in the early years Tuffery viewed his fa'aSāmoa roots with shame and hatred, his attitude began to change on his first visit to Sāmoa. Of that experience, he has related different responses. In 1990, Tuffery recalled, "When I went to the islands I had all these obstacles I came up against—Fa'a Samoa" (Mallon and Pereira 1997, 116; Panoho 1990, 31). Seven years later when he spoke of his experience, he relayed positive memories. His acquisition of an artistic identity appears equally indirect, arriving at a Polynesian orientation by way of an exploration of German Expressionism (Walker 1994, 65).

As a third-generation Pacific Islander living in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Tuffery has acknowledged his task of having to come to grips with the creation of a new culture in a new place (Mallon and Pereira 1997, 116), and has pointed to the different attitudes of those Pacific Islanders who were born in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and those who were born in the home island: "I'd like to think that we could actually have more opportunity to show how we've changed as people and evolved . . . like urban Pacific Islanders. You know there's some of us who do live in cities but we've adapted in a different way and taken on different attitudes and then you've got the ones who were born in the Islands and they've got their own attitudes. . . . Sometimes they actually clash" (Vercoe 2002, 199). In attempting to capture Tuffery's sense of the links between the two communities, art critic Tim Walker has described his art as "a navigation through and between the oceans of each culture and society, discovering as he does, that it's all one ocean" (1994, 66).

#### ANDY LELEISI'UAO

Andy Leleisi'uao has developed his own distinctive visual vernacular to examine and criticize the experiences of the Samoan community in Aotearoa/New Zealand—a community in which he firmly locates himself (Mallon 2001, 73; Vercoe 2002, 202; Mallon 2002, 127). Rejecting stereotypic labels of the Pacific and outsiders' perspectives of the region and its peoples, Leleisi'uao embraces being a New Zealand-born Samoan with the right of access to both cultures (Brownson 1998, 40, 77).

As evidenced in his paintings that reference domestic violence, Leleisi'uao feels an equal right to criticize his own culture through his art, which is "in contrast to the politicized art practices of many Maori, who focus on the

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imposition of one culture upon another” (Stevenson 2004, 31). Like Tuffery, Leleisi’uao has clearly spelled out from his point of view the exact nature of the identity, community, and location produced by his particular combination of heritage and birthplace: “The fundamental understanding we harbor together is that we were not born in Samoa. It is this dislocation and displacement that separates us from Samoan born artists and New Zealand born papalagi artists. We differ in context and content, in that we use our Samoan heritage as a source of inspiration to negotiate out identity, culture and art” (Leleisi’uao 2000).

### NIKI HASTINGS-MCFALL

There is a significant conflict between notions of hybridity and a rather more complex expression of identity in Niki Hastings-McFall’s self-representation. She has acknowledged that she has often felt fraudulent about being described as a Pacific artist because of how others view her afakasi (mixed Samoan and palagi) appearance (Pereira 2002, 43). In the catalogue for the 1997 exhibition *Past Pacific*, she referred to herself as “one of the ever-increasing multicultural breed of New Zealanders evolving in the late twentieth century Pacific [with a] personal interest in exploring the concepts of ethnic hybridity” (Cochrane 2001, 119, 123).

Other art commentators have also used the term *hybridity* to characterize Hastings-McFall’s work, viewing her manipulation of, say, the lei as an acknowledgment of both her Polynesian ancestry and her location in Auckland. Equally, her jewelry is seen as going beyond Pacific stereotypes in an amalgamation of “the results of one culture impacting upon another,” and her *Urban curves* series as linking Pacific navigational techniques and Auckland street signs (Chiu 2004, 15; Cochrane 2001, 123; Johnson 2001, 27). Hastings-McFall has commented on the nature of the cultural space in which she locates herself: “It’s a really free way to be, it’s a really positive side of being in the liminal space, being in-between, where you’re not one and not the other and you’re never going to belong anywhere ever, fully, properly. But at the same time the positive side is that you can take that and take that, and mix them up and do something else, that’s the really good thing” (Pereira 2002, 43).

GRAHAM FLETCHER

Along with John Ioane, Graham Fletcher employs and substantially erases culturally significant tapa with his own motifs in an aesthetic he has described as “efface and replace” (Johnson 2001, 27). Only the texture of the tapa remains as a witness to the erasure. Noting that much of Fletcher’s work deals with cultural boundaries and margins, curator and art commentator Sean Mallon has perceptively linked the difficulty and uncertainty involved in handling mistints (mixed paints) in Fletcher’s *Mistint* series (1998) with “the uncertainties of moving between and negotiating cultural boundaries” (Mallon 2001, 74).

