

GREG SEMU

Born: 1971, Auckland, New Zealand

The theme of cultural displacement is a river that runs strongly through the photography of New Zealand born Independent Indigenous Researcher, Curator and Artist Greg Semu. It is a theme close to the heart as the artist embraces Samoa as his ancestral and spiritual home and has travelled the world since his early 20s in search of self. The significance of identity and the exploration of self weave their way into Semu's work, with one of his first signature creations being a triptych created in 1995 of his naked body covered in Samoan *Tatau* titled *Self-portrait with pe'a, Basque Road, Newton Gully*. This series of photographs lead to his first solo exhibition titled *O le Tatau Samoa, The Tattoo Art of Samoa* and were acquired by the Auckland Art Gallery. In 2004 the Queensland Art Gallery also printed and acquired the series. In 2010 Queensland Art Gallery exhibited the works in a touring exhibition titled *Unnerved: The New Zealand Project* and published them in the accompanying catalogue.

Today Semu is still evolving the dialogue of cultural identity, and the viewing public is noticeably still fascinated, as in 2012 the Auckland Art Gallery commissioned him to revisit the original *pe'a* triptych and produce a corresponding triptych continuing the conversation. The Samoan *Tatau* clothes the body from midriff to knees and is a complex cultural icon of Samoan identity that dates back several thousand years preceding Christⁱ.

Semu began his artistic explorations of cultural displacement by osmosis. Himself, autodidact in the art of photography and film, Semu uses these visual languages to create an evocative dialogue to challenge the romanticised colonialist documentation of 'first contact' with the tribal worlds. The artist strives to challenge the stranglehold academic historians have on the past (be it fictitious or correct) in order to present new conclusions that break from the generic anthropological interpretations.

By using a medium so synonymous with presenting truth and reality in order to re-enact historic and art historically significant moments, Semu seduces the viewer to challenge any preconceived notions of history and instead make a spiritual or mental connection with the work engaging imagination and provocation. This is much like the many religious institutional dogma of "taking a leap of faith".

In 2007 Semu was awarded the first artist in residence at the Musée du quai Branly, in Paris. He was commissioned to create an artistic response to the *Bonded by Blood* Adidas campaign featuring the All Blacks for the 2007 Rugby World Cupⁱⁱ. The result was 'The Battle of the Noble Savage' series, which references early New Zealand colonial paintings by artists including Charles F. Goldi, Gustavus Von Tempsky and Gottfried Lindauer paralleling European painters Jacques-Louis David, Caravaggio, Holbein and Eugene Delacroix. The piece in particular makes pointed allusions to David's French history painting *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1800-01).

The battle depicted in Semu's work is itself fictitious but draws heavily on elements of the land wars between Maori and colonizers for Aotearoa New Zealand. The scene is peppered with historical and cultural references. The lush rainforest visible in the background contains plants only native to New Zealand, the 'warriors' are genuine Maori leaders with authentic *ta moko* (Maori body and facial tattoos) and the weaponry are all colonial war antiques.

By mixing real and fake, past and present, the artist is seeking to promote discussion and break free of "[romanticised] superior attitudes" in which mono linear history is often presented to usⁱⁱⁱ. Semu strives to educate parts of the world that might be ignorant to the fact that whilst Napoleon and the Prussians famously embarked on their offensives, the Pacific Islands were also facing their own battles. Similarly, by commemorating the spirit of the Maori and playing on the stereotype of the 'primitive savage', Semu succeeds in satirising the historical notion of the 'noble savage.' The aim is to reclaim history for the future generations to interpret freely and without prejudice.

In order to help drive alternative interpretations of colonial history Semu draws upon politically historical events, including the dictatorship of Christianity onto 'primitive' tribes. This is evident in his 2010 *The Last Cannibal Supper, cause tomorrow we become Christians* series created for the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Noumea, New Caledonia where the artist takes centre stage as Christ in *Auto portrait with 12 disciples*. The word 'cannibal' is pointedly used to denote the symbolic last supper Pacific Islanders underwent before giving up their traditions and having Christianity thrust upon them. Semu shows off his *Tatau*, which ironically is one of the only Samoan cultural traditions that endured the impact of colonial Christianity. Whilst Semu's depiction of Christianity may seem austere, he observes that the religion simultaneously "saved and paralysed" the island cultures^{iv}. "I'm not trying to say who was wrong or right, I'm just saying let's look at it today from contemporary eyes and from contemporary minds."

