

## John Vea

b. 1985, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand  
lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand

*she sows this āina with her younger siblings,  
yet she cannot inherit that same āina*

2017

video, 3:48

courtesy the artist.

Created during the artist's residency in Honolulu, Hawai'i, in the lead up to the Honolulu Biennial (2017), the title of the work takes inspiration from the Hawaiian concept, 'Aloha 'Aina. The concept, which translates literally to 'Love of the Land', is central to Hawaiian thought, cosmology and culture, emphasising the importance of ecology and culture in daily life.

Vea uses this framework to revisit his familial history in his homeland of Tonga. In Tonga, women are unable to inherit land upon the passing of a family member. A contentious issue on this small island nation with limited land, this legal limitation has caused significant disagreements within Vea's immediate and extended family as his mother — who is the eldest of three sisters — was ineligible to inherit her father's land. Eventually, the title of the land was passed onto the legal 'eldest son', the artist.

The video depicts several family members playing 'Eggs in a Basket'. Taking place in Vea's mother's backyard in Aotearoa New Zealand, where she is able to own land, the innocent childhood game involves stealing as many rocks as possible from your opponent's base within a set time. Based on skill, determination and plain luck, the comradery created by the game sits in opposition to the story of his own family's challenges with the patriarchal barriers of the Tongan legal system and culture. Framing the video is the title deed to Vea's grandfather's land in Tonga, the subject of this legal dispute. The accompanying soundtrack features Vea's grandfather's band, Funga'onetaka, performing *Hala Faka'ete*, a song from his village Navutoka, Tonga.

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### *Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000*

2019

participatory installation

commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art  
courtesy the artist.

#### **Break times**

**10:00 – 10:10am**

**12:00 – 12:30pm**

**03:00 – 03:10pm**

John Vea emphasises the voice and lived experience of so-called low-skilled labourers. Commissioned by 4A especially for this exhibition, *Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000* takes its name from New Zealand employment statutes that require employers to provide rest breaks to their employees. Devised after two residencies across Sydney and Western Sydney where the artist noticed workers and labourers taking breaks, the artist drew upon his own experience as a low-skilled, minimum wage labourer at a prominent New Zealand packing company to recreate a version of the lunch room where he would take his daily breaks during his employment.

Visitors are invited to occupy the installation during three set periods, which form the bare minimum break entitlements that employees are entitled to under New Zealand labour laws. Vea's 'lunchroom' is characterised by its garish coloured wall, makeshift furniture and the bare essentials of amenities that typify these worker amenities. Vea has also created a series of posters for the room that are based on the ubiquitous glorified posters of Pacific Islands, reclaiming idyllic, picture perfect conceptions of the Pacific by inserting excerpts from noted Pacific Island scholars including Epeli Hau'ofa, Teresia Teaiwa and Albert Wendt.

These elements are complimented by a reader and a series of audio files that discuss Pacific worker issues played during the break times.

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*seasonal worker survival kit*,  
2015–  
mixed media installation  
courtesy the artist.

John Vea's sculptural installation of ready-made cardboard boxes refers to the complex labour flow in the Asia Pacific region, highlighting the experience of seasonal migrant workers. Each of the boxes in this wall takes inspiration from *umu* packs. A local development to Aotearoa, New Zealand, the *umu* pack is used by air travellers to transport food cooked in a Samoan/Tongan earth oven, assisting biosecurity officials to manage the flow of foods into Aotearoa New Zealand. One of the simplest and most ancient cooking structures, the Samoan/Tongan *umu* is typically an above ground oven created using heated rocks, contained by a small roof. Foods normally include taro, fish, banana and other fruits.

Veas act of repurposing these *umu* boxes into seasonal worker survivor kits humanises seasonal workers as more than commodities to the state for their labour output. This work highlights that workers, whether seasonal or in general, have the capacity to contribute to the wider cultural material well-being of the community, reminding us that all migrants are knowledge carriers and learners.

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### *Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't*

2017

six-channel video, 32:00

courtesy the artist.

Created during the artist's residency in Honolulu, Hawai'i, in the lead up to the Honolulu Biennial (2017), this work takes inspiration from poet, activist and peer of the artist, Imaikalani Kalahahele. During a conversation, Kalahahele asked, 'What we do with all da concrete rubbish?' in relation to Hawai'i's rapidly growing concrete built environment.

In this sequence of videos two figures traverse Mounharei (Mt Wellington, Auckland), using and then re-using the same concrete pavers to create a path. In an act of teamwork, the pair of workers act in almost perfect machine-like synchronicity. By isolating a type of labour and act, which would typically form part of a larger chorus of construction workers, Vea highlights the skill, care and commitment of workers who are normally stigmatised as so-called low-skill.

The format of the six-channel video is reminiscent of one of prominent New Zealand artist Colin McCahon's (1919–1987) most well-known paintings, *Six days in Nelson and Canterbury*, 1950 (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki collection). A reference to the Genesis creation narrative, McCahon's painting contains six views of a landscape glimpsed from the artist's journey across Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island while he was in search of seasonal agricultural work. By co-opting associations to McCahon's artwork, Vea emphasises the spiritual journey of these two workers, framing them against and within McCahon's language of Christianity, Romanticism and nationalist tropes.

