



The body is political;
politics is embodied



Portrait of ANGELA TIATIA. Photo by Kieren Cooney.
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf,
Sydney/Singapore.



ANGELA
TIATIA

ANGELA TIATIA, *Edging and Seaming*, 2013, stills from moving image: 12 min. Courtesy the artist.

BY SOPHIE ROSE

There are two common English words that borrow from Polynesian languages: tattoo (*tatau*) and taboo (*tapu* or *tabu*). In many precolonial Pacific cultures, tattoos were a form of familial identification and clothing. Yet when Christian missionaries gained footholds in the region in the 18th and 19th centuries, tattooing, deemed heathen, was highly discouraged and in some instances criminalized. Since then, the female-worn Samoan *malu*—which stretches from a woman’s knees to the very top of her thighs—has come to incorporate both *tatau* and *tabu*; the motif simultaneously marks a girl’s entry into adulthood and is an adornment of female flesh that is never to be shown in public. This implicit agreement to cover what was once considered clothing reflects Samoa’s complex relationship to its colonizers: hiding one’s tattoos allowed the tradition to continue in secret, but through its concealment, the practice absorbed the Victorian notion of a woman’s modesty and shame.

In *Walking the Wall* (2014), the Auckland-born artist Angela Tiatia wears a black leotard and heels, exposing her full *malu*. Lying on the floor, she walks her legs up a wall, arching her back as her hips move upwards, her gaze fixed on the camera. This work, part of the series *An Inventory of Gestures* (2014), echoes 1970s events by artists such as Valie Export or Carolee Schneemann, who performed repetitive and often uncomfortable movements to test the limitations of the female body. Tiatia’s bodysuit and heels enact a second form of femininity: one found in fashion magazines or pop music. The artist’s 20-year career as a model is not something to be glossed over. “I think modelling had a profound impact on the way that I’m comfortable in front of the camera; I’m comfortable in my body; I’m comfortable with the tool that I was given,” she relates. As she stretches her long, tattooed legs upward, she looks to us with a knowingness of her body and the connotations it holds. Hers is a female body between two cultures, and she plays on the expectations of each.

Walking the Wall continues to spark controversy with Samoan communities whenever it is shown. Most recently, the video was included in the 2019–20 Te Papa Tongarewa exhibition “Tatau: Sāmoan Tattooing and Photography” in Wellington. Despite the many photos of nude men with the male *pe’a*, it was Tiatia’s *malu* that caused concerned Samoan visitors to call

the museum. Yet this work is not meant to divide the community. “It’s about creating the conversation,” Tiatia emphasized.

Her practice centers on these provocations for difficult discussions. From the outset, Tiatia has paired video-performances such as *Walking the Wall* with documentary films, in which she turns the camera toward members of her family and Pacific communities. For Tiatia, the formats are “two streams investigating the same cause”: one reflecting the “disparity of power as it appears in the self” and the other offering a “macro” picture of these inequities. Embodying the latter is the two-channel film *Edging and Seaming* (2013), one half of which depicts the artist’s mother, Lusi Tiatia, sewing in a home workshop in Auckland, while the other portion follows factory workers in Guangzhou. Lusi completes her last ten orders before her employer moves its operations offshore; in the other channel, workers in China make garments for New Zealand companies. Rather than imply a causal relationship between the two sides, the video reveals similarities between the distant groups of seamstresses. Many workers in Guangzhou migrated from rural towns, just as Lusi travelled across the Pacific to find work; and like Lusi, they send much of their wages back home, upholding a remittance economy that sustains many parts of the world.

In a similar vein, the documentary *Tuvalu* (2016) accompanies the performances *Holding On* (2015) and *Lick* (2015). The three works record the impacts of climate change on the low-lying nation Tuvalu, which is only two meters above sea level on average. In *Holding On*, the artist lies on a concrete pier with her arms outstretched, straining to maintain her position as waves crash against her. Created on the same trip, the video of *Lick* frames the undercurrent, capturing only the artist’s legs and arms as she is swept up in the high tide. These performances make a poetic allegory of an individual subject grappling with the steady advancement of climate change. *Tuvalu* approaches the same topic with slow-moving footage of Funafuti’s main atoll. Unfolding across three channels, the film follows the people of Tuvalu as they stoically perform their daily tasks while the rising sea laps at their feet.

Tiatia’s practice asserts that politics is always embodied, and, if studied closely, a seemingly insignificant gesture can unveil a much larger history. No work

better illustrates this idea than *The Fall* (2017), which features 30 actors in disjointed, choreographed tableaux. The work was commissioned by the Australian War Memorial to commiserate the fall of Singapore to Japanese imperialists on February 15, 1942. This was Tiatia’s first major commission and, with a significant budget, she felt obliged to expand her practice in new directions, working this time as the director of a large cast. While researching the work in Singapore, where she listened to recordings of WWII survivors in the National Archives, she was struck by the vivid details in the personal accounts of the events, which contrasted official histories. Highlighting the personalized experience of conflict, the final five-minute film was taken in a single shot and pans across the performers who each act out a memory from the archive.

The Fall opens with a peculiar frame of six actors holding orchids—the national flower of Singapore—in their mouths, and then unravels into episodes of chaos. We see people raiding supermarkets, stealing cash, burning personal items, throwing fresh linen in the air, running, dancing, and devouring canned peaches—reflecting the confusion, fear, and abandon encapsulated in the original first-person narratives. These scenes unfold in complete silence, evoking the uncanny quietness that fell over the city in 1942. *The Fall* is by no means a simple re-enactment of Singaporean history; rather, the actors reflect a broad range of races, genders, and ages, and wear contemporary clothes. The film’s temporal ambiguity creates a sense of foreboding; this may be a flashback or a glimpse into the future.

Tiatia is now working on a video that will be shown alongside the Art Gallery of New South Wales’ upcoming exhibition “Matisse: Life & Spirit, Masterpieces from the Centre Pompidou, Paris.” In response to Henri Matisse’s paintings of what was then French Polynesia, the work will study the fantastical figure of a Pacific “Venus” and its reverberations in the present. For the first time, she is incorporating digitally rendered images, marking yet another leap of experimentation. While her medium is always expanding, Tiatia’s interests remain fixed on “the politics behind simple things like the gesture, and who is embodying that gesture.” In this way, she compels audiences to consider the “diversity of, and the politics behind, the bodies that we find ourselves in.”