



Fatu Feu'u

Creating Pathways

by Tim Meyer

Silence for the briefest moment. Followed by laughter and ecstatic voices. What they are saying, I do not register because my focus lies on his hand. The gesture it is performing as it moves up and then rests on the younger man's shoulder – a tap, tap in affirmation of what he is seeing? And then the moment passes and I look into two brightly smiling faces – one in a genuinely supportive and impressed manner, the other in a mix of pride and relief.

The one is widely known as the navigator of contemporary Pacific art, has had a long and successful career as an artist with highlights of painting murals in New York and with exhibitions beyond the South Pacific and his Samoan home that won him recognition on a global stage – Fatu Feu'u. On the other hand, a young up and coming artist who comes from a travellers / street artist background and has for the first time ventured out to painting smaller size pieces.

Processing his five years residence in the Cook Islands and amalgamating it with his Mexican roots – it is a vibrant, colourful blend of life and love – Gonzalo Aldana Hernández.

Fatu is here on Rarotonga to promote his shared exhibition with Mahiriki Tangaroa named *Aro'a Alofa* at Bergman Gallery. Mahiriki explains: "It was in 2002 that I had the privilege of meeting and working with him for three months in the role I had at the time, administering the CreativeNZ Pacific Artist in Residence.

Unquestionably, it was one of the most inspiring and rewarding experiences that I'd ever had." And what can reaching for the stars lead up to? Mentorship, friendship and multiple collaborations saw Mahiriki Tangaora exhibiting her work *Kaveinga - Angels of the Ocean* to Venice, Italy in November 2022 at the Biennale. A milestone achievement for contemporary Pacific art.

I am picking Fatu up at his accommodation close to the airport. As we drive out of the lovely appointed property following its beautiful driveway fringed with red and white hibiscuses, he asks me to take the long way so we can drive by the seawall. "Gonzalo and his friends have really done well", Fatu exclaims. And I would have to agree, 562m of colourful depiction of Cook Islands life and culture. It's a true piece of cultural heritage in the public domain and has become a much-visited attraction on Rarotonga.

As we enter Avarua and drive past Bergman's Gallery and University of the South Pacific - USP, I remember Fatu's *Artist talk – Pacific Art Connections* from the night before. Fatu shared some fascinating stories from the humble beginnings of his art career, working in the New Zealand car industry, where he trained as a designer for wallpaper and upholstery.

He said it exposed him to materials and patterns but also taught him about value and the power of sales & marketing. Fatu is a captivating orator and I particularly enjoyed observing Mahiriki's expressions as she hears some tales of the past. When I ask her about it later, she reflects on Fatu:

“What I've observed of him as a person over the years is his relentlessness in pushing artists to aspire and prosper beyond their capabilities. To strive and achieve excellence in the arts, not only as a personal gain, but one to be shared with family, friends and an audience alike.”



Fatu & Mahiriki

As we continue our island journey heading south, I am thinking to myself, how much courage does it take to set out on one's path and truly follow one's calling and passion, no matter the consequences.

As the road meanders through the lush tropical gardens and breathtaking views of the turquoise lagoon that open up when Fatu asks into the silence: “Tim, can we go meet Gonzalo? I would like to get to know him better.”

When things are meant to be, they seem to effortlessly fall into place at times. A meeting is quickly arranged and because the sun is approaching its zenith, we call into Maire Nui Garden Café for lunch.

The Tahitian lime quencher, fish tacos decorated with wild flowers and the beautifully appointed pavilion in the middle of this tropical garden paradise was the perfect setting to nurture our bodies with deliciously fresh local food and our minds with a conversation about life, art & friendship. When



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Fatu told us about taking risks as an artist in order to get to where he / she needs to go – even our souls started feeling at peace and harmony with the moment.

Gonzalo opened up in a way that I have never witnessed in him before. It was true and personal and to the point. Fatu has this ability to inspire artists around him. He is a great listener and even better storyteller but what he really does is igniting a spark in his Gegenueber. Mahiriki Tangaroa: “One of his distinctive attributes is the time he gives so generously to know each artist he encounters.

Understanding their practice, opening their horizons and presenting a myriad of options and pathways in which they could pursue. True mentorship.” At the end of the meal Fatu concludes: “Thank you. This was wonderful. I would now like to see your work, Gonzalo.” And there it was, Gonzalo’s eyes lit up and off we went to visit his workshop.

As we are exiting Muri and passing the white limestone church in Ngatangia we see the traditional vaka moored just off Motutapu close to Avana passage. Shortly after Gonzalo indicated right and turned towards the ocean. We travel past a pawpaw plantation, some piglets enjoying the shade underneath a coconut tree and beautifully fragrant gardenias.



Fatu modeling his daughter's fashion label Finding Jagga



Fatu, Tim and Gonzalo at Maire Nui Garden Café



Continuing on an obscure coral road that takes us right close to the makatea and there it is the house that hosts Gonzalo’s studio. Fatu follows the young artist inside. It is dark and eerie in the entrance hall and after mounting two sets of stairs an urbanesque space opens up. Large windows give an almost 180 degree view of the ocean. With open arms, Gonzalo introduces us to: *Quintessence, Love and Mana* a show of 18 pieces – colourful, dreamy interpretations of island life using bamboo matting and timber rather than canvas for extra depth and texture.

It’s lively, intriguing and daring and will have been shown to the public in November 2024. Fatu felt a deep connection and energy with the place and expressed the inspiration to come back and paint in Rarotonga. So, let’s watch this space.

If you are interested to learn more about Fatu’s and Mahiriki’s and Gonzalo’s art visit Bergman Gallery. For now, it is time to lean back, enjoy the art and thank Fatu for his time and never-ending enthusiasm for these islands and its people.

Left: Fatu met a young Cook Island voyager and carver Oliver Oolders and discussed his first piece that Ollie has carved in Mike Tavioni’s studio earlier this year – a large Tangaroa sculpture



Gonzalo Studio