Fletcher’s preoccupation with complex space is further evidenced in his *Quarantine* series (2000). The paintings in the series depicted various kinds of viruses as seen under a microscope—metaphorically exposing his audience to the kinds of European diseases that negatively affected Pacific peoples during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In an unpublished artist’s statement in July 2001, Fletcher outlined the rationale behind his art practice: “As a strategy, camouflage enables me to be misleading, evasive and ambivalent while at the same time declaring my full awareness as a Samoan artist that my work is embedded within a cultural context” (Vercoe 2002, 196).

JIM VIVIEAERE

More than any other artist considered in this article, Jim Vivieaere has simultaneously embraced and distanced himself from his Pacific Island identity. Born of Cook Islander heritage, and having lived the early part of his life in places such as the Hawke’s Bay, Dunedin, and the Coromandel, Vivieaere’s first contact with Polynesians came after a casual encounter with a French Polynesian family in Australia. However, Vivieaere said it was not until he met fellow artist Fatu Feu’u that he began posturing in an “Islander” identity (Mallon and Pereira 1997, 131). Vivieaere’s ambivalent relationship with Polynesia—something that is inherent in his individual works as well as his exhibitions—and the extent to which he feels that Pacific identity is as much imposed as inherited, is indicated in his statement: “My involvement as an artist in New Zealand is very much dependant on the politics of being Polynesian. It’s not so much about the identity polemic of, who am I? But rather validating the role of the Pacific Islander who enters an institutionalised energy field with little else spare the name part of his

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or her Island whereabouts, and/or the pigmentation of his or her skin” (Vivieaere 2001).

Vivieaere’s rejection of Polynesian essentialism has been underscored by his view of Pacific imagery as something to be used freely by *all* artists, not just those of Pacific Island origin, and his admission that Cook Islands traditional art was no more special to him than any other visual source (Panoho 1990, 24–25; Thomas 1996b, 324–325). At the same time, as curator of the 1994 exhibition *Bottled Ocean: Contemporary Polynesian Artists*, Vivieaere envisaged a community of Aotearoa/New Zealand–based Polynesian artists who were able to use the gallery venue to express concerns over their blurred identities; seek creativity rather than constraint in their cultural origins; and achieve unity through the tidal pull of an ocean (the Pacific) that provides an originating provenance rather than a present location (Vivieaere 1994, 5).

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In considering the question of imposed identity, it is worth considering Māori art historian Rangihira Panoho’s 1990 interview with Niuean artist Sale Jessop, in particular a section that was discussed in some detail by Nicholas Thomas (see Thomas 1996a, 304–308). A critical point in the interview came when Jessop paused to answer one of Panoho’s questions: “I think each and every one of us are trying to find a personal and individual language that . . .” (Panoho 1990, 37). Before Jessop could formulate the word he was looking for, Panoho interpolated, “expresses your identity,” in response to which Jessop picked up the interviewer’s cue and went on to reference his Niuean origins (1990, 37). From this brief but illuminating instance between Panoho and Jessop, it is perhaps not unfair to conclude that the implicit essentialism of the moment lay more in the mouth of the interviewer rather than the artist. It also indicates the pervasiveness of a desire to ascribe to Pacific artists a particular kind of cultural identity.

Taking as a benchmark the argument that “there can, therefore, be no simple ‘return’ or ‘recovery’ of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present” (Hall 1996, 448), it is possible to conclude that the symptoms of essentialism discussed by Hall, Gilroy, Brunt, and Thomas are largely absent. This absence appears to be confirmed by the artists discussed in

this article—all of whom embrace contemporary technologies and identities while eschewing simple cultural reproduction (Hall 1996, 449).

Feu'u's re-creation and shaping, O'Neill's springboard and catapulting, Ioane's platform and springboarding, Laita's alternative encoding, Pule's re-creation (not rediscovery) of lost knowledge, Tuffery's creation of a new culture in a new place, Leleisi'uao's negotiation, Hasting-McFall's liminal space, Fletcher's camouflage, Vivieaere's creativity over constraint, and even Jessop's personal and individual language—all speak of a rejection of simple reproduction and an embracing of contemporary technologies and identities (Hall 1996, 448). At the same time, all of the artists acknowledge a commonality that is exemplified by the flow of the Pacific Ocean, to which they remain connected in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and is consolidated by their shared experience and negotiation of the consequences of birth or domicile there (Stevenson 2000, 28). Re-creation figures more strongly than the rediscovery or restoration of essentialism, and the fragmentation inherent in pluralism is mitigated by a recognition of the creative possibilities of difference as well as the reality of inhabiting a collective "Otherness." That situation is perhaps encapsulated in Mallon's description of the pieces in Fletcher's *Stigma* series (1999): "Every flower is unique, but also part of an often stereotyped and homogenized whole" (Mallon 2001, 74).

