

**Collective creativity:  
Contemporary art associations  
in Port Vila, Vanuatu**

**Lisa McDonald\***

Canterbury Museum  
University of Canterbury

**Abstract**

This paper examines the influence of contemporary art on collective memory in Port Vila, Vanuatu. In doing so, two key organisations are introduced – the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association and the Red Wave Vanuatu Arts Association. The establishment of each organisation is explained to contextualise the current socio-cultural environment in which artists work. The influence of kinship, island genealogy and aesthetic ideologies are explored as are gender relations and colonial heritage. By extension, the oeuvres of particularly active members from each association are presented, thus providing an overview of the themes and media that permeate spaces of shared public consciousness in the capital of the archipelago.

**Keywords:** contemporary art, *kastom*, Vanuatu, Nawita, Red Wave

Contemporary artists in Port Vila, Vanuatu are more than simply image makers. Locally acknowledged as holders of great skill, painters and sculptors are considered ambassadors of the nation. United as citizens, yet bound by codes of natal affiliation and pride, makers encapsulate their cultural heritage in a variety of visual forms. Since the country's achievement of political independence from British and French administrators in 1980, artists have adopted the rich and varied traditions of the archipelago as inspiration for their images. Over the years' they have determinedly created a new visual language that is now synonymous with state sovereignty and national identity. Once regarded with dubious suspicion as a threat to deeply embedded systems of customary status and entitlement, contemporary art today informs collective memory with practitioners acting as central agents in the public presentation and promotion of community values and ideals.

The majority of artists are members of either the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association or the Red Wave Vanuatu Arts Association. Affiliation with one of these autonomous organisations is a vital means by which artists distribute their creations, expand their practical skills and establish professional reputations in Vanuatu and abroad. Myriad factors influence the association to which an artist pledges membership – kin relations, island lineage, colonial heritage, age and gender each being contributing determinants. While the acts of painting, drawing or sculpting are individual pursuits, artists rely upon the cooperative networks provided by each association to advocate the

---

\* **Corresponding author:** Lisa McDonald, Canterbury Museum, [lmcdonald@canteburymuseum.com](mailto:lmcdonald@canteburymuseum.com)

symbolic, cultural and financial capital of their oeuvres. Membership also provides makers with protection against claims of audacious self-promotion. Benedicta Rousseau (2004: 224) notes, “With the emergence of a higher level of economic differentiation amongst the ni-Vanuatu population in Port Vila, jealousy can arise from success in terms of business and employment.” As personal accomplishments and financial prosperity are often discreetly realised to avoid drawing overt attention to oneself, group affiliation offers artists a communal milieu in which to profit from their talents.

Despite the association to which an artist belongs, each organisation mandates that members create original works of art. Both Nawita and Red Wave juxtapose contemporary art against highly standardised and rigidly codified objects of *kastom*.<sup>1</sup> Rather than reproduce prescriptively repeated forms such as *tamtams* (slit gongs) or *namange* figures (fern carvings) artists instead manipulate a variety of media to produce unique visual representations that explore plethora subject matter. From delicate watercolours to intricate mixed-media installations, their creations act as material embodiments of their lived experiences. The diversity of their representations reflects the surroundings in which they labour, as makers explore indigenous identity within local, national and global contexts.

This imagery, however, is mediated by systems of *kastom kopiraet* (custom copyright) that govern access to, and circulation of, highly codified indigenous practices, knowledge and expressions of culture (see McDonald, 2015). Specific symbols, designs and patterns are linked to particular islands of the archipelago, with different communities determining their reproduction and dissemination. Entitlement is bound to *ples* (place) – a socially and spatially constructed term that preordains the roles and responsibilities, along with the rites and rituals, to which an individual has both access and obligation. More than merely a certain locale or physical site, *ples* is a powerful idiom that affirms genealogical connections between the landscape and the body. By extension, the *raet* (right) to acquire and share knowledge is strictly mediated by the notion of *ples*. Artists depict iconography to which they have hereditary claim, thereby demonstrating *rispek* (respect) – the showing of esteem and deference to others and their *kastom*.

