

# Industrial Plantations

Sefton Rani  
Scott Lawrie Gallery 2022



In this enlightening short essay, Andrew Paul Wood explores Sefton Rani's work in his solo show, *Industrial Plantations*.

In the first chapter of his book *Pacific Postmodern* (2000), American poet and educator Rob Wilson, distinguishes between two postmodern movements in Pacific writing. The first is what he calls postcolonial "identity lyrics" which he likens to a kind of kitsch, under-theorized response to the touristic gaze. This might be more dismissively labelled the Frangipanni and Flipflop school - obsessively entrenched in a kind of nostalgic daydream simulacra.

The second category resists the touristic imposition through language-based experimentation where the Pacific is re-envisioned as a fluid, polysemous space for Deleuzian "lines of flight". Tongan-Fijian philosopher Epeli Hau'ofa in "Our Sea of Islands" (1993) likens the Pacific to a continent that binds diverse communities and identities together rather than being an ocean that divides them.

Applied to the visual arts, Self-taught, Piha-based Sefton Rani fits in the latter of Wilson's categories. His Cook Island 'akapapa is the GPS that allows him to navigate his Pasifika identity within the broader context of the New Zealand diaspora without a single hibiscus in sight. Instead, we have a highly sophisticated slice of the gritty urban truth of Pasifika reality in New Zealand's main cities. In Rani's hands paint is the medium that fulfils the same role as Hau'ofa's Oceania - a way of binding disparate identities and influences together into a unified whole.

Rejecting the lure of minimalism (he's more of a maximalist), Rani sometimes refers to his works as "urban-" or "industrial tapa" - that is to say, they have an analogue function to barkcloth where story and identity are translated into a stylised form. Rani's works reinvent this visual storytelling with a combination of modern industrial materials as moulds, his own methods and techniques, ideologies, *trompe-l'œil*, modern motifs, graffiti, and traditional Cook Island symbols into a synthesis that talks about his sense of life in contemporary Aotearoa.

Rani is painting time - his assemblage compress history and allusion into the flattened strata of a contained moment. It echoes a particularly Pacific worldview expressed in recent critical theory: Tā-Vā (time-space) theory. The Tā-Vā model rejects Aristotelian/Western time for something more cyclical, layered, simultaneous, in superposition, eternal and unregulated, unifying human and nature in an eternal flux of cycle and exchange. The past is continually lived in.

In Rani's work, compositions defined by horizontals (as in *Root of All Existence* 2022, *Blasting through the Makatea* 2022, and *Industrial Plantations* 2022) express a connection to place, to the quest and travelling, to the immanent. In the case of *Beating the Drum* (2022) the rhythm of ancient war drums of Mangaia, the Cook Island Rani's father Mii came from. This traditional sonic reference to culture and history is only obliquely alluded to in what is otherwise a monochrome visual constructivist assemblage.

Mangaia (or A'ua'u Enua traditionally) is the southernmost of the Cook Islands, and makes frequent appearances in Rani's art. In one of his more sculptural pieces, *Raumea and Te Uanuku* (2021), the cylindrical form suspended from the ceiling is decorated with a symbol that looks like two 'Ks' facing each other. These represent the eponymous chiefly brothers Raumea and Te Uanuku of Mangaia who fought tied back-to-back so that they were neither exposed to their enemies from behind and if one fell the other could bear him up.

Verticals in the works, on the other hand, denote the spiritual and transcendental. It rises above the tired dynamic of coloniser/other to create a space for Pacific identity that is contemporary and co-existing with the Globalised West, not merely defeated and passively absorbed by it. It is defiant without being alienated or losing itself to paranoia. Therein lies the possibility of therapeutic reparation or opening a way of understanding for the coloniser into the experience of the colonised and exploited.

Inspired by the period he spent working in a paint factory and watching the paint build up with a sculptural life of its own, Rani's work is carefully constructed from multiple layers of solidified enamel or polyurethane paint skin like a piece of Fordite, often moulded from objects like old metal container drums (leaving flecks of rust embedded in it), tire treads (symbolic of life and cultural journeys), and corrugated iron (invoking industrial fences, simple Pacific houses, New Zealand rooves, and the barriers that keep things in or out). For all their lurid palette, they are underwritten by this bold, instantly recognisable and evocative form.

Rani got the job at the paint factory through his father Mii, who already worked there. It's very typical Polynesian thing for the parent to get a job for the child in their place of work. This creates an important lineage of family and labour among Pasifika peoples in Aotearoa, which is neatly evoked in Rani's work.

This industrial origin tells an important story of Pasifika people emigrating to New Zealand and working in manual jobs to support their families here and back in the islands. He describes factories as the "new plantations" and his work attempts highlight the value and dignity of their labour, and their vital, if often ignored, role in the growth of New Zealand's economy. The title of the work *1862* (2022) is a reference to the year blackbirding slaver ships appeared in the Cook Islands.

Other materials are included for texture or symbolism, including pounamu dust, charcoal and ash. Sometimes found objects and snippets of text are incorporated into these assemblages, either embedded or sculpturally. The combination of paint and *objets trouvés*, distressed and blowtorched (Rani is interested in the Japanese notion of *wabi-sabi* or the acceptance, even

appreciation, of imperfection), can sometimes recall Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg or even (closer to home) Don Driver, Rosalie Gascoigne, and Ralph Hotere.

But Rani also looks outward to other artists like Mark Bradford, Theaster Gates, Sterling Ruby, Glenn Ligon, Anselm Kiefer, Sean Scully, Oscar Murillo, Cornelia Parker, and Edmund DeWaal, often from marginalised backgrounds, and many of whom use collage, bricolage and multimedia to transmit a social message. Rani consciously places himself in a rich and unfettered cultural context of sources and influences.

The work is eclectic. It's scattergun. It's punk. It's gangsta. It's street. It doesn't require an overly critical interpretation or engagement because it's so overtly visceral, uncamouflaged and unpretentious. It's technically brilliant. It references everything because it isn't constrained by received hierarchies of taste or academic tradition. It takes up the task of telling a personal and social history through the most difficult medium of all - the abstract art object. It's magnificent.