

Red clouds descending

Peter Simpson

To visit John Pule in his studio - located in a 1950s roughcast, art deco-style house in Henderson in West Auckland, New Zealand - is always a surprise as well as a visual feast. A few months ago the studio was overflowing with five large canvases too big to fit along any one wall but intended to butt together to form a single huge work: *Kehe Tau Hauga Fooo (To All New Arrivals)*, which took up a whole wall at *Turbulence, the 3rd Auckland Art Triennial* held earlier this year. The surprise on that occasion was partly the unprecedented scale of the work - this was the largest painting John has ever made¹ - and partly its colour; the eye was met by a riot of blue on white, a colour I had never encountered in his painting before. The now familiar images of cloud-like patches of colour from which cascade multiple tendrils of vines and flowers that is the immediately dominant impression of this on-going series - before the eye adjusts to the smaller scale of the intricate ink drawings which densely populate the canvases - were painted an intense marine blue (the blue Pacific was my instant response) instead of the rust-red (like dried blood), or more occasionally grass-green, which were usual in these "cloud" works. My latest visit, however, registered another jolt of surprise. The blues of recent months had gone and red was back again, but a distinctly different red from the blood-rust hue of previous works. These new works destined for Melbourne are dominated by a glossy, fire-engine red (like arterial blood) often combined with shiny black - colours which vividly bloomed, pooled and sagged across the pristine white surfaces. The paintings were still being worked on and yet to be given titles, but it is clear that the protean drama of repetition and change that has marked Pule's work for the past two decades and more is undergoing another evolution.

Chatting with John later over sushi and sashimi in a Japanese lunch bar, I was intrigued that the names of poets cropped up in his conversation more often than those of painters. I recall seeing a large volume of Goya on his studio floor, and he spoke warmly of Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), the Netherlandish proto-surrealist, whose *Temptations of St Anthony* and *Garden of Earthly Delights* are loosely analogous to, if not as direct sources of the heterogeneous visions which people Pule's canvases. The conversation soon turned to poets, especially to those whom John first read avidly in his early twenties, a decisive encounter that continues to feed his art and writing quarter of a century later. Most of the names mentioned were Romantic and Surrealist poets - Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Baudelaire, the *Chants de Maldoror* of Comte de Lautréamont (Isadore Ducasse)², Rimbaud, the *Duino Elegies* of Rilke - those whom Harold Bloom once called the visionary company,³ heady stuff for a young man without much formal schooling, raised on the mean streets of South Auckland. Indeed, as may not be well known in Australia, it was as a poet that Pule first appeared in public, in such early self-published books as *Winter, the rain!* (1981), *Sonnets to Van Gogh* (1982), *Flowers after the Sun* (1983) and *Bond of Time* (1985, 1998). A sample stanza from *Bond of*

Time shows the same effortless surrealism as still characterizes his work in all media:

*The sting-ray has stung you. My voice launched
black geysers, hot mud pools, katipos crawl from
your feet; sinister, morbid and sunless; the sky
falls like a stone, and a crucifixion bleeds.*⁴

Another stanza shows the dazzling sweep that connects small details of nature and individual lives to the global movements of peoples and human history that are a recurrent feature of Pule's paintings:

*Romance disappeared like a tragedy from history. A
helmet of dusty dreams, a shirt of birds and design,
a comb to brush away heaps of metal, and in return
came nomadic tribes, hungry and tired.*⁵

The relationship between text and image in Pule's work has gone through many different phases. Initially the two activities were kept separate, but later flowed together and then apart again, like the streams of a braided river. In the late 1980s as he began writing poems in his native Niuean he transferred texts to canvas accompanied by bold poster-like designs. Later he turned to prose fiction, publishing two rich and powerful novels, *The Shark that Ate the Sun* (Auckland, Penguin, 1992) and *Burn my Head in Heaven* (Auckland, Penguin, 1997).⁶ Both books promiscuously mix together verse and prose, narrative and exposition, realism and surrealism in a potent combination that is like a literary adaptation of collage. They contain strong elements of autobiography which extend well beyond the immediately personal to accommodate family history and the history of Niuean people both in New Zealand and Niue. Subsequently he recycled sections of these novels in paintings, drawings and prints. Examples of this process are the lithographic series *Restless Spirit* which distributes a key chapter of *The Shark* through a sequence of 11 lithographs in which the words appear with visual imagery similar to that in his paintings.⁷ Similarly, *Death of a God* subjects a chapter of *Burn my Head* to the same treatment - in this case a sequence of 18 drawings, now in the collection of Auckland Art Gallery and viewable on its website.⁸ Another instance of such intermixing of the visual and the textual is a sequence of lithographs based on poems from an unpublished sequence, *100 Love Poems*.⁹ The verbal and the visual are the yin and yang of Pule's creative world.