## Nawita

Nawita, the oldest of the associations, was officially established in 1989. Ralph Regenvanu (1996: 312) notes that as ni-Vanuatu artists were becoming “more aware of the very tenuous nature of their individual careers” they sought collective agency to legitimise their vocation and elevate the socio-financial capital of their outputs. The organisation thus sought to support, encourage and promote the work of artists while also organising conference, exhibition and workshop opportunities. Over the years the work of Nawita artists has been included in a number of international exhibitions including *Contemporary art of Melanesia* at the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre and *Contemporary arts of the South Pacific* at the University of New South Wales, both held in 1995. Significantly, in partnership with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, the association toured the first exhibition solely dedicated to contemporary ni-Vanuatu art in 1999. *New traditions: Contemporary art of Vanuatu* showcased the practice of ten local artists, each of whom was commissioned to produce a work of

---

<sup>1</sup> *Kastom* (custom) acts as a totalising logic that informs indigenous practices, beliefs and knowledge. Lissant Bolton (1999: 1) defines the term as ‘a way of summing up what the ni-Vanuatu understand to belong to themselves and to their place in opposition to all that contact with other people and other places has introduced to their way of life.’

art that responded to a specific period of the nation's history.<sup>2</sup> These creations were displayed alongside twenty *kastom* artefacts from different islands of the nation to highlight the continuity of ni-Vanuatu creative expression.

Upon its formation, Emmanuel Watt was elected inaugural President of the association – a position he held for twelve years. A self-taught carver, Watt began his art practice in 1975 and was the first indigenous artist to stage a solo exhibition. The display, presented at his studio located at Devil's Point (an outer seafront suburb of Port Vila) in 1978, introduced viewers to new forms of visual expression previously unseen in the archipelago. Since then he has been a leading figure of the local contemporary art movement. Watt takes as his materials debris from the natural world – fallen tree branches and coconut husks are transformed into large-scale sculptures while coral, shells and driftwood found at the ocean's edge are crafted into pieces of jewellery and diminutive figurines. With minimal intervention, he manipulates the existing forms of his reclaimed media to produce works of art that reflect the Melanesian environment from which they emerge. Over the last four decades Watt's oeuvre has explored “the delicate relationship that exists between man and the landscape” (interview, 9 February 2013, author's translation).<sup>3</sup> His long service and commitment to the arts has been officially recognised by way of an Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the Government of the French Republic and a Medal of General Service from the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu.

Other artists credit opportunities provided by Nawita for extending their art practices. Sero Kuautonga and (the late) Jobo Lovo shared a three-month residency in Basel in 1997 that afforded the pair exposure to international museum collections, scholars and marketplaces. Under the curation of Roger Boulay and Christian Kaufmann a travelling exhibition toured the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, the Museum der Kulturen and the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre.<sup>4</sup> The rationale for the project was twofold. In Vanuatu and New Caledonia, where the display was entitled *Spirit blong bubu i kam bak* (*The spirits of the ancestors return*), the display showcased objects “to help reinforce cultural identity or to help spark off or maintain cultural reawakening or “revival”” (Huffman, 1996a: 2). In Europe, under the name *Arts of Vanuatu*, the exhibition presented material culture to museum audiences unfamiliar with the heritage of the archipelago (see Bonnemaïson, Huffman, Kaufmann and Tryon, 1996). Alongside the artefact display was also staged *Spirit blong tedei* (*The spirit of today*), comprising a selection of artworks produced by Nawita members in order to demonstrate the ongoing relationship between the past and the present, the traditional and the contemporary.

The residency presented Kuautonga the chance to continue his critical engagement with Abstract Expressionism, a style with which he first became familiar during a visit to France in 1994. Over the ensuing decades his canvases have conceptually interrogated dichotomies such as rural and urban, tradition and modernity. Having received limited art training in his youth, Kuautonga's experimentation with pigments and supports has resulted in a distinctive style that differentiates his practice from that of others working in Port Vila. His paintings “relate to what is happening in the world today” (interview, 11 October 2012) and attest to his ongoing examination of the relationship

---

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was initially mounted at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and then travelled to Australia, New Caledonia and New Zealand (see Regenvanu, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with artists conducted in Bislama, the lingua franca of Vanuatu, have been translated by the author.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the exhibition Roger Boulay was Curator at the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie and Christian Kaufmann was Curator at the Museum der Kulturen.

between the local and the global – the themes of technology, climate change and indigenous knowledge most recently informing his oeuvre. Since 2001 Kuautonga has held the position of President of Nawita and actively continues Watt’s legacy of encouraging fellow association members to experiment with innovative forms of visual expression.

