

PRELUDE

Greg Semu is an interdisciplinary artist of Samoan heritage who was born and raised in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Semu's first-hand experience of displacement has imbued him with empathy for other First Nations peoples, dispossessed and controlled by imperialist colonial regimes, as he has stated:

In response to the tribulation of the displaced, I want my images to be iconic and significant in a world sense, frozen and distilled in a frame: testaments that transcend geography and the passage of time.¹

The primacy of Semu's cultural identity is an enduring still point, a fulcrum of his artistic practice, which is powerfully distilled in his formative 1995 triptych, *Self-portrait with pe'a, Basque Road, Newton Gully* 1995 and its enlarged 2012 iteration. These self-explorations express Semu's connection to *Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo II*, a highly respected Samoan *tufuga tatatau* or master tattooist. Semu insists on the anthropological context by emphasising the *pe'a (tatau)* as the subject of the image, and not himself.

Semu's practice is informed by universal themes of cultural displacement, diaspora and hegemony. Moreover, the impact of colonial occupation and the importunity of Christianity on indigenous cultures across the Pacific arbitrate the terms of his artistic discourse. In his work Semu interrogates and challenges the attestations of history as evidenced in the legacy of imperialist representations, archives and xenophobic characterisations of First Nations peoples. By referencing, subverting and reimagining European photographs and history paintings, Semu unsettles their accepted hierarchical norms and replaces their chronicles and presumptions with the narratives that survive in First Nations oral histories.

In critiquing colonial discourse, Semu has often deferred to a method that renders the content of his work in the rhetorical terms of a classical European model of representation. The illumination of his compositions has hitherto been based on *chiaroscuro*, the technique used to create visual effects of light and shadow and to delineate forms, enabling the pictorial drama of certain historical or religious events to emerge out of darkness. Semu developed his singular approach in two series commissioned by the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, and Tjibaou Cultural Centre, New Caledonia, respectively: *The Battle of the Noble Savage*, 2007, and *The Last Cannibal Supper ... Cause Tomorrow We Become Christians*, 2010. In these seminal bodies of work and *The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (People of the Pacific)*, 2014–16, which were all shot on location, Semu worked closely with casts of Māori, Kanak and Cook Islander actors to re-stage European epic narratives, with Pacific Islander protagonists playing heroic roles as warriors, Christian apostles and seafaring explorers, defying the elements. Semu's provocative subversions of historical and biblical events rendered romantic, mythical or grandiose in art, serve to invalidate pejorative Eurocentric stereotypes that

persist in colonial sources and lead the viewer to ponder the repercussions of imperial conquest, Christian indoctrination and ethnocide.

Moreover, in these art historical detours, Semu used contemporary image making and digital techniques to fashion these heroic compositions and highlight the musculature of the Pacific Islander actors who emerge out of darkness in accord with the European old master paintings which he greatly admires. Each of these narrative works, which both parodied and paid homage to their sources, became an affirmation of Pacific Islander culture and proclaimed the beauty and eroticism of the indigenous body, in defiance of negative stereotypes of the 'Other'. Moreover, Semu often appropriated himself as the doomed, suffering or dead Christ into his dramatic re-enactments of episodes from the Passion of Christ, giving primacy to the revelation of his ancestral *tatau* and the naked body as an object of desire. He thereby challenges the ivory tower hegemony of Eurocentricism and presents a reversal of the Otherness that problematises representations of race and history.

BLOOD RED

In *BLOOD RED*, Semu shifts his focus from repositioning old master paintings, to exposing the 'Australian owned and operated humanitarian crisis'² suffered by Aboriginal people since 1788. Semu locates incumbent colonial records and photographic archives and by rendering them dramatically visible exposes a state sanctioned erasure of history and denial of inhuman atrocities that Aboriginal people have endured at the hands of the colonisers as he states:

The lucky country's 200-year history of colonial imperialism is a conflicted human tapestry of violent, lethal collisions – a tsunami of atrocity, trauma, tragedy, shame, denial, repeated opportunity and betrayal. Too many life stories that matter are muted and gagged in a blanket of silence and betrayal.³

In tackling the past and present 'systemic abuse and institutionalised neglect of the obligatory duty of care'⁴ perpetrated by Australian officialdom against the traditional owners, Semu takes as his raw material a site specific case study. He examines the conflicted contact history of Coen, a small township located in Country of the Kaanju people, in Far North Queensland, as a means of stimulating a dialogue on the disturbing frequency of black deaths in custody which continues to trouble the heart and conscience of Australians. The settlement was established during the 1870s, following the discovery of gold in the Coen district.⁵ Subsequently, about 500 miners flocked to the Coen field, but exploration further afield was stalled owing to the fierce resistance of local Aboriginal people who feared for their safety, having heard alarming stories of diggers armed with rifles travelling along the Coen track. In 1897, the Queensland Parliament passed the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* 1987, which granted power to the Home Secretary

to remove Aboriginal people and keep them on Aboriginal reserves under control of the state. Under the terms of this act, over 300 people were removed from the Coen district to reserves of Palm Island and Lockhart River. During the 1930s, mainly older Munkan, Kaanju and Lama Lama people lived in bark and stick huts scattered around Coen, before the establishment of several permanent Aboriginal reserves in Coen where Aboriginal people from different language groups co-existed, as wards of the state.