Since around 1990 when his mature style as a painter emerged, Pule's paintings can be seen as falling into two broad categories, which for convenience might be called the "hiapo" paintings, c.1991-2000, and the "cloud paintings", c.2000-2007, though the distinctions between them in both content and chronology are not hard and fast.

The "hiapo" paintings had two impulses in particular: first, Pule's discovery of the Niuean form of bark-cloth painting known as hiapo, and secondly his reacquaintance with his birthplace, the island of Niue (which he left as a 2 year old in 1964), in a sequence of visits from 1991 onwards. In *Hiapo*:

Past and Present in Niuean Barkcloth written jointly with Australian anthropologist Nicholas Thomas, Pule records his first encounter with hiapo in a book lent him by his Niuean language teacher:

“In the middle section of the book a picture of hiapo is reproduced, a circular sun motif is blossomed out of the centre, the double lines of triangular rays almost touched the edges of the entire cloth. What caught my attention was that the interior of the circle was illustrated profusely with leaves and seeds...When I started translating my poetry onto canvas, I needed a foundation. I found that foundation in hiapo...”¹⁰

It is sometimes assumed that Pule’s return to Niue and his discovery of the potential of hiapo occurred simultaneously, that he discovered hiapo when visiting the island. But this is not the case. As he explains, there is only one example of hiapo currently in Niue – a piece gifted by the New Zealand government when the island gained independence and now placed behind the speaker’s chair in the Niuean parliament. Every other known example of Niuean hiapo (around 50 pieces were traced by Pule and Thomas for reproduction in their book) is held in museums in New Zealand, Australia, Britain, Europe and the United States – in itself an extraordinary story of dispossession and dispersal. As Pule and Thomas’ book reveals, Niuean hiapo is a post-contact phenomenon and flourished under the influence of the missionaries between 1860 and 1890. Important to Pule also is that Niuean hiapo incorporates many European items including ships, compasses, written language, numbers, and leaves and flowers of plants introduced by the missionaries as well as indigenous flora and other imagery. In other words, Pule’s painterly transactions with hiapo are with a medium that is already culturally hybrid. Furthermore, unlike Samoan or Tongan bark cloth (siapo, tapa) which emphasise the regular repetition of motifs within a geometrical grid, hiapo is, in Nicholas Thomas’ description, much less predictable:

“Freehand painting gave the hiapo an open, experimental character; the combination of repetition and deliberate irregularity produces patterns that are dynamic rather than merely decorative”.¹¹ As Pule says: “The energy of hiapo has affected my art. It deals with identity and migration, colonisation of people, destruction of indigenous practices. It conjures up past stories that live in the images – such as shark and constellations”.¹²

In the 1990s Pule invariably employed a grid-like format which divided the surface of his paintings into rectangular cells he filled with a bewildering variety of imagery, ranging from abstract geometrical patterns (often traditional, sometimes repeated), to comic strip-like religious narratives, and incorporating a plethora of mythological references and personal symbolism.

The paintings were densely peopled with humans, creatures and objects, some familiar and immediately recognisable (car, church, boat, fish, bird, hammer, spade, flower, candle, cross, aeroplane, sun, moon, stars, mountains, for example), some radically stylised, others private and unreadable.

I cannot now remember precisely when the hiapo-like grid of

Pule’s 1990s paintings gave way to the bloody clouds of the 2000s but I suspect it was around the beginning of the new millennium. An untitled work on paper I own, one of the first “cloud” works I recall seeing, carries the date 2000/01. In these works Pule daringly abandoned the hiapo grid and launched himself on an ocean of white canvas without benefit of a structural armature. It was at first like watching a trapeze artist performing without a safety net. In this series, rust red (or green) “clouds” or “islands” of variable size, number and distribution, are surmounted by miniscule black-ink drawings of people, creatures, buildings, vehicles and the like (often reminiscent of the earlier hiapo-style paintings). An essay by Rob Garrett neatly encapsulates the range of scenes depicted: “Recurring symbols and motifs...include hybrid bird-like lizards, botanical motifs, birds, the Christian cross, Pacific church buildings, aeroplanes, broken aeroplanes mounted by two-headed monsters, ambulances, decapitated heads, fantastical creatures breathing fire, skulls, sex acts, island silhouettes, drifting island-clouds, and his own poetry”.¹³