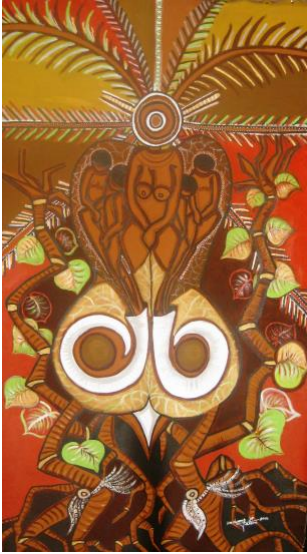
For Lovo, the residency kindled his interest in tapa – a form of material culture once created by his Erromangan kinsmen.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the missionary campaign of Hugh Angus Robertson, the production, circulation and exchange of the cloth was a prevalent feature of both social and ceremonial life.<sup>6</sup> Unadorned tapa served as clothing and bedding in utilitarian settings, while decorated cloth was a central feature of customary rituals that reflected the highly stratified regimes of sociality particular to the island (see Carrillo Huffman and Nemban, 2010, Huffman, 1996b, Humphreys, 1926). The motifs applied to tapa during these ceremonial occasions were mediated by strict codes of ownership as imagery referenced ancestral spirits, tribal identity, land custodianship and structures of political power. To undermine the cultural potency of the cloth, the concentrated distribution of imported fabric became an essential component of the Christian campaign. Calico was introduced as an alternative to tapa, thus resulting in the decline and eventual erosion of its manufacture and use on the island – the consequences of which became apparent to Lovo during his time abroad.

Upon returning to Vanuatu, he thus sought the counsel of his elders regarding the techniques of tapa production and decoration. In collaboration with his father and grandfather, he researched and documented the *kastom* dress of his paternal Lowuhen umah clan ancestors. Consequently, his corpus includes tapa made from the bark of one of three trees: the whitewood tree (*Endospermum medullosum*); the breadfruit tree (*Artocarpus altilis*); or, the banyan tree (*Ficus macrocarpa*), with each species producing cloth of a different colour. To these supports Lovo applies only organic pigments: pure yellow derived from the ground bark of the noni tree (*Morinda citrifolia*); red and brown from the burnt bark ashes of the noni tree; black from the roots of the kauri tree (*Agathis macrophylla*); and, white from limestone. His iconography embraces “tradition but twists it slightly to find new ways to tell Erromangan stories” (interview, 2 October 2013, author’s translation). Combining established cultural icons with original motifs, Lovo’s imagery is symbolic of indigenous experiences of contemporaneity in Vanuatu.

---

<sup>5</sup> Lovo is one of core group of now established artists to have benefitted from formal art studies with French instructors Jacqui Bourdain and Henri Thailade at the Institut National de Technologie du Vanuatu between 1979 and 1981. Other artists discussed in this paper who also attended the Institute are Joseph John, Juliette Pita, Jean-Claude Touré and Andrew Tovovur (see McDonald, 2015: 55-59).

<sup>6</sup> Robertson, a Canadian missionary, was stationed on Erromango 1872-1913.



**Fig. 1.** Juliette Pita, *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 2012

Representations of Erromangan heritage also feature prominently in the corpus of Juliette Pita, older sister of Jobo Lovo. Along with the highly stylised figure of the male *kastom* chief, Pita also creates paintings, drawings and tapestries that reference women in a range of social contexts. Her images of the female body performing ritualised dance routines articulate inherited knowledge and effeminate customs particular to her home island. For more than three decades Pita has also often portrayed women as maternal nurturers and providers. She highlights “the role that women play in contemporary ni-Vanuatu society and the many domestic tasks they perform” (interview, 28 September 2012, author’s translation). From canvases of breastfeeding mothers to depictions linking women to the agricultural wealth of the land (Figure 1), her images celebrate the realm of the feminine.

Pita’s career challenges the oft divisive nature of broader ni-Vanuatu gender relations that can serve to disempower and subordinate women. As the country’s only established female contemporary artist she carries with her locally constructed gender stereotypes. As Roselyn Tor and Anthea Toka (2004: 11) note, “Currently in Vanuatu, there is a significant marginalization of women from pertinent discussions and decisions in areas of social and economic development, governance and human rights at community and national levels.” The pervasive perception that female responsibilities lie in the realm of domesticity – the rearing of children, maintenance of households, tending to gardens and actualisation of spousal ambitions – situates art as an occupation best suited to male practitioners. Pita, however, subverts such societal expectations. Her art is not only a prominent feature of the local visual landscape, but also internationally recognised and acquired by institutions around the world.



