



On Friday 16 August 2019, Australia's Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack responded to growing climate change concerns from Pacific Island leaders articulated at the Pacific Islands Forum hosted in Tuvalu with a comment that drew quick ire from the region. In conversation with business leaders in the inland NSW town of Wagga Wagga, McCormack stated, 'They'll [the people of the Pacific] continue to survive because many of their workers come here and pick our fruit, pick our fruit grown with hard Australian enterprise and endeavour and we welcome them and we always will.'¹ It was a comment that encapsulated McCormack's—and, by the very nature of his position, the Australian government's—view on the relationship between Australia and the wider Pacific, one of an unequal balance of power.

In particular, McCormack was referring to the Seasonal Worker Program, a temporary visa that enables citizens from Timor-Leste, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu to enter Australia for up to nine months to work as a seasonal labourer 'in selected industries for Australian employers who can't source local labour.'² This visa presents a precarious existence. For Australia, these workers fill labour shortages that predominantly occur in regional agricultural production and enable our industries to continue at peak efficiency; for those granted entry into the Program, with the attraction of seemingly high Australian wages, the visa they are granted comes with hidden costs beyond the initial fees of government-stamped permission of entry. Return flights, accommodation, health and police checks, ongoing insurances and increased cost of living means that an entry level wage of \$19.49 an hour leaves little room for savings to take home.³ Contracted to an employer, the seasonal worker enters Australia days before commencing work and leaves immediately upon completion of their job, becoming part of a largely invisible workforce. It is this invisibility that Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) based artist John Veā investigates, with both wit and pathos, through his practice. The exhibition *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art is Veā's first artistic presentation in Australia.

The co-opting of humour and wit to draw in viewers is intrinsic to Veā's practice. Anchored by significant research and informed *talanoa* (shared storytelling), his works employ comedic gestures that draw in and challenge audiences to consider the complex realities of the wider *Moana Nui a Kiwa* (the Pacific Ocean). Veā's personal circumstance of residing in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) while remaining intrinsically connected to his Tongan homeland underpins the distinct perspective he offers in his works, enabling him to construct multilayered and biting critical works about structures of power and influence in Tonga, the wider Pacific nations and Aotearoa New Zealand. A significant artistic investigation that continues throughout Veā's work is his examination of labour relations between Aotearoa New Zealand and its surrounding Pacific communities.

Like Australia's Seasonal Workers Program, Aotearoa New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme and Limited Visa offers much the same conditions, limiting workers to the horticulture and viticulture industries for short-stay employment in planting, maintaining, harvesting and packing crops that employers say cannot find anyone currently in Aotearoa New Zealand to perform.⁴ Separated from families, performing hard labour in regional locations and attempting to save as much as possible leaves seasonal workers with meagre financial reward and, as Veā seeks to articulate, little recognition nor relationship with their host country. Throughout his practice Veā has questioned and challenged the manner in which labour exchange between the Pacific and Aotearoa New

Zealand has failed develop a two-way relationship of exchange and instead constructed a largely invisible, underpaid and unrecognised workforce.

Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Performance Space is Veā's titular performance work *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* The work forms part of the 2019 Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art and, staged alongside the Carriageworks Farmers Market, Veā constructs an information booth that mimics those that pop-up throughout Pacific nations with the aim to entice people to join Aotearoa New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Limited Visa. Inside a marquee tent Veā touts the opportunities offered by the scheme, encouraging people to ask questions, while giving away oranges stickered with the pickers' minimum wage and visa stipulations. In Veā's marquee the bleak reality of the visa, so often obscured when enticing potential employees in the Pacific, becomes apparent.