The clouds/islands are often linked by tendrils and festoons of flowering vines, and by ladders or stairs on which tiny figures, often weighed down with huge burdens, can be seen ‘migrating’ from one to another. Garrett, in explanation of the ubiquitous vines, asserts that, “A recurring motif is the vines of the *ti mata alea* (Cordyline tree), which in Niuean culture is believed to be the plant from which human life originated.” Another possibility is that the vines recall the fragrant flowers of the malea vine, while among the flowers depicted are peonies originally flowering in missionary gardens. In “*When You Return...*”, an essay written for the catalogue of the Asia-Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2002, Pule writes: “I imagined a Polynesian vision of bloody sweat of red clouds descending to earth ...The idea of red clouds perfumed as micro-paradisiacal isles, connected to each other by ladders, planks, steps, each one balancing groups of people...prepared me for the festival ahead”, a passage which in its transition from “bloody sweat” to “micro-paradisiacal isles” conveys something of the emotional parabola of this imagery.¹⁴

A noteworthy feature of Pule’s latest paintings is their increasing painterly richness and complexity. Initially the “cloud” paintings employed thinly applied inks often wiped with the hand to achieve a smudging or blurring of outlines. Later he moved to oil paints, still thinly applied, and more recently still to enamel paints which intermixed with turpentine and/or varnish to achieve a range of visually exciting effects. Initially the paint is applied with the stretched canvas lying on the floor. When the painting is lifted and placed against the studio wall occasionally the paint slumps, wrinkles and puckers in unpredictable ways, a fortuitous circumstance which the painter benignly accepts. As Jonathan Smart wrote of a recent exhibition at his Christchurch gallery: “His painting is becoming richer and more symphonic in scope – a visual poetry akin to the emotion and political power of his written words.”¹⁵

Pule’s first show in Melbourne introduces Australian viewers to a remarkable artist at the peak of his powers; an artist unafraid of embracing the big themes – love, death, war, religion, sex, politics, imperialism, culture-clash, migration, settlement – in paintings which are both intimate and grand, sensuous and mysterious,

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encompassing a generous and tough-minded vision of life in all its sadness, pain, anger, wonder and joy.

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- 1 It has since been acquired by the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.
- 2 Comte de Lautréamont was the pen name of Isidore Lucien Ducasse (1846 – 1870), a French poet whose only works, *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies*, had a major influence on modern literature, particularly on the Surrealists and the Situationists.
- 3 Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (London, Faber and Faber, 1962)
- 4 The katipo is a small poisonous spider, black with a red streak on its back, much like the Australian red-back, found among sand dunes and driftwood on New Zealand beaches.
- 5 See www.jonathansmartgallery.com/ for some 2005 drawings incorporating stanzas from *Bond of Time*.
- 6 The Niuean subtitles of these two books are *Ko e maago ne kai a laa* and *Tugi e ulu haaku he Langi* respectively.
- 7 *Restless Spirit II*, 1999-2000, 11 lithographs, boxed set, each 800 x 600mm, edition of 20. There is a set in the National Gallery, Canberra, and samples are viewable on <http://www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz/artists/johnpule/editions.asp>.
- 8 *Death of a God*, 18 drawings, 1999, ink and oil crayon on paper, each 765 x 568, collection of Auckland Art Gallery, <http://collection.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz>.
- 9 Examples from this series can be viewed on line at www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz.authors.pule.
- 10 John Pule and Nicholas Thomas, *Hiapo: Past and Present in Niuean Barkcloth* (Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 2005), p. 20.
- 11 Nicholas Thomas, "Born in Paradise: Place and Desire in John Pule's Paintings", exhibition catalogue, Auckland, Gow Langsford Gallery, 1996.
- 12 Pule and Thomas, p. 20.
- 13 Rob Garrett, "Walking with Letters: Michael Parekowhai, John Reynolds, John Pule", *Artlink*, Vol 27, No. 1, pp. 46-49.
- 14 John Pule, "When You Return...", in *APT 2002: Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, ed. Lynne Seear (Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery, 2002).
- 15 Jonathan Smart, *Ata* <http://www.jonathansmartgallery.com/content/view/85/48/>.

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A brief history of emerging dreams: the recent work of John Pule

Doug Hall

It is not possible to talk about modern art and literature in New Zealand without giving an extensive profile to the work of John Pule. Equally, but more specifically, it is not possible to think of the Pacific as having a contemporary and international voice without recognizing his art.