**Fig. 2** Alvaro Kiki Kuautonga, x-ray film stencil, 2013



**Fig. 3** Taitu Tensley Kuautonga, coconut shell kava cups, 2013

For mid-career Nawita members the mentorship of established artists and development opportunities provided by the organisation have counteracted the absence of formal art education. Alvaro Kiki Kuautonga and Taitu Tensley Kuautonga (son and nephew of Sero Kuautonga respectively) attended an intensive six-month workshop jointly organised by Nawita and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in 2002 that provided technical training, materials and studio space during the early years of their artistic careers.<sup>7</sup> The two received tuition in the techniques of carving, clay modelling, drawing, fabric design, painting, weaving and wood-block printing in an environment of creative support and exchange that cumulated in a public exhibition of their works of art. Both artists today create paintings that embody their ni-Vanuatu identity and encapsulate the cultural heritage of their home island Futuna. In addition, each experiment with different media – Alvaro utilising x-ray film to produce stencils that illustrate *kastom* stories and practices, scenes of everyday life and geometric designs inspired by the natural environment (Figure 2); Taitu crafting brightly decorated kava bowls and trinket boxes from coconut shells (Figure 3).

A new generation of emerging artists are following in the footsteps of their elders and also joining Nawita. In her capacity as both an artist and mother, Juliette Pita has undertaken to teach her daughter, Amelia Lovo, the technical skills required to produce high quality works of art. Pita regards it her “role and duty to teach and encourage [Lovo] to paint and draw about [her] *kastom* and culture” (interview, 28 September 2012, author’s translation). The close maternal bond between the two has resulted in a nurturing relationship between mentor and student. While the younger is inspired by her mother’s works of art, the stylistic variations between her and Pita’s canvases have become more pronounced as her competency and confidence increase. While both rely on a shared bank of imagery, the generational gap between mother and daughter undoubtedly influences their perceptions of not only the creative process, but also their standing within the local artworld and community more broadly. In an environment dominated by male practitioners, both established and emerging, Pita and Lovo exemplify the power of kinship with regard to the acceptance, promotion and viability of artists perhaps otherwise disadvantaged by gender and age.

## Red Wave

As the Kuautonga and Jovo families came to dominate the membership of Nawita, other artists perceived the benefits of establishing an alternative association. Consequently, Red Wave was founded in 2005 by Jean-Claude Touré, a Francophone painter from the island of Ambae. In 2000 Touré commenced a two-year artist-in-residency at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific’s Fiji campus.<sup>8</sup> Here he was introduced to Dr Epeli Hau’ofa, the founder and then Director of the Oceania Centre, who governed the institution as an open space of participative learning. Joining other artists such as Ben Fong, Mason Lee and Lingikoni Vaka’uta, Touré became a member of the Red Wave Collective. During his time at the Oceania Centre he was introduced to distinct painting techniques that were to inform his corpus. While in Suva he was “inspired to create a new style of art” (interview, 22 October 2012, author’s translation) and developed a deep affinity with the aesthetic ideologies and teaching methods championed by Hau’ofa (see Hau’ofa, 2008; Thomas, 2012).

---

<sup>7</sup> The workshop was led by French artist Julie Dupré, and was sponsored by the governments of France and New Zealand.

<sup>8</sup> The Oceanic Centre for Arts and Culture opened 1 February 1997 (Hau’ofa, 2008: 83).

After returning to Port Vila he strove to actualise an art space similar to that of the Oceania Centre, with provisions for visual artists, theatre performers, dancers and musicians. However, a shortage of funds prevented the construction of an appropriate building so instead Touré founded Red Wave, an organisation that could function without a business premises. Modelled upon the association of which he had been a member in Suva, Touré applied the name Red Wave in Vanuatu to acknowledge that “A new wave has come out of the sea. Unlike a blue or a white wave, the red wave symbolises a new kind of contemporary art that is emerging in the Pacific ... and will be recognised internationally as coming from the region” (interview, 22 October 2012, author’s translation). With a mandate to equally share development and exhibition opportunities, encourage the talents of emerging artists and provide an alternative to Nawita as a platform for exposure, the appeal of Red Wave actualised a shifting of association affiliations among artists in Port Vila.