In *BLOOD RED*, Semu worked like a filmmaker, zeroing in on, re-enacting and upscaling as gigantic photographs the brutal evidence of Coen's frontier wars for the purpose of remembering the past and acknowledging present injustice and discrimination. Working in consultation with Coen artist Naomi Hobson and Kaanju traditional owners and in close collaboration with a host of community elders, teachers, police, stockmen and actors, Semu and Hobson negotiated a dialogue with displaced peoples of Coen. His project renders tangible archival and remembered testimony of their experience as a chorus of silent injustice that challenges colonisers' accounts of Australian history.

Rather than modelling his compositions on great old master paintings and their theatrical *chiaroscuro* lighting, Semu drew upon cinematic sources of film noir, the violent blood spatter spaghetti western and 'who done it' detective murder mysteries. He envisaged Coen as a frontier settlement, a 'Dead Wood' in Far North Queensland. The artist is concerned to make visible the incontrovertible evidence of misery, suffering and loss endured by Aboriginal people in Coen and the blood Country that lies beyond the settlement, to stimulate dialogue, reflection and perhaps 'engineer a quantum leap of dreaming'.⁶

Working on location, Semu employed a cast of Aboriginal actors to re-enact and interrogate Coen's colonial frontier history. He looked particularly at archival photographs which disclose enslaved Aboriginal prisoners shackled in neck chains as well as their adversaries: the white enslaver police officers and the conflicted black enforcers – native police and black trackers. As the fourth character in the re-enactment of an ugly history, Semu reconstructed images of the trackers' huts depicted in the archival images and from the architectural remnants that survive.

In this provocative exhibition, modelled on the cinematic techniques, visual language and genre for driving narratives of contemporary film makers such as Quentin Tarantino, Semu is a silent, omnipresent witness, attesting to the hidden injustice, systemic abuse and illegal displacement of traditional owners from their lands. The exhibition opens and closes with a larger than life 'Mexican standoff'⁷ that engulfs the viewer in the enormous injustice of Australia's treatment of First People, which continues into the present. Despite the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1987–1991), the images of Aboriginal incarceration in *BLOOD RED* serve as a frightening metaphor of its alarming prevalence in Australia today, exemplified by the heinous death of Cameron

Doomadgee (Mulrunji) in a prison cell on Palm Island on 19 November 2004.

On one side, gigantic figures of the enslaved traditional owners of Coen rise up in close-up and confront the viewer with the enormity and brutal inhumanity of their dispossession and enslavement and the incalculable repercussions of this systemic abuse. Semu's shotgun snapshots are huge manifestations of Aboriginal incarceration and consequent death in custody. More unnerving is the deployment by the colonisers of native police and black trackers as despised and loathed 'wolves in sheep's clothing', arch betrayers of their Countrymen, armed with rifles to enforce the enslavement of their own people as part of their policy to divide and rule the traditional owners. However, in a telling twist of the narrative, Semu dramatically inverts the past, unchains the enslaved Aboriginal prisoners and imagines the roles of the black and white protagonists being reversed. Against a blood red wall, he lines up white men, stripped to their underpants and shackled in neck chains, overseen by an Aboriginal police officer, armed with a rifle and ammunition, empowered to turn the tables on the colonisers and inflict a form of Aboriginal customary law or pay back. Semu's deliberate subversion of the Coen story serves to negate the desensitised attitude to torture, murder, rape and attempted genocide of people of colour in Australia and challenges the viewer to consider the grievous details and the untold legacy of Australia's wrongly commenced national history, and to embrace a narrative for change.

BLOOD RED is an empowering work that embodies complex narratives that survive in Aboriginal oral history, historical documents and the photographic record in opposition to 'authorised' accounts of how Australia was 'settled'. By re-enacting calamitous historical events as larger than life photographs, a medium so synonymous with presenting truth, Semu brings these atrocities and their untold legacy into the present. The pictorial inventions and written accounts of history and their social constructs of Otherness have dominated the knowledge base for generations. Semu interrogates the deceptive and bloody history of the colonial frontier and challenges the viewer to imagine and work towards a different Australia. His photographic discourse of cinematic proportions aims to stimulate awareness and reaction in the viewer as a mechanism for attitudinal change.

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¹ Artist's statement 2014.

² Artist's statement 2017, emailed to author, 10 May 2017.

³ *ibid*

⁴ Artist's statement 2017, emailed to author, 12 April 2017.

⁵ This discussion of Coen's European contact history is based on the following source, <https://www.qld.gov.au/atsi/cultural-awareness-heritage-arts/community-histories-coen/>, accessed 12 May 2017.

⁶ Artist's statement 2017, emailed to author, 12 April 2017.

⁷ Artist's statement 2017, emailed to author, 10 May 2017.