And he left his native Niue when he was two years of age.

It has been a journey of cultural reclamation – partly and inevitably an experience through degrees of separation. Eventually the unfolding of his heritage came to be absorbed as intimate experience – through direct encounter and also as a kind of cultural ricochet as oral histories shaped his imagination. To know who he is and that which he is about to become, is also to know who he was, or might have been. It is a path, perhaps a journey that is not linear or necessarily historical as we might readily understand it. But sensory, visual and born of the imagination as well as experience.

He knows Niuean culture as traditional and permeable – never fixed or unchanging. He is a contemporary artist who reaches us through his understanding and empathy for a past that is spoken for, and has been told to him. And this includes its dislocations that touch us in ways that are able to transcend its specific introspection, and speak more widely of shared human experience. Longing and alienation – warmth and rejection: religion and violence.

It's a real and imaginary world that occupies the mind and heart of John Pule – one that is poignant. He is not a hand-maiden for easy post-colonialism, nor a symbol for dogmatists. He is at once observer and participant in his own heritage and a source of revitalized memory.

John Pule became known in a climate in which identity-driven art consumed the art world. He has emerged from this milieu with a unique Polynesian expression; not a self-appointed voice for other people, nor as a visual temper tantrum for the sake of identity politics. Identity is personal, deeply personal, and discarding this for some kind of attention-seeking hero worship was not for him. As pointed and political as his art might be, he invites us to understand him through his distinctive view of the interconnections between places and their history – the body and spirit – cosmology too. These are places of mystery and contemplation, and where we are never frog-marched to enlightenment. It is his respect for tradition and himself that ensures that the value he places on the intrinsic quality of what he makes is never compromised.

He was a novelist and poet before he came to painting: later a printmaker but always a wonderful draughtsman. And none of these interests sit as mutually exclusive from each other. His early works were based on traditional *hiapo*, Niuean bark cloths which are subdued and unassuming. Muted tones and a loose geometrical grid provide a structure for a variety of

symbols, designs and quasi-figurative depictions. They appear as unlaboured, and the paint seems not so much applied but stains the paper and canvas – where images gather their form from dry sgraffito-like surfaces, and where we find no affectation or spectacle.

But here there's a clue to his mature work. The free-hand painting in *hiapo* – unlike other methods used in Pacific *tapa* that involve rubbing to transfer an image to the cloth – *hiapo* allows a greater degree of spontaneity and adaptation.

The converging of his interests in subject and words was all but predestined. In its way it is Pule's involvement with another more recent tradition, as his contemporaries and predecessors have similarly done. Of those who have adopted this convergence of image and text as a fully-formed aesthetic, Colin McCahon is the best known to Australian audiences. But Pule's style emerges from oral histories that first appeared in his poetry and novels. He adopted a visual language that is distinguished by its emblematic forms that are rich in characterisation, but seldom straightforward and literal in their descriptions.

New Zealand artists have continued to work with words and pictures. It's a difficult equilibrium to take on, one where an artist finds the perfect weight and counterbalance of words to subject matter, and vice versa – where one doesn't topple the other. There is a reciprocity that takes place between the two that gives wholeness to Pule's meaning. Many will argue that we feel more comfortable in reading: go to any art museum and we find visitors reading printed words, that's true. Or perhaps it's the well-worn observation that the interpretation of what we see is necessarily based on our complicity with the subject depicted – and that can be a more complicated and less certain reading. Hence we are drawn to language. Pule seems to play with these two tensions of text and image and produces work that is incisive, but not heavy-handed. His paintings have a broader humanism for which his heritage is its well-spring.

Pule deals with the consequences of history, not as agitator – nor facile propagandist. Christianity, for example, is a theme that runs through his work. We find it in stories that unravel as we concentrate on small, loosely arranged cartouche-like elements that intersperse fields of white canvas or paper which, in turn, merge with the blood-like stains, as though they have saturated the canvas: perhaps the metaphorical residue of the past or evidence in-waiting as his stories continues to unfold.

His recent work, for which he is best known, has earned him enormous critical respect, and in this exhibition extends his recurring themes and iconography. But now the surfaces are more overtly layered, where enamel and varnishes flow and skins form a corporeal surface texture.