This meditation on the importance of the contemporary viewer is further expressed in his *Body on the Line, Cultural Warriors* 2010 exhibition. Semu captured former and current NRL players of South Pacific and Maori heritage, dressed loosely in customary Islander garb. By featuring familiar, contemporary sports figures adorned in traditional attire the artist promotes, celebrates and nurtures cultural awareness, provoking health and fitness issues and a marriage between the world of art and sport whilst developing relationships with ethnic minorities and mainstream Australia.

In 2012 Greg Semu's works including *Auto portrait with 12 disciples* (from 'The Last Cannibal Supper...cause tomorrow we become Christians' series) and *Untitled* (from 'The Battle of the Noble Savage' series) were featured in *The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7)* held at the Queensland Art Gallery. The Triennial is the Queensland Art Gallery's flagship international contemporary art event and represents the exceptional transformations that have occurred in Australian, Asian and the Pacific art.

In 2013, Greg Semu was named the winner of the People's Choice award for the 62nd *Blake Prize*, with his video installation *Te Upoko o Hoani te Kaiiriiri, The Head of John the Baptist*, 2013. The video runs for 8 minutes and 53 seconds, with images of three heads projected onto a black wall with hidden sacred text. It took Greg Semu five days to paint this monumental wall using acrylic paint and oil crayons. Sporadic interjections of light illuminate the wall and the sacred scrawl is momentarily revealed before disappearing. The hidden text references lost tribes, traditions and potential for rebirth. The video provokes conversation about conflicting desires of two insidious practices: the decapitation of spiritual leaders to achieve religious cleansing and the ritual tradition of 'headhunting' to grant immortal martyrdom.

In 2013, Alcaston Gallery represented Greg Semu at the inaugural *Sydney Contemporary 13* art fair held at Carriageworks, Sydney. Also in 2013, Greg Semu featured in Alcaston Gallery's annual Sydney exhibition to showcase represented artists titled *All About Art @ Depot Gallery*, Sydney.

In 2014, Greg Semu was awarded the prestigious Creative New Zealand Visual Arts Residency at the *Kunstlerhaus Bethanien*, Berlin 2014-2015. During this 12 month residency the artist will develop the overall theme of the brief yet intense relationships pertaining to Germany and "German Samoa". Semu refers to this as *die Koloniale Begegnung, The Colonial Encounter*.

In February 2014 Semu was artist in residence at Buku Larrnggay Mulka, Northern Territory, where he continued to research Indigenous Australians and develop portraits of Yolgnu family and friends.

Also in 2014, Greg Semu completed a residency in the Cook Islands granted by Creative New Zealand, as part of his upcoming epic and ambitious project *Symbols of Power*, to investigate and document a major moment in Pacific history and art history. The residency was structured as a community engagement and development project incorporating Cook Island locals as crsi, crew and consultants.

In August 2014, Alcaston Gallery was thrilled to feature Greg Semu at the *Melbourne Art Fair* held at the Royal Exhibition Building, 13 - 17 August.

In 2015 Greg Semu held a solo exhibition titled *Two Bodies, Two Landscapes, Zwei Körper, zwei Landschaften*, at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, and is an invited artist in the major international exhibition *Personal Structures* at Palazzo Bembo, during the 56th Venice Biennale, 9 May – 22 November 2015.

The National Gallery of Victoria - International will host a major solo exhibition *The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (people of the pacific)* by Greg Semu from 10 June – 11 September 2016, an immense honour for the artist.

Greg Semu has lived in Sydney since 2009, after residing in a wide range of places such as New York, Paris, London and Sāmoa. In September 2014 he moved to Berlin to complete his twelve month Creative New Zealand residency at Kunstlerhaus Bethanien.

Greg Semu joined the stable of artists at Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne in 2013.

