



Sofia Tekela-Smith

a fragment of the day behind my ear

profile by John Pule

Sofia Tekela-Smith is one of a rare group of artists who uses the term jeweller to describe her practice but because of the nature of working with many different materials, she has become an artist with multiple voices dealing with many disciplines and genres including the role of mediator between installation and jewellery. Her early works parodied the dusky maiden stereotype but recently her oeuvre of works speaks about rendezvous in her country, Rotuma. Tekela-Smith works with a rich variety of materials, pounamu/greenstone, memory, mother of pearl, black pearls, fibre, wax threads, industrial plastic and feathers. These materials are rendered carefully to make flowers, that in earlier works generated different types of fragrances reminiscent of her country. These perfumes act as connectors to her family, her land and childhood.

For Tekela-Smith, the body relates to the spiritual, and the physical in hereditary ways, but there is always a sense of the body reacting differently from the perfumes generated when it comes into contact with necklaces inspired by Rotuman flora. This necklace is known as *tefui*. The *tefui* can be seen as the basis for Tekela-Smith's most recent art-making processes. It has adaptive qualities and stability and is grounded in Rotuman soil. *Fui* refers to the painstakingly created but elaborately designed and executed star shape component of a necklace. This star acts as a foundation on which a rich array of different flowers or leaves are placed and secured with woven vines. Women wear a *tefui* consisting of five *fui*; men can wear a five or seven *fui*, and a child wears three. Tekela-Smith's *Lovely Hula Hands*, a series commissioned for the Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, 2002, literally extended her connection with her soil into another realm, creating a new paradise of fragrances and fauna.

These works consist of elements that incorporate disciplines associated with portraiture, sculpture and photography. These ideas came to providence in her magnificent exhibition *Melodies Of Their Honey Coloured Skin*, Te Tuhi-The Mark Public Art Gallery, 2003, and *Home/Ground*, Art and Industry Biennale, 2004, New Zealand. Heads of friends, family and her lover were photographed. A clay model was sculpted from the photograph, a rubber mould was made and cast in fibreglass. In the same way prominent figureheads were honoured by having busts commissioned, these heads eulogize genealogical connections between each model, through knowing Tekela-Smith and each other. For Tekela-Smith, the head remains taboo. Shell and stone were intricately cut to resemble Pacific motifs, metaphor and imagery pertaining to the struggles and joys of a people whose history was once deliberately forgotten, but now resuscitated and indigenised into a language of the future.

Rotuma if you are lucky to find it, is a black dot on a map, on some maps the island does not exist. That is the fate of its existence. It has a unique Polynesian language and culture. In her solo exhibition *I Would Take You To My Mama's Country*, John Leech Gallery, 2003,

Tekela-Smith etched poetry onto mother of pearl. '*Bloody is the shift; tearful is the move, sadness to those who knows other lands, happiness for those who waves them on,*' is one example of the words she uses as a metaphor for presenting a New Zealand passport to gain permission to enter another country in order to reach her own. The political overtones in the exhibition's title refer to travelling through political territories and international boundaries over sea, sky and land, collecting stamps of approval, but more poignantly the works are about her first journey with her mother back to Rotuma as an infant.

Paradise Now! 2004, Asia Society Museum was the first exhibition to showcase paintings, photography, installation and sculpture from the Pacific Region in New York. From black sculptured heads to photographed heads Tekela-Smith used photography daringly as a way to install her jewellery. A pair of photographs were titled *Savage Island Man with Pounamu, ... with Pure*. In one, a white cowrie shell necklace was forced into her subject's mouth; the other showed a pounamu necklace delicately balanced in his mouth. The mouth, after the eyes, is the most expressive muscle; when inflicted with wounds, the lips swell and burst forth blood. To warn that a tale is about to escape his mouth, the Rotuman storyteller would call out *Hanuj!*, simply translated as *Sacred Mouth*, and the people would reply with *Ma!*; we believe!. The mouth features in many Polynesian stories of mythology, as a place where land is created through the actions of demi-gods, who on finding the mouth to be like a large cold cave furnished wonderfully with a stalagmite, used it as a pathway to the heart. Tekela-Smith uses the mouth to hold objects that emanate meaning because the head is a place of respect, imagination and where our memories and soil are siphoned and reconnected.

Tekela-Smith's work is anointed with stories from her memories, stories wrapped up in the *pene'is/sweet* fragrances that are endemic to her *fuang ri* and *mosega*. The head becomes custodian of her memories and her jewellery. Notions of destination are sensuously prevalent in her works, and like an adventure, it crosses into others' time and space.

John Pule is a Niuean poet and artist living in Auckland, Aotearoa.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Sofia Tekela-Smith, *Green My Heart Green (After Cook) Series*, 2004. Photo: Amy Wright. Sofia Tekela-Smith, *Tatau My Heart Tatau series*, 2004, greenstone. Sofia Tekela-Smith, *Sofia* 2003, fibreglass, mother of pearl, waxed thread. Image courtesy of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.