Discovery. It's an ambitious and confident word that is laden with general and personal associations. For Pule it has been about discovering a past through years of listening and reflection. His forebears were 'discovered', a conquest-fraught discovery at that. We have understood discovery as ambitious and necessary, and without it the lexicon of new lands and settlement would remain incomplete. It became a rich source of imagery – mainly British and French. The modern imagination of the exploration of the Pacific persists with images that romanticize a western idealism of a place untroubled by anything. Images of Captain James Cook (his ships were *Resolution* and *Discovery*) – in blue uniform coat and white breeches: a posture of stoic Protestantism in the face of the primitivism of naked aggression on atoll-formed beaches and sandy cays. Cook called Niue "Savage Island". Pule depicts Christianity as limp and scurvy-like. He doesn't rail against it – but unlike most renderings of the subject, he treats it with a sneering disdain. An impostor's declaration of goodness doesn't sit easily with a culture which has evolved precariously, shifting in subtle but profound ways, like its land. A functioning culture and then the missionaries with their anxious, guilty singularity whose duplicitous righteousness marked a stark contradiction to a place born a long way from the Pentecostalism that sought to subordinate, if not eradicate its soul. Missionary zeal has long been the subject of cliché and cheap retort – and Pule resists both temptations. He deals with its imprint by knowing the inevitable consequences of colonialism in one sense, but dislocation and suffering nonetheless.

The images of heroic conquest remained part of the commercial and educational interpretation of Polynesia, especially after the war. He has dealt with the commodified ideals of coconut tree arcadia and the kitschy representation of Pacific culture, yet has always found the attachment to his own Niuean heritage too strong to flirt with cliché and direct appropriation. There are official accounts, but stories are personal, and the strength in his art is underpinned by this. But he is far from humourless and seems delighted to depict sex – detailed, intimate and uncomplicated acts: a response, perhaps, to Polynesia's representation as sexualised islands of dreams.

We have looked at Pule's cultural antecedents, and that's important. But we must also understand that he is part of contemporary mainstream art, and not an attention-seeking curiosity from the edge. New Zealand and Australian art museums are places that have shown an ease in the way they have (almost thoughtlessly) represented the art of different cultures in a more general, even international context. The rigorous art museum nomenclature of cultural segregation was first broken down in Australia and New Zealand. We have lived with this, and not yet fully realised the extent to which others have viewed it as a cultural exemplar.

Are myths old and immutable stories that continue to reaffirm cultural value? Or do they move beyond their spoken origin and become something else? At what stage does a fact or an equivocal account dissolve into myth and, after a generation or two, return as an original truth? It's not a question posed out of western anthropological interest or provenance, but

more a way to explain how traditional cultures define and reinvest in themselves. Pule's personal encounter with stories told to him means that he embraces these as his source and creates a modern and new reality, but one that is culturally and historically fused. We never lose the sense of belonging to tradition. This flux and reinterpretation is what sustains culture and tradition in a state of perpetual transition.

Narrative and story telling is important to the history of New Zealand art – Australia too for that matter. History paintings with grand and epic stories that heralded the reach of our ambition. The determined and unrelenting surge towards something or other – ideals of civic grandeur and public responsibility – nationhood, and moral virtue. It assumed a shared view of the world and what its future might represent. It was singular and dutiful. The information contained in such Victorian narratives held an assumed and benevolent view of Maori and Pacific peoples. Their depiction was conditional, sometimes viewed as a threat. And the landscape and ocean were also threats – romantic, sublime – frightening and awe-inspiring. We all have stories to tell, and for many they are about the sea, and voyage. There is a visual language that guides us in our response to Victorian narrative and sentiment. At the time it was intended to stir an emotional response – more recent scholarship finds it useful in understanding the historical and miscued view of the representation of old cultures viewed through chaste eyes.

Of course the character of story-telling has changed, but remained nevertheless. Pule is careful not to labour the notion of memory – it's rather that he pushes the idea of a continuing story, locating the personal amongst the bluster of modern history's political generalities. Pule can teach us the subtleties of what it is to speak of cultural intimacy, and also to have it resonate beyond its specific references.

He provides a curious double-take on history painting – a twist, perhaps, on a tradition where grand allegories were not completely understood unless the sum of its parts were fully comprehended. Paintings that grew out of research, and where exotic cultures were fascinating, but separate. But John Pule presents encounter, and rediscovery as a private introspection in which he interleaves visual snippets, words and even blood-red clouds as reflective allegories. When we see, for example, the meandering drawing of the *ti mata alea* – the Cordyline Tree – as it ties together small vignettes that form randomly across the canvas, we must also know it as the source of human life. His story is of a fractured history and opalescent dreams.

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