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Solo Exhibitions

- 1995 *O le Tatau Samoa, The Tattoo Art of Samoa*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2001 *Antipodes*, Maison du Livre, de l'Image et du Son (MLIS), Villerbanne, France
- 2003 *Reflections*, 23 rue des Blancs Manteaux / 57 rue Charlot, Paris, France
- 2005 *DRAFT*, Galerie Agnes B, Paris, France
- 2005 *Music for your eyes*, Artbeatzactivate, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2005 *L'art urbain du Pacifique - Urban art from the Pacific*, Chateau de St Auvent, France
- 2008 *Strictly Samoa*, Penrith Regional Gallery and the Lewers Bequest, Emu Plains, New South Wales, Australia
- 2010 *The Last Cannibal Supper*, The Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Nouméa, New Caledonia
- 2011 *The Battle of the Noble Savage*, City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand
- 2011 *The Last Cannibal Supper*, Mcnamara Gallery, Manganui, New Zealand
- 2012 *The Last Cannibal Supper*, Galerie Métropolis, Paris, France
- 2012 *Better to Give: The Greg Semu Archive*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2013 *Paradise Lost? Contemporary Works from the Pacific*, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 2013 *Battle of the Noble Savage*, Two Rooms Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2013 *Elcho Island Family Portraits*, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- 2014 *Greg Semu: The Battle of the Noble Savage*, Te Manawa Museum of Art, Science and History, Palmerston North, New Zealand
- 2015 *Two Bodies, Two Landscapes, Zwei Körper, zwei Landschaften*, Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany
- 2016 *Greg Semu – The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (people of the pacific)*, National Gallery of Victoria – International, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Group Exhibitions

- 1994 *Bottled Ocean*, City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand
- 1997 *Inei/Konei: The Pacific in Photo Art from Aotearoa*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
- 1998 *Inei/Konei: The Pacific in Photo Art from Aotearoa*, The John Curtin Gallery, Perth, Western Australia, Australia
- 1999 *Tatau: Polynesian tattoo*, Museum of Ethnology, Köln, Germany
- 2000 *Partage d'exotismes*, 5th Biennale d'art contemporaine de Lyon, Halle Tony-Garnier, Lyon, France
- 2000 *Paris photo 2000*, Salon internationale pour la photographie, Carrousel du Louvre, Paris, France
- 2002 *Citoyens Bohèmes*, Printemps, 69 blvd Haussmann, Paris, France
- 2002 *Oeil pour oeil*, Collection Privée de Lyon, Centre d'Art de la Ville de Lyon, Lyon, France
- 2004 *Ka kino to pounamu he pounamu onamata*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2005 *DRAFT*, Galerie Agnes B, Paris, France
- 2005 *Music for your eyes*, Artbeatzactivate, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2005 *L'art urbain du Pacifique - Urban art from the Pacific*, Chateau de St Auvent, France

- 2005 *Smoke and Mirrors*, Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
- 2007 *The Scrum of Cultures*, Musee du Quai Branly, Paris, France
- 2009 *The Great Journey, In Pursuit of the Ancestral Realm*, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Art, Kaohsiung City, Taiwan
- 2010 *roundabout*, Wellington City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
- 2010 *Tiaho (To Shine)*, Instituto de Latino Mexico, and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Coyocoan, Mexico City, Mexico
- 2010 *Body Pacifica*, Casula Powerhouse, Casula, New South Wales, Australia
- 2010 *Unnerved: The New Zealand Project*, Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.
- 2010-11 *Unnerved: The New Zealand Project*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- 2011 *Oceania*, Wellington City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
- 2011 *The Fragmented Body*, Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
- 2011 *Niu Warrior*, Casula Powerhouse, Casula, New South Wales, Australia
- 2011 *Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature Art Prize 2011*, Singapore Art Museum. Singapore, Singapore
- 2012 *Pacifica Power*, Casula Powerhouse, Casula, New South Wales, Australia
- 2012 *The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
- 2012 *So Fukin Native*, Black Dot Gallery, Melbourne Fringe Festival, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- 2012 *Home AKL*, Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2012 *Variable Truth*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
- 2012 *The Inaugural Pulima Arts Festival 2012*, Indigenous People Cultural Foundation, Taipei, Taiwan
- 2013 *2013 Contemporary Aboriginal Art*, Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in conjunction with the Ministry of Culture, National Science Council and the National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan
- 2013 *Body on the line & Mana Pasifika*, Logan Art Gallery, Logan City, Queensland, Australia
- 2013 *Auckland Art Fair*, The Cloud, Queens Wharf, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2013 *Paradise Lost? Contemporary Works from the Pacific*, Satellite Gallery in conjunction with the Pacific Arts Association International Symposium at Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
- 2013 *Present history: a selection of photographs of New Zealand 1960s to the present*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia
- 2013 *Sydney Contemporary 13*, Carriageworks represented by Alcaston Gallery, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
- 2013 *62nd Blake Prize*, Galleries UNSW, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
- 2013 *All About Art @ Depot Gallery*, Sydney, New South Wales represented by Alcaston Gallery Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- 2013 *Headcount*, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
- 2014 *International Travelling Exhibition*, South East Museum of Photography in conjunction with the Queensland Centre for Photography, Daytona, USA
- 2014 *Fish Hooks and Moving Trees: Pacific Transformations in Australia*, BEMAC national touring exhibition, Pero Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, Queensland, Australia
- 2014 *Stitching the Sea*, Blacktown Arts Centre, Blacktown, New South Wales, Australia
- 2014 *Melbourne Art Fair*, represented by Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- 2014 *Daegu Photo Biennale 2014*, Daegu Metropolitan City, Korea
- 2014 *Tino i le Vā*, curated by Jacob Tolo, Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- 2015 *Personal Structures – Crossing Borders*, curated by GlobalArtAffairs Foundation, Palazzo Bembo, Venice, Italy
- 2015 *Sydney Contemporary 15*, Carriageworks represented by Alcaston Gallery, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
- 2015-16 *Passion: Fan Behaviour and Art*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin, Kunsthaus im KunstKulturQuartier, Nürnberg, Ludwig Muzeum, Budapest & Stadtgalerie, Kiel, Germany
- 2015 *All About Art: Brisbane*, White Canvas Gallery represented by Alcaston Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Awards