On the one hand there is, as art historian Jonathan Mané-Wheoki has pointed out, the imposed identity of "the dislocated Pacific 'other' in New Zealand" (here we might recall Pule's self-description as being "everybody's 'other'"), with its consequent emphasis on artificial community (Mané-Wheoki 1995, 16). On the other hand, there is the individuation inherent not only in a society under the influence of market fundamentalism, but also in most artistic practice, with a consequent emphasis on difference. While conflicting in nature, the outcome of their dual operation can be seen in the diverse but ultimately cohesive identifications, as reflected in this brief survey of Pacific Island artists.

The circumstances of Pacific Island artists living in Aotearoa/New Zealand are deeply complex. While they retain ties with their home islands, their place in the "new" land is tenuous given Pākehā aspirations for a postcolonial reality, and the continued struggle of Māori against internal colonization. The situation is further complicated by the more recent migration to Aotearoa/New Zealand of people from Southeast Asia and China.

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That Aotearoa/New Zealand society is heavily conditioned by the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural relationship between Māori and Pākehā means that Pacific Islanders—and by extension Pacific Island artists—are excluded from official biculturalism. Although they are contained under an unofficial policy of multiculturalism, Islander artists are dissociated by a number of factors including education, class, and artistic expression from their own migrant communities, which are themselves wedged uncomfortably between the bicultural partners and the later migrant communities. As Cochrane stated: “Polynesian artists are now creating their own cultural space in New Zealand” (2001, 114).

The variety of references to such a space—for example, the gap between cultures, a space within, a third space (as in Homi Bhabha), the space to which things are brought back, a different context, the liminal space—in turn gives rise to a variety of parallel characterizations: *interface*, *limen*, *vā*. None of these expressions, however, seem to me to be truly representative of these Pacific Island identities and the space they inhabit—not *interface*, because it is far from a single connecting surface; not *liminal*, because it is not a space for crossing, meeting, exchanging; and not even *vā*, because it is not so much a separation that connects as a space isolated from the other competing but inaccessible communities, one in which artistic identity can be developed and maintained, the space to which Pule brings things back.

The concept I have found most useful in trying to imagine the space between that Pacific Island artists inhabit is *interstitiality*. Developed in the 1920s by Frederic Thrasher, a sociologist from the Chicago School of Sociology, the idea of interstitiality has since been expanded by French sociolinguist Louis-Jean Calvet, and explored by Homi K Bhabha in the context of postcolonial cultural formations (see Thrasher 1963 [1927]; Calvet 1994; Bhabha 1994). Initially, Thrasher devised the term to describe the spaces in which gangs emerged, the interstices of “the more settled, more stable, and better organized portions of the city” (1963, 20), “borderlands and boundary lines between residential and manufacturing or business areas, between immigrant or racial colonies” (1963, 22). Calvet later transferred the concept from the geographical to the social, seeing the interstitial as a place of cultural passage, transition, and as a space in which to claim identity in a variety of forms (Calvet 1994, 28–29). Bhabha, in turn, extended interstitiality to “the articulation of cultural differences” (1994, 1). Bhabha continued: “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating

strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1994, 1–2).

I argue that it is precisely this interstitial cultural space that has provided the necessary habitat for the pursuit and celebration of shared creative difference and diversity to the contemporary cohort of artists of Pacific Island origin in Aotearoa/New Zealand. While we have seen frequent reference to a range of combinatory strategies in the work of the artists considered herein—including balance, blending, duality, synthesis, fusion, creolization, and hybridity—these features often seem to be imposed by outside commentators rather than a systematic consideration of the actual practice of the artists themselves. The circumstances I have just outlined, taken with the evidence of my survey of a number of well-known Pacific Island artists, suggests that an examination of the cultural location in which they see themselves living and working may be a more productive avenue of investigation.

*Notes*

1. The term *Pākehā* refers to New Zealanders of European settler descent.
2. In Apia on Saturday 29 December 1929, New Zealand police opened fire on a peaceful Mau demonstration, killing Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III and eight other Samoan leaders.

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*Abstract*

Using critiques of essentialism and pluralism as a backdrop, in this essay I survey the works of eleven Pacific Island visual artists, and consider the cultural space they occupy in pursuing their creative practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Although a variety of concepts have been deployed by commentators and the artists themselves to describe that space—such as balance, blending, duality, synthesis, fusion, hybridity, liminality, interface, creolization, and vā—I advocate the use of sociologist Fredric Thrasher’s concept of interstitiality to better

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understand the nature of the cultural and productive space occupied by these artists.

KEYWORDS: Pacific, Polynesia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, artists, visual arts, migration, interstitiality