

# TAPUITEA

By Katie Rasch

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*Tapuitea* (2022) dissects and reimagines Sāmoan mythology using science-fiction tropes and imagery, to blend her fascination with culture and speculative storytelling. This interest is spurred on and contributes to a growing canon of Pacific Futurism, inspired by Afrofuturism movements, which reposition our ancestral stories from relics of the past into potentials for our future. Katie's imagines a future of floating cities, wayfinding through stars, space-waka (canoe) and tatau (tattoos) that move and glow. Like so many other mixed-race diasporic children who are displaced from their cultural homelands, Katie is always learning more about Sāmoa through her family and the strong Pacific community in Meanjin, "I want this work to reflect the joy and obsession that I feel every time I learn a new story, like a kid picking up a good comic for the first time."

## Our Origin Stories

Written by Luce Nguyễn-Hunt

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Nestled amidst the faded deep-Microsoft blue of Katie Rasch's *Tapuitea* are Sāmoan mythological figures. Lost in an underwater landscape made up of pixels and layered images, Katie's friends and family illustrate the Sāmoan mythology and creation stories of Tapuitea, Nafanua and Tai'i, and Sina and the Eel. Arranged in a style that mirrors comic books or graphic novels, these digitally constructed scenes give a sense of childlike wonder whilst toying with playful early 2000s internet aesthetics. The blocky coral and mangroves, superimposed with light flares and lasso-tooled characters almost makes me feel like I've stepped into my childhood computer desktop background. It cleverly transports the new generation of Sāmoan diaspora back to our first curiosities of deep sea life, through games like *Treasure Cove*, *Atlantis Underwater Tycoon* or TV shows like *Flipper* and *Lopaka*. In hindsight, it's no wonder many of us had a natural liking to digital media that explored the ocean and its beautiful creatures, perhaps it's the closest we could get to feeling at home.

Shortly after Katie made *Tapuitea*, she told me how the piece ended up speaking to her inner child. She described feelings that have surfaced in my own life as well, that of unexpected little bits of cultural knowledge and memory that might lay dormant for years until emerging intuitively in artworks. She explains, "there's also a thread of giving a younger version of myself something to learn from." It's both a joy and a gift to be able to revel in this moment of inner child reconnection with Katie and draw out our own inner child's intuitions and seemingly forgotten stories.

### **The Story of Tapuitea**

*Tapuitea* tells the story of a young woman who terrorised and enacted cannibalistic violence towards her aiga and kin. She eventually set her sights on devouring her brother, To'iva, who was so afraid he swam to Savai'i and hid in a fasa tree (like pandanus tree) near a pool of water. As Tapuitea

followed To'iva, she tasted his footprints in the sand and noticed that they were salty, working out that her brother came from the ocean and was still indeed on the island. Eventually, when she reached the fasa tree that To'iva quietly perched in, she saw his reflection in the water and jumped, scrambling to capture his reflection.

To'iva begins to admonish his sister, shaming her for transgressing vā and destroying the love and care founded by their familial relationship. Coming to her senses after hearing her brother's plea, Tapuitea decides to make amends and renounce her old ways. She promises To'iva to ascend into the sky to appear as the morning and evening star, helping to guide wayfinders as her way of asking for forgiveness. She becomes a key star that guides journeys at sea and her presence in the sky continues to navigate our people home. This story teaches us that even through breaking vā and with wicked beginnings, Tapuitea is able to reimagine herself into another form of protection, guidance and safety.

### **Nafanua and Tai'i**

Nafanua is the goddess of war from Western Savai'i (Falealupo). This story is set in the times when the people of Falealupo were working as slaves for the two dominant tribes on the island. The Falealupo men were ordered to collect fresh coconuts from the trees, directed to climb feet first. This was not only extremely difficult but humiliating and awkward. One day, it was Tai'i's turn, and as he struggled to make his way up the tree he let out a loud sigh. Nafanua heard Tai'i's sigh of despair from all the way in Pulotu and realised the people of her homeland were in anguish.

She sought advice from her father, Saveasiuleo, pleading with him that she could hear the cries of their people. He then gifted Nafanua with one of his four war clubs. The first called Ulimasao, which she was to use as her sea vessel. The second,

Faauliulito, was dedicated as her weapon in battle. The third, Tafesilafai, was also for battle but only to strike her enemies. And the final club was Faamategatau, which would be used in the face of victory and to establish a new order and justice for Falealupo. It was her destiny to save her people and return the enemies back to their respective homeland too. Nafanua united the Falealupo peoples and granted them their freedom. When the war finally came to an end she ordered the people to tie coconut leaves onto the coconut trees to identify and proclaim them as sacred and forbidden. Still to this day, it is customary to tie coconut leaves onto the tree trunk and restrain from picking coconut, often preserving them for special occasions or to naturally fall to the earth.

### ***Sina and the Eel***

Described as one of the most beautiful girls on Savai'i, was Sina. She adopted and raised a small pet eel, adorning it with all the love and care. As the eel grew, it fell deeply in love with Sina. This obsessive crush scared Sina, but as she ran from it, the eel persisted and followed. Just when Sina thought she had finally reached safety in Taumeasina, she was horrified to see the eel's eyes piercing through the water of a village pool. She cried out, "E pupula mai, ou mata o le alelo!" (Translating to: "You stare at me, with eyes like a demon!")

To protect Sina, the village chiefs had no choice but to kill the eel. Before its eventual death, the eel requested that Sina bury its head on Taumeasina. Sina gracefully agreed to its dying wish. From the burial site of the eel's head, grew a tall coconut tree. Upon removing the coconut husk (natural fibers), we can see the three distinct holes marking the two eyes and mouth of the eel. One of the marks is easily pierced for drinking the coconut's refreshing juice. Legend says, that Sina kisses the mouth of the eel each time she drinks from the coconut.

**Katie Rasch** (she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist and artsworkeer, working predominantly with photography and digital art on unceded Yuggera and Turrubal land. She explores speculative myth making through the lens of Pacifika Futurism to return to decolonial narratives. She often creates work with the goal of creating representation and reconnecting with cultural pride. Through this, Katie playfully draws from her connections within the Pacifika and Queer Meanjin community to explore her cultural learnings, championed by optimism and hope.

Katie Rasch  
Tapuītea 2022  
Photographic installation, dimensions vary  
With thanks to Ashley Rasch, Emily Nguyễn-Hunt and Solomon Elisaia-Mamea



**ANTHEM**

**Metro Arts**

**Jo Thomas**

Creative Director + CEO

**Kyle Weise**

Curator (Exhibition Program)

**metroarts.com.au**

97 Boundary Street, West End, Brisbane Qld 4000

(07) 3002 7100

info@metroarts.com.au

Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nations' cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.



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