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*29.09.09 Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga*

2013

video, 30:38

courtesy the artist.

Tsunamis occur most frequently in the Pacific, particularly along the Pacific Ring of Fire that loops from the South island of Aotearoa, New Zealand snakes up through island nations of the Pacific and Asia, then down the western edges of North and South America. The zone at the northern edge of the Pacific Plate is geologically the most active field of the earth. Several times a year, strong earthquakes of at least 7 on the Richter scale result in tsunamis.

*29.09.09 Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga* was created as a direct response to the 2009 Samoa earthquake and tsunami which claimed more than 189 lives and injuring hundreds of people. Vea's durational performance is an ode to the resilience of Pacific populations in the natural disaster's aftermath. Filmed on the West coast of Auckland at Piha beach, well-known for its blackened volcanic sand and deceptively strong rips, Vea attempts to build a wall from cinder blocks in waves breaking on the shoreline. Engaging in, what ultimately becomes a Sisyphean task, Vea's wall is repeatedly knocked down by the strong surf—illustrating the strength, destructive capacity and contingency with which nature operates.

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*Finish this week off and that's it!*

2014

five-channel video, 1:59:00

courtesy the artist.

This work draws attention to the issue of poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand. A highly charged issue, a number of reports commissioned by social welfare NGOs since 2005 have found that poverty has been affecting a greater number of New Zealand's citizens with corresponding social indicators ranging from increased poor health, lower rates of immunisation, lack of participation in early childhood education, to young people leaving school with no or low-grade qualifications.

Across five video screens, Vea presents a timeline of the artist over a five-week period as he lived on the World Bank's demarcation of the global poverty line (the equivalent NZ\$2.25 per day in 2013). During each of the filming sessions, the artist holds a rock for as long as he can before dropping it at the point of exhaustion. As time progresses, the artist looks noticeably thinner, yet surprisingly his stamina and capacity to hold the burden of the cinder block increases as the weeks progress.

Vea dedicates the video to those who are affected by this issue, particularly citizens who work low-skill labourer positions:

'Every day I turn up to work wondering if I'm next to go. I work the factory lines as normal with the others. This is the third day into this and most of the workers that are left are anxious; most of us hope our names don't get called up on the intercom. I hear my name out loud, I make my way through the aisles with everyone's eyes staring with sympathy. I walk into the office, my boss looks at me with remorse, 'Finish this week off and that's it!'

— Former factory worker, Auckland, 2009.

'I live in a two-bedroom apartment with eight others. We can't afford much on our own but if we live in a large group we can cope. Living in this country is very expensive for us, after all our bills whatever little that is left is for our food. We live on rice most days.'

– Gujarat cleaner, Auckland, 2013.

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*If you pick my fruit, will you put mine back* [photo documentation]  
2019

participatory installation  
commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art  
and Performance Space  
courtesy the artist.

Taking place over two weekends at the Carriageworks Farmers Market in Sydney's former Eveleigh railyards, Vea's participatory installation presents a comprehensive appraisal of the global phenomenon of temporary labour migration. The installation took place as part of Performance Space's *Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art* in a constructed tent that mimics the pop-up recruitment booths that seek to entice citizens and potential workers from Pacific Island nations to join New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Schemes.

Inside Vea's marquee tent, participants can pose as a low-skilled labour worker within a series of life-size stand-ins. In each scene, workers are stripped of their individuality; wearing requisite personal protective equipment, they are reduced to their labour. As they stand passively within their working environments they are presented with annotated with ironic slogans in both English, Samoan and Tongan that pose a series of fundamental questions about the ethical limits of such schemes, reminding us how fragmented the lives of seasonal workers. The installation features a series of packing boxes with picked fruit that have been stickered with the New Zealand minimum wage and visa stipulations, which visitors are invited to take.





## Nusra Latif Qureshi

b. 1973, Lahore, Pakistan

lives and works in Melbourne, Australia

### *Chain-Man-Equine*

2019

digital print on fabric

commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

This immense over six-metre work is the most ambitious of Qureshi's reinterpretations of the illustrations from The Right Hon. Lord Egerton of Tatton's 1896 book *Indian and Oriental Arms and Armour*. Armoured figures appear at each end of heavy velvet, poised and ready for battle. However, their weaponry stretches across the length of the work, unable to hold shape and, through digital manipulation, glitching. Shields appear to be melting across the fabric and their tendril-like swords - futile in defense and ineffectual in inflicting violence - appear as dreamlike wafts.

Qureshi removes the fixed and immutable impression of arms and armoury in *Chain-Man-Equine* through a series of glitches that hint at malfunction. The threat of both weaponry and the armoured figured is neutralised through digital manipulation. The sharp edges and heavy forms of metal are lost through Qureshi's engineering. But, through the loss of form, Qureshi also comments on the future of war, conflict and control. The stark definitions of war and battle are lost in a digital and remote age where violence and decimation will occur through imperceptible commands. The insidious sophistication of such faceless and formless threats mean that cruelty can - in fact, will - occur through dreamlike wafts of the digital kind.

