



JOURNEY BLONG YUMI
Australian South Sea Islander
150

65000
10 000



Sonya Hopkins, *Woven trumpet shell* (detail) 2004, cotton, rope, lace. Photo: Carl Warner

JOURNEY BLONG YUMI

According to our oral histories both in Vanuatu and in Australia, and from our research throughout the world, in Vanuatu and in Australia, we bear witness and solemnly declare to the world that indeed between the years 1847 to 1906, over 40,000 of our people were kidnapped from our islands, and treated as commodities to be sold into Australia and forced to work as slaves in the fields of the industries thus mentioned above.¹

- Chief Richard David Fandanumata (Historical Advisor to the Vete Indigenous & Historical Association, Vanuatu) and Abel David (Chairman of the Vete Indigenous & Historical Association, Vanuatu)²

Slavery is not a word that many Queenslanders would associate with the founding fathers of this great State, nor is it a term that the history books will readily admit to. Following the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, many cotton and sugar plantation landowners began to adopt a policy of sourcing indentured labourers³ from the Pacific islands to keep production costs as low as possible. From 1863-1904, under the auspices of 'indentured labour', over sixty thousand South Sea Islanders were taken, either through force or coercion, from their homelands in the Pacific and transported to Queensland.⁴ The majority of these people were sourced from the Melanesian archipelagos of Vanuatu, New Caledonia, the Torres Strait Islands, Solomon Islands and surrounding areas as they were believed to be well suited to work in a tropical climate.⁵ However, the farce that was 'indentured labour' during this period effectively masked a half century-long practice that in many



AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDERS
150 YEARS

cases simply amounted to abduction and forced labour.⁶

Journey blong yumi: Australian South Sea Islander 150 presents the story of six artists whose ancestral roots are intertwined with this legacy. Sharing personal recollections of social and economic struggle and survival, the artworks in this exhibition speak to the desire for reconnection and reconciliation with the past, as well as recognition of the unique place of South Sea Islanders in Australian history.

In the paintings of Jasmine Togo-Brisby blackbirds take human form. Looking us directly in the eye they are a quiet reminder of the horrific practice of 'Blackbirding'. The term blackbirding refers to the abduction of Pacific island people by Australian and European sailors during the nineteenth-century.⁷ Blackbirders in search of human cargo would lure groups of young Pacific people aboard their ships with the promise of gifts and items for trade. Once on board they were detained and shipped back to Australia where they were put to work.





Simone Togo-Brisby, *Through the folds of fabric (Blackbirding dress)*, 2010, calico, felt and feathers. Photo: courtesy of the artist

Many traders overloaded their ships without sufficiently stocking supplies or facilities for the voyage. As a result many South Sea Island people did not survive the journey. Such abuse of human rights led to various amendments to the Kidnapping Act throughout the 1870s which helped condemn blackbirding as a violation of a person's freedom, but failed to put a complete halt to the practice.⁸

Togo-Brisby's three painted portraits depict both the blackbirder and the blackbirdees. The two South Sea Island people in her painting are her great grandmother and great grandfather who were abducted from their homes as children. Brisby sourced their portraits from photographs attached to their indentured labouring contracts. Reading through their contracts she noted that

her great grandmother was only eight years old when she was abducted from the islands – just one year older than Togo-Brisby's own daughter. Togo-Brisby was horrified to think how her daughter would have responded to being abducted and taken to a foreign land, unable to speak the language, and never to see her family again.

Jasmine Togo-Brisby's sister, Simone Togo-Brisby, was similarly inspired by the journey of their great grandmother, designing a blackbirding dress made of fabric resembling cotton sacks which may have been used by their great grandmother. The youthful design of the dress belies the horrific story of a stolen child, and indeed a stolen childhood.



Sonya Hopkins, *Woven trumpet shell*, 2004, cotton, rope, lace. Photo: Carl Warner



Fay Mooney, *Homeward Bound*, 2013, acrylic on canvas. Photo: Carl Warner



Rhonda Norman, *The Strength Tree*, 2013, acrylic on canvas. Photo: Carl Warner

In her paintings Rhonda Norman similarly deals with the idea of finding solitude during times of turbulence. The daughter of an Aboriginal Australian father and Australian South Sea Islander mother, Norman grew up knowing little about either culture. Instead her strength comes from her faith in God and the ability of faith to pull one through times of difficulty.