Touré’s corpus reflects his firm ideological stance regarding *kastom* as content in contemporary ni-Vanuatu art. For him, such depictions “reflect the sovereignty of the nation” (interview, 22 November 2013, author’s translation). His oeuvre takes as central subject matter the *kastom* and culture of Ambae. Local practices, traditions and cosmologies are transposed onto canvas by way of his highly stylised pictorial language. From oral histories to marriage rites his images encapsulate indigenous experiences in the context of an ever-evolving globalised world (Figure 4). Touré positions his paintings as documents of social history, comparing his paints and supports to the pen and paper of the historian – continually chronicling and critiquing customary knowledge allows him to “promote and protect the culture and heritage of the country” (interview, 22 November 2013, author’s translation).

Fig. 4. Jean-Claude Touré, *A Traditional Ambae Marriage*, acrylic on canvas, 2012

In his capacity as President, Touré encouraged a number of established artists to join Red Wave. As a prelude to the establishment of the association, a group of core artists including Matthew Abbock, David Ambong, Eric Natuoivi and Andrew Tovovur (all Nawita members at the time) participated in a woodblock print-making workshop in 2001 that was organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Office for the Pacific States.<sup>9</sup> The programme provided instruction with regard to the manufacture of paper, construction of woodblocks and the operation of a printing press. Artists were shown methods to harvest and construct fibres from locally available resources to make durable paper. Each participant was encouraged to develop their own style of visual representation and ni-Vanuatu attendees continue to produce high quality paper upon which they print woodblock images, paint and draw. The medium is now synonymous with Red Wave and acts as a material signifier of allegiance to the association, as no Nawita members are schooled in the art of printmaking.

<sup>9</sup> The workshop, Artists in Development: A Unique Workshop, was led by New Zealand artists Chris Delany and Michel Tuffery, and was sponsored by the Norwegian Agency for International Development.



**Fig. 5.** Eric Natuoivi, *Untitled*, mixed media, 2012

Eric Natuoivi also incorporates clay (imported from Australia or New Zealand) into his corpus, thus making him the only ceramicist in Port Vila.<sup>10</sup> Taking the historical traditions of Lapita and Wusi pottery as inspiration, his hand-made coiled pots are bisque or saw-dust fired to achieve varying textural and colour finishes. Natuoivi appends carved wood forms or highly polished pig tusks to many of his works of art, the latter being a sign of *kastom* wealth throughout the country (Figure 5). Having attained both a Graduate Diploma in Expressive and Performing Arts in 1987 and a Master of Education in Creative Art in 1991 from the University of New South Wales he is the only artist in Port Vila to hold internationally recognised academic qualifications in the discipline of fine art. The subject matter of Natuoivi's sculptures oscillate between one of two central themes. Some of his vessels examine socio-political issues affecting the lives of ni-Vanuatu – the topics of gender equality, globalisation and climate change most recently informing his practice. Other pots reflect the intangible cultural heritage of his home island Futuna - song, dance and storytelling are captured in visual form, thus acting as vehicles for the active promotion and protection of *kastom* and the “spirit world” (interview, 21 November 2013).



**Fig. 6.** Joseph John, *Storian*, watercolour, 2013

Until his recent retirement, Natuoivi co-taught art alongside Joseph John to students pursuing a Diploma in Primary Education (Teaching) or a Diploma in Secondary Education (Teaching) at Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education. The only contemporary artist from the Shepherd Islands, John's corpus is characterised by watercolour, acrylic and oil paintings that explore the relationship between (wo)man and nature. His pictures juxtapose traditional ways of living with introduced concepts of Western modernity, to highlight the fragility of cultural heritage, local ecosystems and *kastom* knowledge (Figure 6). As one of the first artists to have held a solo exhibition at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in 1984, John's images have circulated in the public domain and resonated with local

<sup>10</sup> Experimentation with local clay has proven ineffective for Natuoivi use: clay from the Banks Islands experiences shrinkage, while clay from Malekula crumbles after the firing process despite the addition of grog.



viewers for decades. He has produced images for children’s publications, while also illustrating pamphlets and brochures distributed by government departments and non-government organisations. Consequently, John’s work is readily identifiable by local audiences, as are the messages embodied within his many allegorical representations.