Veā's works are often deceptively simple at first glance, yet their strength emerges in their ability to employ everyday items to unveil complex realities; the stickers on the oranges in *If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* are, in daily life, so often ignored but through Veā's work they become beacons of information. It is through Veā's artistic guise of simplicity that he delivers their *denouement*. In *29.09.09 Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga* (2013) he stands among breaking waves in a futile attempt to build a wall of cinder blocks on a shoreline. The act of building a wall is straightforward, but it is the more than thirty-minute duration of the performance that moves beyond the basic (somewhat humorous) gesture to become a comment on endurance within a labour and ecological framework that pits one against the other in an uneven dynamic. His furrowed brow and unwavering focus throughout the performance renders his ineffectual act desperate; no longer humorous the work instead becomes a sombre reflection on the fraught days after the 2009 Pacific Tsunami and the pressing urgency of climate change.

Veā's practice is urgent. Though his works unfold at a measured pace they implore immediate action. His Australian debut coincides with growing public concern, debate and protest for climate action, for global equality and for structural transparency and, while the works of Veā are singular offerings, they call for strong collective actions for change.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

John Veā (b. 1985) is a Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) based artist who works with sculpture, video and performance art. Veā works with tropes of migration and gentrification that exist within *Moana Nui a Kiwa* (the Pacific Ocean). By enacting stories that have been collected through everyday interactions with people, both in his home community and abroad, with a journalistic sensibility he offers a sometimes humorous and always powerfully symbolic viewpoint to the Western meta narrative. Most recently Veā has exhibited in the Honolulu Biennale (2017), the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2018) and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (2018). His work is also in the collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Veā received his Master of Art and Design at Auckland University of Technology in 2015, where he is currently undertaking his practice-led PhD.

Curators: Micheal Do and Mikala Tai



Centre for
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Asian Art

LIST OF WORKS

Window:

she sows this āina with her younger siblings, yet she cannot inherit that same āina, 2017, video installation, 3:48.

Ground Floor:

Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000, 2019, participatory installation, dimensions variable. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

First Floor:

Documentation of *If you pick my fruit, will you put mine back*, 2019, participatory installation, dimensions variable. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Performance Space.

seasonal worker survival kit, 2015–, mixed media installation, dimensions variable.

Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't, 2017, six-channel video, 32:00.

29.09.09 Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga, 2013, video, 30:38.

Finish this week off and that's it!, 2014, five-channel video, 1:59:00.

As part of Performance Space's Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art:

If you pick my fruit, will you put mine back, 2019, participatory installation, dimensions variable. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Performance Space for Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back? John Veā performances as part of Performance Space's Liveworks Festival

Dates and times:

Saturday 19 Oct 8:00AM – 11.00AM
Saturday 26 Oct 8:00AM – 11.00AM

Venue:

Farmers Market at Carriageworks
245 Wilson Street, Eveleigh
Free, visit performancespace.com.au to find out more

Please Explain: who is picking the fruit?

Date and time:

Saturday 26 October 2.00PM – 3.30PM

Venue:

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art
181-187 Hay St, Haymarket
In this edition of *Please Explain*, as part of *John Veā: If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* speakers discuss the realities and restrictions of migrant labour. In particular, speakers interrogate to what degree models of labour impact the socio-economic relationships between Australia, New Zealand and many Pacific nations.
Free, book at 4a.com.au

#IfIPickYourFruitWillYouPutMineBack @4a_Aus

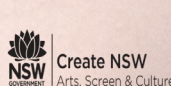
Register online and find out more about *John Veā: If I pick your fruit, will you put mine back?* and our public programs:

4a.com.au

Front: *Section 69ZD Employment Relations Act 2000*, 2019, participatory installation, dimensions variable. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

Back: Documentation of *If you pick my fruit, will you put mine back*, 2019, participatory installation, dimensions variable. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and Performance Space.

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This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body

1 www.sbs.com.au/news/mccormack-apologises-to-pacific-over-pick-our-fruit-climate-change-comment

2 www.immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/temporary-work-403/seasonal-worker-program#Overview

3 http://awardviewer.fwo.gov.au/award/show/MA000028#P364_34406

4 <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/apply-for-a-visa/about-visa/recognised-seasonal-employer-limited-visa>