

# FROM THE COLLECTION

## ART COLLECTION



This art work hovers between abstraction and figuration and is called *Fāgogo* - the Samoan word used to describe the kind of storytelling where the narrator enthral the audience with acting and vocal variation. Jagged motifs dance across the hardboard to operate like stage flats revealing the action of a play. Canvas and tapa have been shaped into energetic patterns, glued around a ghost-like face which appears to be floating to the surface of the work like a repressed memory.

*Fāgogo* are spooky tales of the supernatural, presented in a theatrical way, designed to terrify the listeners. Swirling into the subconscious through the agency of the human voice, words and ideas which make up these stories provoke images in the (often juvenile) listener's mind. This is evoked in the way the currents of blue

and green lines swarm around the torchlit green face, enlivening the surface. Printed in angular letters on the diagonal below the head is the word *FAGOGO*, each letter bigger than the one before like a voice urgently calling the name of a character in a cartoon strip.

The artist has fashioned the head at the centre after the Tahitian adolescent girl *Tehamana*, or *Tehura* as Paul Gauguin renamed her in his book *Noa Noa*. She is immortalised in Gauguin's *The Ancestors of Tehamana* or *Tehamana Has Many Parents* (*Merahi metua no Tehamana*), a predominantly green-toned portrait in oils of a young girl in Victorian dress inscribed with its title in capital letters. Painted in 1893, it is now venerated as one of the artist's masterpieces in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Alluding to Gauguin, and combining tapa cloth

with oilstick, acrylic and oil paint on hardboard in this work, loane was inaugurating an artistic practice which has been intent on exploring the *vā* or space between cultures. He writes: "I used tapa cloth, but in a way that makes it look different, but still retains the qualities. My art works are abstract, they don't look Polynesian as far as traditional forms go, but they do as an evolution of that genre. The gist of it, its spirit, is still there, even though the form has changed."

Made from the bast or inner part of the bark of the *u'a* or paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), tapa is known as *siapo* in Samoa. Women usually harvest the bast in long strips, soaking it so that they can scrape it clean and smooth with a shell before beating it with an *l'e* (heavy wooden club) on a *tutua* (anvil) to spread the fibres and increase the width of the strips. loane has preserved both the natural texture and colour of the tapa, shaping the pieces to look like the markings on carving but also to be reminiscent of flora and fauna found in a South Pacific Island. By contrasting the material reality of the skilled work that women do in preparing bark to make *siapo* with the Gauguin's fantasy of his Polynesian child-bride, loane conjures the French artist as a foreign devil, and his relationship with the Pacific Islands as exploitative. Collaging real and fictive elements together like a cubist pasting a newspaper masthead into a tabletop still-life, loane is mindful of the gap between what is imagined from tales that are told, and real or lived experience.

■ Linda Tyler

John Herbert loane, born 1962, *Fāgogo*, 1986, Oil, oilstick, acrylic, tapa and canvas on hardboard, 795 x 1190mm.