

REVIEW: MICHEL TUFFERY, “SIAMANI SAMOA,” ANDREW
BAKER ART DEALER, BRISBANE, 13 JUNE–14 JULY 2012, AND
COMMEMORATIVE STAMPS, AUGUST 2012

Melissa Reimer



Figure 1. Michel Tuffery, Commemorative coin in presentation kava bowl, 2012.

Michel Tuffery is motivated by Aotearoa New Zealand's place within the Pacific and its connections to and relationships with Samoa particularly. His rich cultural heritage informs his practice as a multimedia artist, within which he scrutinises issues surrounding colonialism and exploitation. His work is, however, also celebratory of cross-cultural interaction.

Though diversity is a hallmark of Tuffery's artistic career, there is coherence and continuity too, with the artist returning to motifs and themes favoured within his early paintings and prints. For "Siamani Samoa" (2011–12), Tuffery has created a limited edition series of ten *selu tuija* (hair combs), imitative of traditional Samoan headdress. Working in either rimu or acrylic, using the modern method of laser cutting, Tuffery has incorporated elements drawn from three areas: colonial German–Samoa architecture, with which he became enamoured during his first visit to Samoa as a 10-year-old and has since intently studied; ancient *selu pau* (exquisitely fine wooden Samoan hair combs), encountered at the Canterbury Museum in the late 1990s and seen in historical photographs; and traditional and popular Polynesian botanical and animal iconography, including the *manumea* (pigeon), and *niu* (coconut tree).

Within the combs, Tuffery has recreated the effect of the elegant fretwork which distinguishes some of Samoa's iconic heritage buildings, including the Mulivai Catholic Cathedral (now demolished) and the Courthouse Maota Fa'amasino. These monumental edifices are increasingly rare in Samoa owing to ongoing redevelopment, particularly in Apia. The combs are rich in narrative and recount past and current Samoan history in a pictorial and contemporary



Figure 2. Michel Tuffery, Maota the Courthaus Apia Samoa, 2012.



Figure 3. Tuffery, Malumalu Catholic Cathedral Mulivai Apia Samoa, 2012.

manner, effectively serving as modern artefacts. Tuffery explains that his art has always been a vehicle enabling him to pose questions about family, place, identity, colonialism, ownership, history and legacy. Primarily, his art allows him to make the conceptual tangible. Tuffery's use of traditional Polynesian iconography within a fine art context aligns him with some of the most important names in art history including Gauguin and Picasso.

In fact, while Tuffery's allegiance to his rich ethnicity is a driving force in his art, his artwork is also underpinned by decidedly non-Polynesian sources. His love of unnaturalistic colour owes something to the influence of modern artist Paul Klee (1879-1940), whose practice traversed expressionism, cubism and surrealism. Tuffery's use of popular motifs and everyday materials (the tin bulls of the 1990s, for example) are a nod to Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962).

We may assume, Warhol, who appropriated motifs from disparate sources and championed printmaking, would have approved of Tuffery's work celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Friendship between New Zealand and Samoa. For this, Tuffery created five woodcut prints based on the "Siamani Samoa" comb series, with *siapo* (or *tapa*) – one of Samoa's oldest cultural art forms – serving as the base onto which the Polynesian and colonial motifs have been overlaid. These have been reproduced as stamps in five denominations. This series serves as another example of the continuity of Tuffery's practice in that, stylistically, they are reminiscent of the stamp series he produced in 2009.

Tuffery has also produced the design for a limited edition coin. Based on the composition of a rose window – first seen in his woodcut prints of the late 1980's and encircled within a woven framework (of typically Polynesian design) referencing the impenetrability of family – Tuffery has incorporated motifs from Samoan *tātau* (tattoo), nature and architecture.

In his characteristic linking of old and new narratives, and conflation of traditional and contemporary iconography – Polynesian and otherwise – Tuffery's work demonstrates the interconnectedness of diverse aspects of life, including the colonialism of both New Zealand and Samoa, and his own unique cultural heritage. Tuffery's artistic aim is to produce work which invites and fosters dialogue, which continues to ask questions and incite debate, and which pays homage to the history and multiculturalism of the Pacific Islands within a global context.

Melissa Reimer is a gallerist and a freelance art historian and copywriter. She undertook her formal studies at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, majoring in English literature, and art history and theory, attaining her doctorate in 2010, with a thesis examining the influence of modern art on writing at the fin-de-siècle. She has both published and presented her findings in New Zealand and internationally. Melissa is currently living and working in Christchurch, doing her bit for the city's recovery, one painting at a time.

Michel Tuffery MNZM was born in 1966 in Wellington of Samoan, Cook Island and Tahitian descent. On paper and by reputation, Michel is one of the seminal role-players in enhancing the visibility of contemporary Pacific Island art, both locally and beyond the wider Pacific. His creative output is extensive as he is adept at all arts media, printing, painting and sculpting, and he works collaboratively with technicians and other art practitioners to realise his performance and installation projects, which require moving image, light and sound. His concerns are measured and politicised around the conservation of the environment and shaped by his Pacific Island ancestry. His visibility as an artist has been achieved through awards, commissions, international residencies and exhibitions, and his art is held in numerous public and private collections.



Figure 4. Dancers Installation of exhibition at Pataka Art and Museum, 2012.



Figure 5. Michel Tuffery, Commemorative coin (detail), 2012.

Figure 6. Dancer wearing Pop Pink Tava'e Comb, at Pataka Exhibition Installation, 2012.