

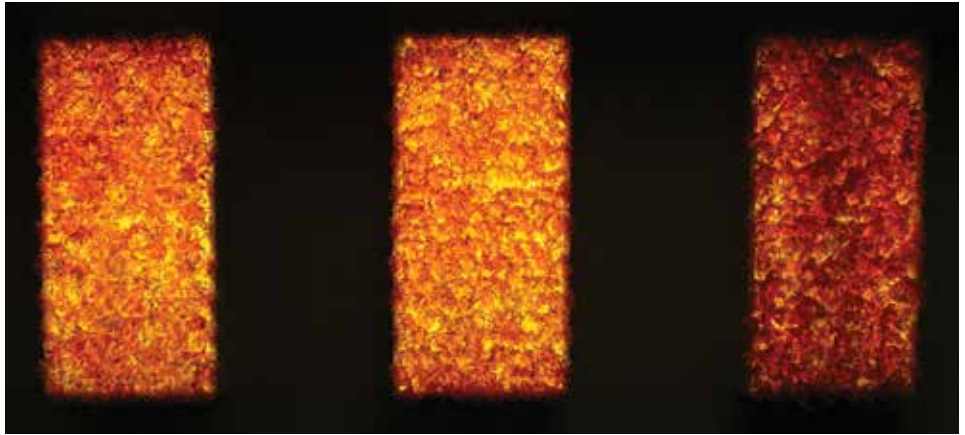
# From the art collection

Golden and good humoured, Niki Hastings-McFall's floral tribute to her Samoan heritage has greeted tides of students and staff since the opening of the Kate Edger Information Commons in 2003.

Boxing together artificial yellow hibiscus flowers with electric light, the artist uses contemporary and permanent materials to link the intangible qualities of a Pacific experience. These showy blooms broadcast beneficence and hospitality - they are flowers with power.

Part of the artist's series Fl/Oral Histories, made in 2002, they are delivered already freighted with the inheritance of colonisation. Permeated by a yellow light which symbolises the legacy and continuing influence of Christianity in the Pacific, they encapsulate past and present. Their perky petals point to how Pasifika traditions were suppressed by a new authority in the nineteenth century. When missionaries arrived, the role of verbal recitation to establish social identity and position was usurped by The Word, which was written. Indigenous knowledge got devalued, part of the darkness of ignorance that would be banished before the light as souls were saved.

The triptych or three-panelled altarpiece is a format associated with the Christian church. Arranged across its surface, devotional imagery conveyed the mysteries of faith. Iconoclastic, this trio of trapped blooms is an adornment for the altar of art. Rather than leading the viewer to God, it points to two high points of 20th-century art for its form, combining the readymade of Dada with the all-over technique of an American colour field painting. A three-piece suit, it shows how emblems of living cultures can be appropriated into narratives of



power and displacement by museums, sealed in airless vitrines, and placed on display for popular consumption, and so consigned to history.

Raised in Titirangi (the Fringe of Heaven) by palagi grandparents, Niki Hastings-McFall first plied her making skills as a jeweler at the Manukau School of Visual Arts, graduating in 2000. Craft was the vehicle she used to navigate the shifting sands of her personal and cultural identity, which became important to her at the age of 35 years: "I first met my Samoan father, James McFall in 1992. He was terminally ill and sadly he died later that year. However, he left me the rich legacy of my rich Samoan aiga (family). Since these significant events, my work has been increasingly driven by my research into this Pacific Island heritage," she writes.

Representing Ubuntu - kindness, generosity of spirit and humanity - floral lei are symbolically exchanged in many cultures of the Pacific, and flowers are also worn in the hair or over the ear. Despite prohibitions on the custom by church fathers preoccupied with sin, the idea of the

islands as densely populated by languishing dusky maidens, advertising availability and consent by wearing flowers in their hair, has persisted. Sourcing her artificial lei from the \$2 shop, Niki Hastings-McFall's positions her flowers to face down the possibility of being confined by this unreal stereotype.

Functioning both as garlands and as wreaths, lei have sacred associations with the gods. Giving, wearing, storing and disposing of lei is governed by custom and protocol. Using materials as synthetic as an economy dependent on tourism, Niki Hastings-McFall shows how in the contemporary world Pacific myths and realities have become scrambled, and traditions are not always honoured. A symbol of prestige has become a cultural cliché, albeit lightly worn.

Linda Tyler

*Commissioned for the opening of Kate Edger Information Commons in 2003, Niki Hastings-McFall, born 1959, Yellow lei light triptych, 2002, Perspex, lightboxes, artificial lei*