

John Pule

b.1964

Self-taught

John Pule's big print *Mana He Aga, Manako* swarms with drawn-on scrolls and scribbles, with dashes and dots, with crosses, stripes and blottings. His distinctive way of drawing seems a bit like a form of writing. In fact, Pule is also a poet and a novelist, and when he began his career he would paint the words of his poems and stories directly onto canvas as a text to be read. He also made figurative paintings, inspired by the style of Paul Gauguin, about French nuclear testing in the Pacific.

Then, in the early 1990s, he switched to producing artworks inspired by the patterns of Niuean tapa cloth (in Niue, tapa is called hiapo), and this has become the style that he is best known for. He uses it to express the things that are important to him personally as a Niuean living in New Zealand, a Pasifika artist.

His art offers visual metaphors of the relationship between Niue and Aotearoa. It's about the mass migration of people from the island of Niue, the relocation of almost an entire country to the city of Auckland over the past 50 years. His art is also autobiographical, in that he incorporates the story of his extended family's travels back and forth, first on the cargo passenger ship *Mau'i Pomare*, and later by passenger plane. And his art makes references to the colonial history of Niue, to the visits of missionaries, traders and anthropologists, as well as to the conflict between ancient traditional beliefs and the imposition of Christianity.

Pule has devised a personal graphic style based on traditional designs found in Polynesian arts and crafts — in tapa-making, tattooing, carving and jewellery. His concepts and methods are present in *Mana He Aga, Manako*, with its net-like weave of little frames inside and around, which are shapes that evoke many things, from a pattern of islands flung out across the horizon, to the ancient Polynesian star maps, which were grids made out of wooden sticks and used by navigators on board canoes. Pule's patterns here summon up, or at least suggest, the mysterious forces which rule the universe, as if they are aids for spiritual navigation, and the whole work a dreamtime map for the journey through life.

Within the spidery lattices of *Mana He Aga, Manako* are caught lizards and birds and other creatures which might symbolise such things as ancient gods and Christian angels. There is a turtle shell that might be Captain Cook's compass; there are crosses on the tops of fale (traditional huts). His sinuous lines also evoke waves and sea snakes, ferns and fingers,

eyes, hands, heads: a collection of supercharged and mystical graffiti.

As usual, the artist has used a restricted palette, just brown and black; typically, he favours black and earth colours: raw sienna, burnt umber, red ochre — colours used in hiapo. From simple repetitions of line and minimal harmonies of colour, the artist has come up with a delicate yet powerful arrangement of motifs. He is the artist as primal scribe, drawing designs on behalf of the tribe, a taleteller summoning forth meaning with this rhythmic force field.

David Eggleton

Galleries and museums:

www.artsfoundation.org.nz
www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.aucklandtriennial.com
www.bookcouncil.org.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.govtbrewster.com
www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

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 Caughey, E. and Gow, J. (1999). *Contemporary New Zealand Art 2*, Auckland, David Bateman.
 Eggleton, D. (2007). *Towards Aotearoa: A Short History Of Twentieth Century New Zealand Art*, Auckland, Reed.
 Mallon, S. and Pereira P.F. (2000). *Pacific Art Nui Sila: The Pacific Dimension Of Contemporary New Zealand Arts*, Wellington, Te Papa Press.
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Web search:

Paul Gauguin
 Niuean tapa cloth (hiapo)