Andrew Tovovur takes *kastom* practices from his home island Erromango as subject matter. Throughout his corpus he uses “The symbols of Vanuatu ... in new contexts to create a rich visual language” (interview, 19 February 2013, author’s translation). His practice centres upon the production of paintings and drawings on supports of paper, canvas and tapa. He distinguishes his works of art by way of two distinct categories: ‘fine art’ – large-sized canvases that explore indigenous themes, history and ideologies; and ‘tourist art’ – small-scale works that incorporate stereotypical Pacific island subject matter, such as local flora and fauna, that appeal to international travellers as mementos and souvenirs (interview, 9 October 2012, author’s translation). Tovovur has secured a number of commissions that have resulted in highly visible public murals. From panoramas for utility companies and commercial service providers to vistas for restaurants and guesthouses, his distinctive imagery is immediately discernible in an urban landscape that, more and more, has come to be dominated by mass-produced advertising billboards.

The appeal of Red Wave for mid-career artists lay in the diversity of older members’ island genealogy. The prominence and perceived partisanship of the Lovo and Kuautonga families within Nawita proved a decisive factor. Matthew Abbock, David Ambong and Tony Bruce – all from the Malampa province – together rescinded their Nawita memberships to join Red Wave. While not related to one another in any capacity other than friendship, the three consolidated their individual positions based upon a common bond of regional camaraderie. Abbock, a self-taught artist, produces images that “focus on the stories and *kastom* of [his home island] Paama ... to show belief in the traditional ways of life” (interview, 29 October 2013, author’s translation). Since 2013 he has crafted his own canvases, using a mixture of calico, glue and white acrylic paint, providing him both an economical working material and point of difference from fellow artists. To these supports he applies acrylic paint by way of distinctive brushstrokes to convey the fluidity of his subject matter that often includes marine creatures and seascapes.



Fig. 7. David Ambong, Fest’ Napuan logo, 2007

The corpus of Ambong, a self-taught artist from the island of Malekula, encompasses paintings, woodblock prints and graphic designs. Since 2007 he has been the official artist for *Fest’ Napuan*, an annual five-day music festival held in Port Vila. During this time, he has created logos and stage

backdrops that have appeared on merchandise including t-shirts, stickers and mugs, while also being used in promotional material such as newspaper advertisements, banners and programmes. Ambong combines the colours of the Vanuatu flag with the motifs of national insignia to make his designs synonymous with the event (Figure 7). As a result, local interest in his work has steadily increased over the years as audiences are regularly exposed to his highly anticipated images. In both his commercial and artistic practices Ambong incorporates the tropes of *kastom* – lived experiences of tradition inform the imagery of his art and reflect his “spirituality and culture” (interview, 29 October 2012, author’s translation).

Bruce, by way of material departure, creates intricate carvings from the nuts of the natangora tree (*Metroxylon warburghii*). Having learnt the techniques of wood carving from his paternal uncle, Bruce attended a workshop in 2000 that focused on plethora uses of the nut.<sup>11</sup> After conceiving “a picture in [his] mind, similar to a silhouette” (interview, 26 October 2010, author’s translation), he produces miniature creations that alternate between depictions of marine and earth creatures that inhabit the land and ocean of Vanuatu (to which he often applies Indian ink to accentuate the intricate features of his highly polished surfaces) and those that represent *kastom* stories and activities particular to his home island Ambrym. Within this latter category Bruce regularly juxtaposes figurative representations with sand drawing designs – ephemeral geometric patterns drawn in sand, dust or ash that visually communicate coded messages to restricted cultural and language groups across the central and northern islands of the archipelago.

## Conclusion

As Port Vila evolved from a small colonial outpost into a space of rapid urbanisation, so has the number of artists based in the capital increased. Within a complex network of social relations, makers pledge membership to Nawita or Red Wave based on multiple factors – kinship, island genealogy, age and gender each being contributing influences. Yet, rather than invoke an atmosphere of animosity or malign, the existence of two associations is regarded by makers as impetus for the production of new and engaging forms of art. The advocacy and support offered by each organisation provides artists with opportunities to develop technical skills and establish professional reputations. By doing so, the elevated socio-cultural agency of contemporary art positions paintings and sculptures as vehicles for the active promotion and protection of the archipelago’s diverse customs and cultures. No longer associated with colonial administrators or expatriate hobbyists, today works of art are embraced as representations of lived ni-Vanuatu experiences.

