

FOREWORD

The *Strictly Samoan* exhibition suite announces the growing presence of Samoan families in Sydney and reveals a little of their history, culture and custom.

Aussie Aiga pays tribute to the enduring Samoan passion for large-scale family photos and acknowledges photography's growing potential as a complement to traditional oral expressions of Samoan genealogy. Greg Semu's artful portraits are a reminder of our universal love of family photos and the role photography plays in displaying and illuminating human relationships.

Samoa Mo Samoa (Samoa for Samoa): The Story of the Mau brings to the fore the remarkable Mau movement for independence. Drawn from the Alexander Turnbull Photographic Archives of the New Zealand National Library, the photographs tell of Samoa's little known history, from its colonial-backed civil wars of the 1890s to independence from New Zealand in 1962. Samoa was the first Pacific nation to achieve independence and the Mau movement's strategy of brave, highly organised passive resistance is a political model of great significance and an achievement of which older Samoans are most proud.

'Ie Toga showcases the conceptual expression and austere beauty of Samoan 'ie toga (fine mats). 'Ie toga continue to be the most precious medium of exchange in and out of Samoa and on any weekend in Sydney you will find formal 'ie toga exchanges in full swing at weddings, funerals and other important events. 'Ie toga are not ornate and not meant for everyday display. They circulate in Samoan communities as esteemed articles manifesting relationships, occasions, politics and respect. 'Ie Toga presents twenty five mats borrowed from the Sydney Samoan community (including a rare Sydney-made mat) as well as two extremely old/fine examples from the Australian Museum's Pacific collections. I am very grateful to the people who, in lending their 'ie toga to the exhibition, have sidelined them from their usual significant purpose.

Tatau Competition displays the exquisite tattoo work of the late Su'a Suluape Paulo 11, one of the Pacific's most influential artists through a photographic series by Greg Semu and *Sacred Marks*, a digital documentation of a traditional tattooing session.

The provocative *Strictly Samoan* title was coined by my esteemed colleague Lalau Leo Tanoi and was chosen to emphasize the importance of self and ancestral knowledge, cultural connection and re-connection. Knowledge is power, so we dedicate *Strictly Samoan* to all young people of Samoan descent.

Victoria Harbutt, Project Curator

YOU CAN'T TAKE A SAMOAN OUT OF THE PICTURE (extract)

Aussie Aiga was a dedication to all ancestors, not only those of the Samoan community but to the ancestors of all the communities of Penrith and Australia. In Australia today there are over 60,000 people of Samoan descent. Aussie Samoan aiga (families) have a unique identity formed by their adoptive country, but they maintain a network of sacred relationships from their ancestral land that governs their daily lives.

One definition of the word *Samoa* describes *sa* as a prefix meaning *sacred*, and *moa* as meaning *centre*. At the centre of Samoan culture are the relationships and loyalties within the extended family; at the centre of a Samoan family photo album is a desire to record one's image for future generations to admire and connect with.

Samoans have inherited an oral culture. One saying that leaves a lasting impression is *E pala ma'a ae le pala upu*: 'rocks will erode but words will not'. It made me think that books, pictures, maps and sophisticated technology are in fact inferior methods of storing knowledge compared with the ways we Samoans transmit our knowledge of family history. For thousands of years we have passed on our Indigenous knowledge from one family member to the next, trusting that each caretaker will promote our genealogy and keep the knowledge pure. If the caretaker fails to do so, then we risk losing our *mana*, or power; our truth may be compromised or *moko* (broken).

Every village in Samoa has an ongoing *fa'alupega* - a recited charter of ceremonial greetings that incorporate salutations immemorial and the village hierarchy. The charter acts as an oral constitution and registry of the village's chieftain titles. It serves as a reminder for all families within the village of their founding ancestors over the centuries.

Photography can complement our contemporary oral genealogical claims. Photographic proof of a person's existence, in the form of a family portrait, will help future family members attest and trace their lineage through oral and visual evidence. Greg Semu and I visited Sydney Samoan families between 7 and 22 June 2008. It was a pleasure to talk to Samoan parents who were happy to recite their village *fa'alupega*. The survival of this tradition confirmed my thoughts and extrapolations related to Samoan photography culture: photography supports our traditions of handing down knowledge of our ancestors and recording the stories of our lives for future generations. You can take a Samoan out of Samoa, but you can't take a Samoan out of the picture.

Lalau Leo Tanoi, Cultural Worker/ Assistant Curator

AUSSIE AIGA

Everything you were afraid of: a mass swell in the Pacific, a wave of human migration travelling on a one-way ticket to cultural collision and ethnic mutation. Starring the volatile diaspora of Samoan insurgent communities battling it out in the wild west ... we bring you the exhibition Aussie Aiga! Well, not exactly.

'Aussie aiga' is a term that encapsulates ideas about inhabiting and belonging: to place, to country, to family. We photographed 200 people in the environments that they inhabit both domestically and socially. It was an incredibly bonding human experience. I came away from the project feeling I had been given an acknowledgement that we are the living descendents of a unique DNA tree dating back thousands of years. It was palpable, visible and communicable in all senses.

The oral recitals of ancestral and family origins confirmed our suspicions: our bloodlines are interlaced like the motorways of the M4, M5 and M7. Intravenous highways. We are not strangers. Beneath the surface, we are AIGA.

I was touched by their generosity. Moved by the experience. 'Faaafetai tele lava lau alofa. Manuia lava lau Malaga': 'Thank you for your love, and blessings on your journey.' We be licking the Va.¹

Greg Semu, Artist

Greg Semu is a Samoan born, New Zealand raised photographer of international acclaim; ideas of cultural identity, plurality and difference are pivotal to his artistic practice. Semu's work is held in major public and private collections in Germany, France, Australia, Taiwan and New Zealand.