- 2011 Finalist, *Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature Art Prize 2011*
2013 People's Choice Award Winner, *62nd Blake Prize*

Collections

Artbank
Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
Casula Powerhouse, Casula, New South Wales, Australia
Hocken Collections, University of Otago, Otago, New Zealand
The James Wallace Art Trust, New Zealand
Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Kaohsiung City, Taiwan
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France
Musée d'arts Contemporain, Lyon, France
Museum für Völkerkunde der Stadt, Frankfurt, Germany
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia Capital Territory, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
Penrith Regional Gallery and Lewers Bequest, Emu Plains, New South Wales, Australia
Private collections in New Zealand, France and Australia
Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington New Zealand
The Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Nouméa, New Caledonia

Commissions

- 1997 *Re-resurrection*, Art Space. Auckland, New Zealand.
2007 *Battle of the Noble Savage* series, Musée du quai Branly, Paris, France
2010 *The Last Cannibal Supper, cause tomorrow we become Christians*, Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Noumea, New Caledonia
2010 Art Director and Photographer for *Body Pacifica NRL Calendar* for 'Body Pacifica: Connecting You to the Islands Festival, Casula Powerhouse Galleries, Casula, New South Wales, Australia
2012 *Self portrait with Pe'a front, side and back. Sentinel Road Herne Bay, 2012*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand

Symposiums/Panel Discussions

- 2013 Panel member, *Birds with Skymirrors*, Carriageworks, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
2013 Delegate, *Pacific Intersections and Cross-Currents: Uncharted Histories and Future Trends*, 11th Pacific Arts Associations International Symposium, Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Artist Talks

- 2010 *Floor talk*, regarding the 'Body Pacifica' Exhibition Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Casula, New South Wales, Australia
2010 *Australian Museum in house Artist Talks*, Australian Museum, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
2011 *Greg Semu talks to Reuben Friend*, City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand
2012 *Artist Floor Talk for the Opening Weekend of the The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Gallery of Modern Art and Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
2013 *Body on the line with Greg Semu*, Logan Art Gallery, Logan City, Queensland, Australia
2013 *Leo Tanoi on Greg Semu*, Sydney Contemporary 13, Carriageworks, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia
2014 *Seminaire sur la photographie à l'école du Louvre*, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France

Bibliography

- 2010 Ruth McDougall, 'Unnerved: The New Zealand Project' catalogue, catalogue essay and image, Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland, pp. 136-137
2011 Lily Hacking, *A fantasy of Paradise*, Artzone, Issue no. 42
2012 Victoria Harbutt, *In League: Four art exhibitions exploring sport, strengthening culture*, Exhibition essay, Cover Photo, *Museums Australia Magazine*, Vol 21 (1) – Spring, 2012, pp 17-22