While some artists paint and draw, others carve or sculpt. Acrylic and oil paint, ink and watercolour feature alongside clay, wool and products of the natural landscape. Supports vary from canvas and banana leaf paper to wood, calico and tapa. Palettes comprise colourfully rich hues, sombre earthly tones and monochromatic tints. No single style of representation binds artists to one another – depictions oscillate between the figurative, abstract and allegorical. Subject matter ranges from mythology to modernity as artists confront issues such as urban and rural life, gender roles and responsibilities, customary traditions, colonial history, the global economy, technology and the environment.

When considered as a discreet category of ni-Vanuatu material culture, these objects augment collective memories of indigeneity, identity and nationhood. Nawita and Red Wave each hold annual

---

<sup>11</sup> The workshop was sponsored by the Fonds pour le Pacifique Sud.

exhibitions at the Espace Culturel Français, a multi-purpose space adjacent to the French Embassy in the centre of the Port Vila's leisure and business precinct. Images welcome visitors to the Parliament building and also the offices of the Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat, while the walls of the Reserve Bank are adorned with the work of local artists. Both the National Museum and National Library and Archives collect and exhibit works of art, and images are used in the promotion and marketing campaigns of corporate entities and not-for-profit organisations. Proudly displayed, contemporary art permeates the shared consciousness of local viewers as it encapsulates communal values and ideals to provide temporal links between the past, the present and the future.

## References

- Bolton, L. 1999. "Introduction." *Oceania*, 70 (1): 1-8.
- Bonnemaison, J., Huffman, K., Kaufmann, C. and Tryon, D. (eds). 1996. *Arts of Vanuatu*. Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing.
- Carrillo-Huffman, Y. and Nemban, S. 2010. "Nelokompne Rises Again: The Revival of Erromangan Painted Barkcloth and its Role in Indigenous Re-examination of Colonial Missionary History." In *Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Traditional Knowledge Conference 2010: Kei Muri i te Ave be Tangata Ke – Recognising, Engaging, Understanding Difference*, edited by J. S. T Rito and S. M. Healy, pp. 90-98. Auckland: Nga Pae o te Maramatanga (New Zealand's Maori Centre for Research Excellence).
- Hau'ofa, E. 2008. *We are the ocean: Selected works*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Huffman, K. W. 1996a. Spirit blong bubu i kam bak, ex. cat., 29 June – 10 August, Port Vila: Vanuatu National Cultural Council.
- Huffman, K. W. 1996b. "The 'Decorated cloth' from the 'Island of good yams': Barkcloth in Vanuatu, with Special Reference to Erromango." In *Arts of Vanuatu*, edited by J. Bonnemaison, K. Huffman, C. Kaufmann and D. Tryon, pp. 129-140. Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing.
- Humphreys, C. B. 1926. *The Southern New Hebrides: An ethnological record*. Cambridge: The University Press.
- McDonald, L. 2015. *Creating kastom: Contemporary art in Port Vila, Vanuatu*. PhD thesis, University of East Anglia.
- Regenvanu, R. (eds). 1999. *New Traditions: Contemporary art of Vanuatu*. Port Vila: Vanuatu Cultural Centre.
- Regenvanu, R. 1996. "Transforming representations: A sketch of the contemporary art scene in Vanuatu." In *Arts of Vanuatu*, edited by J. Bonnemaison, K. Huffman, C. Kaufmann and D. Tryon, pp. 309-317. Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing.
- Thomas, N. 2012. "'We were still Papuans': A 2006 Interview with Epeli Hau'ofa." *The Contemporary Pacific*, 24 (1): 120-132.
- Tor, R. and Toka, A. 2004. *Gender, Kastom and domestic violence: A research on the historical trend, extent and impact of domestic violence in Vanuatu*. Port Vila: Department of Women's Affairs.

---

## Author's biography

Dr Lisa McDonald is Associate Curator Human History (Māori and Pacific) at Canterbury Museum and Adjunct Fellow with the School of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Canterbury, Aotearoa/ New Zealand.

---