Kakae Pakoa, whose impressive six metre carving takes up the main wall in the exhibition space, is directly descended from Vanuatu lineage. In moving to Australia to be with his wife he wanted to connect with the descendants of those people who went missing from the islands so many generations ago. Kakae states that many stories of abduction and questions about where these people ended up still abound

in the islands today. Even after the White Australia Policy of 1901, when many South Sea Islanders were deported from Australia to free up employment opportunities for White Australian settlers,⁹ most South Sea Islanders never returned to their homelands: the majority of vessels used for deportation only went as far as the Torres Strait Islands.

Pakoa's carving encapsulates the journey of the South Sea Island people through time and space. His carving is a *monument* to those who had been lost and an *aide memoire* for those who remain; for those who return to their ancestral homelands and reconnect with their families who are keeping the home fires burning awaiting their arrival.



Neither migrants nor Indigenous peoples, the artists in this exhibition give voice to a community who were formed through adversity. Collectively their artworks speak of legacy and hopes for the future, while expressing the contemporary identity of a uniquely Australian-based Pacific island culture. The artists in the exhibition hope that through telling their stories they may be able to help raise awareness about who the Australian South Sea Island community are, where they come from and their continued role in Australian and Pacific island history.

As part of these efforts to raise awareness, Logan Art Gallery partnered with the Vanuatu Australian South Sea Island Community (VASSIC) to deliver a series of programs and art activities to school children. The groups heard recollections from fourth generation descendants of South Sea Island people who spoke about their own personal histories, traditions and culture. Some of these oral histories have been recorded and are on display within the exhibition.

The groups were invited to create artworks in response to what they had heard. Each of these individual artworks have come together to form two large collaborative installations within the exhibition. The first is a large floor based installation using cane and cotton acknowledge the historical significance of the South Sea Island people in the cotton and cane industries of Queensland. The second project involves children recording their own personal stories of migration using white chalk on black cardboard cut in the shape of birds. The cards have been arranged on mass to resemble a flock of flying black birds migrating, taking with them the stories and personal histories of a new generation.

¹ Fandanumata, R. and David, A., *Solemn Declaration to the World of Slavery of New Hebrideans in Australia 1847 – 1906*, 2013, Vete Indigenous and Historical Association, Vanuatu. Retrieved, July 4, 2013, from <http://mysunshinecoast.com.au/i/bm/oid39429/doc/SOLEMN%20DECLARATION%20TO%20THE%20WORLD%201%203.pdf>

² The Vete Indigenous and Historical Association represents the social, cultural and economic concerns of groups and individuals within the Tongoan and Sheperd islands of Vanuatu in relation to issues around land rights and historical grievances primarily within the communities of Port Villa and Efate.

³ Indentured labour is a form of labour where employers pay for foreign workers travel to their country for work. In the case of some Australian South Sea Islanders imported to Queensland during the second half of the nineteenth-century, indentured labourers were forced to work off a debt unduly imposed upon them.

⁴ Parnaby, O.W., *Britain and the Labour Trade in the Southwest Pacific*, 1964, Durham NC: Duke University Press, p. 203.

⁵ Galloway, J.H., *The Sugar Cane Industry*, 1989, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, p. 234.

⁶ Saunders, K., *Uncertain Bondage: An Analysis of Indentured Labour in Queensland to 1907, with Particular Reference to the Melanesian Servants*, 1974, Brisbane, Australia: Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Queensland, p. 1.

⁷ Mortensen, R., 'Slaving in Australian Courts: Blackbirding cases, 1869-1871', 2000, *Journal of South Pacific Law*, Vol. 4, p. 3. Retrieved, June 12, 2013, from <http://www.paclii.org/journals/fJSPL/vol04/7.shtml>.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 11-13.

⁹ Giuliani, G., 'Throwaway Labour. Blackbirding and a White Australia', 2011, *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, Vol. 2. No.2. Retrieved, June 12, 2013, from www.ub.edu/dpilsa/jeasa22giuliani10.pdf

JOURNEY BLONG YUMI

Australian South Sea Islander

150

Journey blong yumi reflects on the journeys taken by South Sea Islander people who have made the Logan region of South East Queensland their home. It showcases contemporary artworks, stories from ASSI Elders, and artworks created by local students through the ASSI in schools outreach project.

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12 July – 17 August 2013

Journey blong yumi: Australian South Sea Islander 150
was curated by Michael Wardell and Kakae Pakoa.

Catalogue essay written by Reuben Friend.

Thank you to the participating artists Jasmine Togo-Brisby, Simone Togo-Brisby, Sonia Hopkins, Fay Mooney, Rhonda Norman and Kakae Pakoa.

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