- 2012 Ron Brownson, Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai, Albert L Refiti, Ema Tavola, Nina Tonga, *Home AKL – Artists of Pacific Heritage in Auckland*, Catalogue, Auckland Art Gallery, August 2012
- 2012 David Burnett, 'The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art' catalogue, catalogue essay and images, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland, pp. 196-200
- 2012 Michael Fitzgerald, *Greg Semu – Redefining Cultural Roots*, Art Asia Pacific; Nov/Dec 2012, Issue 81, p 66
- 2012 *Artlines – The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, 4-2012 (DEC/JAN/FEB), Cover Photo
- 2012 *Twenty Year and Counting*, Art News New Zealand, Vol 32 n4, Summer 2012, p. 134
- 2012 *Australia puts the art of the region on the table*, The Art Newspaper, Number 241, December 2012, p. 27
- 2013 *Asia Pacific Triennial 7*, Australian Art Review, Mar/Apr 2013, p. 44
- 2013 Ji-Shen Loong, *Transcending Histories & Disrupting the Present at APT7*, Art Monthly Australia, May 2013 n 258, p. 9
- 2013 Professor Sasha Grishin, AM, FAHA, *The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial*, Craft Arts International, No.88, 2013, p. 85
- 2013 *Exhibition and Workshop Program August to October 2013*, Logan Art Gallery, Cover Photo
- 2013 *Feature Ad for Alcaston Gallery at Sydney Contemporary*, Art Collector, Issue 65, Jul-Sept
- 2013 *Process: Greg Semu*, Artist Profile, Issue 24 – Sydney Contemporary 13 Edition p. 130-131
- 2013 *Feature Ad for Alcaston Gallery at Sydney Contemporary*, Artist Profile, Issue 24 – Sydney Contemporary 13 Edition, p. 3
- 2013 *Self Portrait with pe'a*, Photofile, Vol. 93, Spring/Summer 2013-14, p. 108-112
- 2013 *Launching on Troubled Waters*, ArtAsiaPacific, Issue 86, Nov/Dec, p. 40
- 2013 *A Research for Representation of Primitivity – Taiwan Contemporary Aboriginal Art Exhibition*, 2013, exhibition publication, pp132-135
- 2014 *Feature Ad for Alcaston Gallery at Melbourne Art Fair*, Photofile, Autumn/Winter 2014
- 2014 Beverly Knight, 'About the Artist', *Special Issue: Global Sport in the Pacific*, The Contemporary Pacific - a Journal of Island Affairs, Volume 26, Number 2, pp. ix-x, 280, 302, 324, 346, 368, 388, 409, 433, 445, 457 & 553
- 2015 Fiona McGregor 'Fabricated Realities', *Sturgeon*, Issue 3 2015, pp.12-21
- 2015 Rachael Vance 'A Touch of Fantasia', *Art New Zealand*, 2015
- 2015 Jacobs, K., C. Knowles & C. Wingfield (eds), 'Interview: Greg Semu and Jacqueline Charles-Rault', *Trophies, Relics and Curios? Missionary Heritage from Africa and the Pacific*, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015, pp 138-143

Selected Artist Residencies

- 2007 Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France
- 2008 Penrith Regional Gallery and Lewers Bequest, Emu Plains, New South Wales, Australia
- 2008 Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand
- 2009 Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Kaohsiung City, Taiwan
- 2010 Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture Centre, The Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Nouméa, New Caledonia
- 2011 Elcho Island Arts Centre, Elcho Island, Northern Territory, Australia
- 2014 Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia
- 2014 Creative Residency for *Symbols of Power*, The Cook Islands
- 2014-2015 The Creative New Zealand Visual Arts Residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin 2014-2015

ⁱ Ruth McDougall, 'Unnerved: The New Zealand Project' catalogue, catalogue essay and image, Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland, pp. 136

ⁱⁱ *Capital Times – We're all Pacific Islanders*, 3 August 2011, <http://www.capitaltimes.co.nz/Were-all-Pacific-Islanders>

ⁱⁱⁱ Biography of Greg Semu by Greg Semu

^{iv} *Stuff – Art rewards 'are there'*, Steve Kilgallon, 30 October 2011, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/arts/5876344/Art-rewards-are-there>