

Case study number: 02/2014

Project Title: Veitalatala: Matanga 'oe Fonua

Digital Photographic imagery printed on Ngatu (Tapa or bark cloth)

Researcher: Talita Toluta'u

Project Period: 2008-2012

## **Project Description:**

Talita started printing on *Ngatu* (Tongan word for Tapa) whilst studying for her Master of Art and Design at AUT. Ngatu is a form of bark cloth made from the beaten bark of the paper mulberry tree. After an initial sampling and experimentation process, Talita had three large format designs digitally printed on ngatu. These art pieces and the process of creating them became an essential part of the narrative of Talita's Master's documentary.

## **Background:**

This was a challenging and unusual project, in that it involved digital textile printing on a previously undocumented substrate. Ngatu is used both traditionally and in contemporary practice as a canvas by many artists, but each use different mediums to mark these ngatu pieces. Ngatu can be painted, decorated by rubbing, stamping, stenciling, smoking or dyeing. However, Talita didn't come across any examples of digitally printed ngatu or tapa during her research, so her print process with the TDL involved some trial and experimentation.

The traditional Tongan ngatu usually tells a story and holds history in its prints. It is one of the most important traditional Pacifica women's crafts that still lives to this day. Talita was inspired to experiment with printing on ngatu as she saw it as a way of bringing the old traditions together with modern technology, and developing a new method of preserving stories and experiences.

**Process:**

Talita sourced her base cloth from Tonga. The ngatu pieces are hand-made by her family members. This is a traditional and labour-intensive process, where skill and experience enables makers to create pliable and refined cloth from the bark. Several pieces are often joined together to create larger cloth, using a starchy glue substance. They are then brought into New Zealand where they are laid under a mattress to 'flatten' out in preparation for printing at the Textile and Design Lab.

Talita's design process started with photography, which she incorporates as a means of documentation and as a method of refining thought. The ngatu artworks she creates are photographic portraits of Tongan women. The distinctive portraits depict their migration journey out of Tonga and into their new respective 'homelands'. The design focuses on the history of these women and how memories are recollected in a multifaceted way. She describes the artwork as a poetic construct of their stories, with the distinctive variegated design reflecting the variations of memory, being complex and multi-layered.

After the artwork is designed in Photoshop, test prints are trialed through experimentation at the Textile and Design Lab. Initial test prints were on an A3 size piece of ngatu. Talita would then make adjustments to the colour in Photoshop if required. This sampling and adjusting process would be repeated until satisfactory, to achieve the print colours compatible with the natural variations of this base fabric.

There were several specific challenges printing onto this unique cloth. As ngatu is an "untreated" (without a finishing treatment applied to surface) natural fibre, it can be very absorbent. This affected the ink adhesion, which tended to 'bleed', giving blurred and imprecise line effects. This incidental effect was taken advantage of by Talita, who incorporated it as a design feature representing the imprecision of memories.

The other print issue also related to the natural characteristics and irregularities of this cloth, as the ngatu pieces could not be absolutely flat as normally required for digital printing. This issue was significant as the variable height of the barkcloth meant that the distance between the print heads and the cloth also varied, resulting in uneven dispersion of ink. Methods such as taping the ngatu cloth down to the printing bed, and trying to flatten the ngatu pieces longer under mattresses were adopted, with some degree of success.

**Project Outcomes:**

Finally, the photographic designs were printed onto larger 2m x 1.5m ngatu pieces, which Talita went on to showcase as final artworks in numerous exhibitions. Talita has had a great response to these artworks, with audiences appreciative of how digital textile printing on ngatu creates a contemporary twist to the traditional ngatu pieces, but still reflects the original purpose of preserving history. The finished artworks delicately render photographic imagery on this unique cloth, imbued with a sense of narrative and modern storytelling.

**Conference Papers:**

These artworks have been showcased at the following conferences and exhibitions:

AUT Masters exhibition 2008

AUT WE window display 2009

PACIFICA Conference 2012

Presentation Confirmation of candidature 2012

Tongan Research Association Conference 2013

Talanoa Pasifika conference 2013

**Interesting and Relevant links:**

Talita's thesis can be viewed here:

<http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/handle/10292/503>

**Contact:** talitatolutau@yahoo.co.nz

**Images:**



*Figure 1. Finished artwork, portrait on ngatu, T.Toluta'u*



*Figure 2. Digital printing in process at the TDL, 2013, T.Toluta'u*



*Figure 3. Digital printing in process at the TDL, 2013, T.Toluta'u*