

Scratching at the Surface 28 Feb 2022

SCOTT  LAWRIE

Sefton Rani doesn't hold back his work
packs a punch and delves deeply into
contexts that are helping him to forge his own path.

SHARE





"I create art because I'm consumed to do so. I believe the best use of my time at this point - and probably for the rest of my life - is to make art."

Sefton Rani is an artist that uses paint to form sculptural assemblages which dive - without restraint - into the history of labour and cultural production.

His work revolves around sociological, historical and political themes, which are elaborately constructed using found objects and industrial paint.

Unlike trying to reconstruct the past, Rani's practice relies on strong cohabitation within the present.

Through complexity and imagination, searching for geographical connection and alternative approaches of cultural relics, he skilfully combines unexpected and familiar materials, their meanings and interpretations. This work radically reformulates the ways in which we perceive contemporary landscape.

Scott Lawrie Gallery is presenting a solo exhibition of Rani's works titled *Industrial Plantations* until March 6, centred around the sculptural and physical attributes of paint and creating art that both subverts and embraces the genre. The work is enveloped by agency and action while reflecting on current debates surrounding globalization, migration, and remapping the cultural scene. Creative journey - with a business detour

Although he has spent the last nine years as a full time artist, Rani's journey to art took the long road of getting there. After a successful 25-year career working in hotels and living in major cities overseas, it was finally time to come back home to Aotearoa and apply those hard earned business skills.



Sefton Rani, *Industrial Plantations* (2022).

Rani explains “if you want to make art as a profession, you essentially become a small business owner and you need to understand, end to end, how to maximise the opportunities in that business.

“My former life set me up well for that. I have been lucky to have been involved in training, meetings, conversations and strategic discussions that your typical artist just wouldn’t get a chance to be involved with.”

Rani talks about his process and associated elements of his art-making with a compulsion, a drive for what is possible when art is situated at the heart of hard work.

“People often don’t understand there is a difference between a job and work. A job sustains you financially so you can live. Your work is what you are supposed to do in this lifetime. Art is my work. “

Cracks and layers

In a lot of ways, it is the process that is the vital aspect of Rani’s work. The focus is not about how the work is reproduced, but how it is transformed.

Like a window into his consciousness, we are invited to look at what lies beyond the cracks, to mingle amongst the colours and the landscapes, shapes and surface between art and the world that may be invisible to some of us - but that surrounds us every day. It is also a great reminder that an entry point into an art work is abundant but not often accessible to those that are trying to experience it.



Sefton Rani. Photo: Supplied.

“All art is simply pigment and a binder on a surface. The rest is up to the viewer to work out or buy into,” muses Rani.

The work addresses the role of construction in making of art, representation and reception of such practice.

“Paint is an object in the work, not a veneer or lipstick on the surface of a painting.

“My current show has about 200 litres of paint used to create the paint skins and some of them are centimetres thick. The paintings are visually and physically dense and heavy. Sometimes they weigh more than 20kg. I like that sense of work in them, labour is a material.

“I now understand how working in a paint factory when I was younger and my dad working in a paint factory all his life has influenced the work greatly. They were industrial fields for Polynesian / migrant workers.”



Sefton Rani, Industrial Tap #9 (2021)

The paint skins that make the works offer an immersive, physical and perceptual experience that combines the illusory with the everyday labour and its impact.

Using the layered method, he masterfully peels back the coats to expose the underlying specks of colour and then proceeds to resituate what we might call familiar tropes and everyday motifs like tyre marks, skirting boards and corrugated iron.

“The paint skins I use have grown in sophistication, visually and chemically. There is a lot of alchemy in there.

“I paint on glass, plastic or objects, peel it off and then collage the paint. I paint with dry paint! I’m colour blind to red so it’s all a bit of a guess with colour sometimes.

“I like the idea of a journey or history being told with the cast paint objects I do. It’s why I encourage patinas on them, often the patina is from the original object I apply the paint to when creating the paint skin object. Rust, dirt, detritus, these are colours to me that are valuable. Rust automatically ages the work even if it was only made yesterday.



Sefton Rani, Urban Tapa (2022)

“I like black. I like the concept of the void, nothingness. Black doesn’t let the light out. I like that.”

Warning: emigration is not for the faint-hearted

As viewers, we get a definite sense of the historical starting point - an ancestral migration to Aotearoa and the specific context of migrant life.

Rani's use of the material has adopted a function of a mask. It is a seal and a cover up of the everyday realities associated with the work performed by the men belonging to the Pacific migrant communities.

"Plantations were replaced with industry. Yellow flowers replaced with yellow and black hazard markings, yellow skellerup raincoats and yellow forklifts. Tropical scents replaced with chemicals, stalagmites and stalactites in the limestone caves of Mangaia where my dad grew up replaced with similar forms dripping from tanks of resin."

These works are dramatic. This sharp aesthetic is a vehicle and a language aiming not to illustrate but to reinterpret the context some people are predetermined to experience.



Sefton Rani, Manual Labour (5% Mexican), (2021)

"The materiality for me was no longer key, it just allowed me to express the story of the Pacific migrant worker. "The colours used often are OSH colours (occupational health and safety) but they also link back to contemporary art like pop art. I like this link as there was often repetition in the images, like there is in the motifs of tapa, tattoo, carving and tivaevae."

The scratched paintwork and exposed layers are just another means of communication of the relationship between the migrant/diasporic labour and the environment that is cracked and distressed. The relationship equally reinforces the idea that the lived experience of the artist has a conscious influence on the work they produce. For us as viewers, knowing this helps us to connect to it and understand it.

But this is just one factor, and not a defining one. “I try to create an environment where I can get myself out of the way and let the work get on with what it wants to be. “

Layers of marginalisation

What we find familiar as part of our wider construct in the contexts of factories and road works is dismantled to reveal how deceptive aesthetics worlds can be.

Rani exposes literal and figurative layers of what it is like to be marginalised through examination of societal rifts, systemic racism, Pacifica identity, as well as his interrogation of himself and his own complicated personal history. There is certainly no better moment to highlight these social issues and recontextualise them within the contemporary art movement. “These paintings are honest and unpretentious. If you look hard enough, all the answers of how they are made are there. I leave the clues in there so you can unpick them. The paint wants a chance to tell its creation story so I allow it to do so.”



Sefton Rani, All Things Move as the Wind Blows #1.

These paintings demand a second look

Rani is letting go of the rules of what tapa looks like by taking only the necessary and bridging the paint into the material that encompass the urban and heritage environments.

“Some Pacific artists (and non-artists) don’t see my work as Pacific art. Good! If you hate it, even better. That means I am succeeding in forging ahead and creating my own path.”



It is through this considered view of personal experience that this artist is also exploring the current social norms. What is surfacing through and beyond the paint is a narrative of one person’s experience, their encased memories and diasporic longing for a place or a time that is self-constructed.

Rani states “everyone in this country is an immigrant. We all have had various obstacles to overcome moving here, some documented, some not.” There is careful work at play, scratching at the surface of what is between and within the paint. What is being revealed and what remains concealed on purpose. What is kept and what is let go of. A balance of impulse and restraint. That is what gives these paintings their power.

Sefton Rani is one of the artists participating in TBI’s Toipoto Mentoring Programme. For more information on how to apply and what the requirements are.