

## ***Kupesi in Colour***

### *About the Artist*



Ashton Boyd, whose artist name is BAY, is a Tongan/Australian artist, who has been practicing professionally for 4 years regularly exhibiting in Adelaide and interstate.

Her work is inspired by both her Tongan ancestry and mental health. She has developed a strong recognisable abstract style, and donates a portion of sales to Headspace Australia.

Her artwork has been featured on the packaging of Madame Flavour Tea, and named as a finalist in various art prizes including the Advertiser Contemporary Art Prize and the Korea Australia ArtPrize in Sydney.

### *About the Exhibition*

Last year I was awarded an artist residency at Nexus Arts. This included a 12-week residency where I was able to research, develop and create a significant body of new work towards an exhibition during the Adelaide Fringe 2020.

I am so grateful to have had the financial support of the Independent Arts Foundation to pursue this valuable opportunity. The residency was a significant milestone in my career and it would not have been possible without the IAF Small Grant Award Young and Emerging Artists' fund. The exhibition *Kupesi in Colour* came at an important time in my personal and professional development, having recently returned from a trip to Tonga.

It was a particularly important journey for me, as I didn't know I was Tongan growing up. I travelled to one of the very remote outer islands my family originated from and learnt much more about my heritage. I learnt much more about traditional Tongan art known as 'Kupesi' and it was these traditional arts that inspired my latest body of work.

The process of making Tapa cloth (Tongan barkcloth) and the use of Kupesi to decorate them, led me to question the stories behind the designs I saw. Sadly, the meanings behind the Kupesi are slowly being forgotten with each generation.

Kupesi are bold geometric patterns and symbols carved into a wooden block. Tapa cloth (traditional barkcloth) is then placed over the top of the carving and rubbed over with mangrove ink. This process is then repeated until the cloth is covered with the pattern.

My exhibition in March this year was a chance to celebrate and raise awareness around Tongan art. By taking traditional ideas and meaningful symbols, and mixing them with contemporary materials.

I created four new Kupesi designs inspired by my seafaring ancestors and these were used throughout my recent exhibition on different mediums.

The first 4 pieces were conceptual works, inspired by individual Kupesi symbols, I wanted to break down patterns into their individual elements. I showcased these using glittering perspex, framed over Tongan Tapa cloth brought home with me from Tonga last year. The juxtaposition of traditional element and contemporary materials is used to reflect the conflicting themes of heritage and identity, consistent throughout this exhibition and my practice.



The centre point of the exhibition was the large painted wooden carving, a modern Kupesi block, designed using a pattern I developed. Viewers were encouraged to interact by taking a rubbing using crayons and paper provided and contribute to a large communal artwork on the wall. It was crucial to have this interactive element as part of the exhibition as the process of making Tapacloth in Tonga is a communal activity.

In the final four paintings in the exhibition, I use repetitive patterns in the background and abstract painting in the foreground. This contrast of structure with the abstract, of traditional and modern, suggest a way in which my ancestry and individuality might find harmony with each other.

Finally, 3 tonnes of sand was installed to cover the floor space. It was important that the exhibition was completely immersive and had a strong connection to the Tongan islands. By standing in the sand (shoes were optional!) I removed a layer of hesitation often felt with exhibition spaces, and I loved that how connective that medium became. Walking in the sand and viewing or interacting with the exhibition became a shared experience that I wasn't expecting. I really loved how that part developed, as Tongan community culture is very strong. Seeing footprints in the sand was also reminder of my own journey, where I've been and where I may be headed.

Thank you.

