

Essay by Andrew Paul Wood commissioned by Scott Lawrie Gallery to support the Industrial Camouflage [the chaos of hope] exhibition 2023.

Sefton Rani was based in Piha, Auckland. He is of Cook Island heritage through his father. His work is an ongoing exploration of his Pasifika identity in the context of working class and industrial Auckland.

Sefton sees his work as sculpting in paint to create a contemporary Pacific art, and refers to his works as “industrial tapa”. While influenced by the forms and mark making of traditional tapa, carving, tattoo, weaving and tivaevae, he eschews touristic Pacific imagery of hibiscus and dusky maidens for the industrial working class reality of Auckland’s Pasifika community.

It fits within, or grows out of, the new Pasifika art Dr Karen Stevenson documented in her book *The Frangipani is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985-2000* (2008), a product of the Pasifika diaspora, adapting to a new and very different urban context in New Zealand. It is an art that strikes a precarious balance between “where you are” and “where you’re from” and speaks across racial and geographical divisions.

Sefton primarily creates his work from solidified paint skins in a process of investigating the sculptural materiality of paint. It doesn’t just sit flat on a canvas, it bubbles, holds impressions, and imitates industrial surfaces, or simply exists as an object. His practice reflects the years he spent working in an Auckland paint factory, and both commemorates and elevates the otherwise ignored and unseen labour of Pasifika peoples in hard, manual jobs in Aotearoa.

Sefton’s new exhibition *Industrial Camouflage (the chaos of hope)* is something of a phoenix. The original iteration of the show was complete and waiting... And then Cyclone Gabrielle struck the North Island. Sefton and his family lost his home, he lost his studio and a year’s worth of the special paint ‘skin’ that is his trademark.

It may be three years before Sefton and his family can return to the house. This terrible limbo is evident in the work, which is, understandably, not what the artist originally intended. Instead of delaying, Sefton chose to plough on so that it would still be fresh and in the moment.

Coping in the immediate aftermath, sorting out new accommodation and a studio, only left eight weeks to pull a show together. That horrible night and its aftermath is evident in the work, in keeping with Sefton’s approach to painting as a kind of postmodern tapa and industrial archaeology that records the present.

Many of the paintings are in a dark, almost black palette, as if coated or embedded in mud, imbedded with text created by the impression of printer type blocks. This effect is achieved by mixing the paint with black, iron-rich Piha sand, reflecting the destruction, “painting time” as he does.

It intimates what anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour calls “iconoclasm”, where the destruction of an image creates an ambiguous situation, and it is unclear if something has been purposefully destroyed or something new created.

Over the sand and paint is another layer of what Sefton calls “sexy yet toxic” industrial paint, met with an act of alchemical subtraction by the application of combustion, chemicals and mechanical wire brushes to scar the surfaces.

It feels like the mud and sludge of the cyclone are physically, viscerally present, not merely represented as an act of mimesis. There is a Schnabel-like quality to the work, with the forms of the text serving the same function as brush strokes while at the same time, emotionally registering with the viewer as an allegory of ruin.

Inevitably the presence of text in New Zealand painting evokes Colin McCahon, especially with such a dark palette, but instead of religious statements Sefton’s texts spell out the dreaded words many found on their properties – Notice, Caution – and Ture X.

Ture X is a reference to the blue laws in the Cook Islands, moral bans imposed by the missionaries in 1879. Ture X (Law 10) forbade the traditional cultural practice of tattooing. Under this law the giving or receiving of a tattoo was punishable by having to manually weed a twelve-by-twelve yards area of ground.

For Sefton Ture X has come a symbol of increased authoritarian policies imposed by governments in the present global environment – whether well intended as in the Covid lockdowns, or otherwise, the synergistic effects of which can only ever be observed in hindsight.

Five of the works in the show are of the thick paint skin works we more usually associate with Sefton’s oeuvre. These were the only works, mid-creation, that Sefton was able to rescue from the flood. The paint skins, carefully layered up and manipulated, preserve the cast impressions of corrugated iron and tread plates. As with Sefton’s older work, these sculptural paintings are a monument to the contribution of Pasifika migrant labour in New Zealand.

In the 1960s, the factories of Aotearoa became the new island plantations. The “Industrial Camouflage” of the exhibition title refers to the forms and primary colours of industrial signage manifest as harsh, contrasting bands in the paintings, minutely recreating patterns of peeling paint and rust, punning on colour field painting and abstract expressionism.

An analogy can be found in Roy Lichtenstein’s punning, comic strip-style depiction of a gestural brushstroke of paint. Sefton’s industrial tapa also allude to the economic siren song of these industries, luring Pasifika migrants across the sea with the promise of money, material and educational opportunity.

What is being camouflaged in this equation is the cultural breakdown under the social pressures of Western capitalism, the breakdown of family with parents working multiple jobs and shifts at all hours to pay the bills, school truancy, and young Pasifika men seduced by the flashy trappings of the gangsta lifestyle.

Two of the works specifically refer to the little-discussed impact of Covid restrictions on working class Pasifika, operating hand to mouth, not always able to access government support processes, out of work because of business closures, and the resulting atmosphere of despair, sometimes leading to self-harm.

These works allude to this dark emotional abyss not through paint, but by the absence of light in the holes that pierce the paintings, casting a darker shadow on the dark paint beneath, a spiritual darkness.

A similar meditation on anxiety and despair suffuses and pervades all the work in this exhibition, the weathering of all kinds of disasters. This is a cenotaph to those who survive and those who don't. It's raw, powerful and brave.