

It could be a poem, this three-lettered word, so sonorous in pronunciation and generous in application.

*Ola*: life, to live;  
to recover, to get well;  
to be well; to be prosperous;  
to be delivered of a child; to be delivered from punishment;  
to end a war and conclude a peace;  
the first bonito caught in a new canoe;  
a peace-offering; an exclamation –  
“Wonderful!”

*Ola* is the driving force for life, an ethos of connection to ancestors who took only what they needed; to generations not yet born; to rainforests, rivers and oceans; to ourselves and to each other. Both a state and ethic of care and wellbeing, Feu’u has mobilised *ola* in works made in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes, towards protection of the Kermadec Islands, in his protests against driftnet fishing and nuclear testing, and in his personal recovery of self and self-esteem—inseparable from his family and home village—following the 2009 tsunami that devastated Samoa.



*OLA* (2020) is Poutasi Village in Falealili, the rainforest behind his family’s property, and the life-sustaining resilience of *ufi* yams when other crops fail. *OLA* is The Pinnacles near his home in Coromandel, Feu’u’s children born in Aotearoa, different ways of being in, from, and thinking about land. It’s simple acts of survival and sustenance bound up with complex needs—to be respected and supported. It’s familial, as endearing as a grandmother’s message and enduring as the ancestors. It’s one hundred shades of green, painting the poems of people and place, past, present and future.

If *ola* is about connection, *OLA* (2020) also evokes a contronym. Imagined aerial views recall the divisions and overlaps of *siapo* barkcloths and *tatau* upon skin; delineated territories cleaving together as they cleave apart. This tension extends to

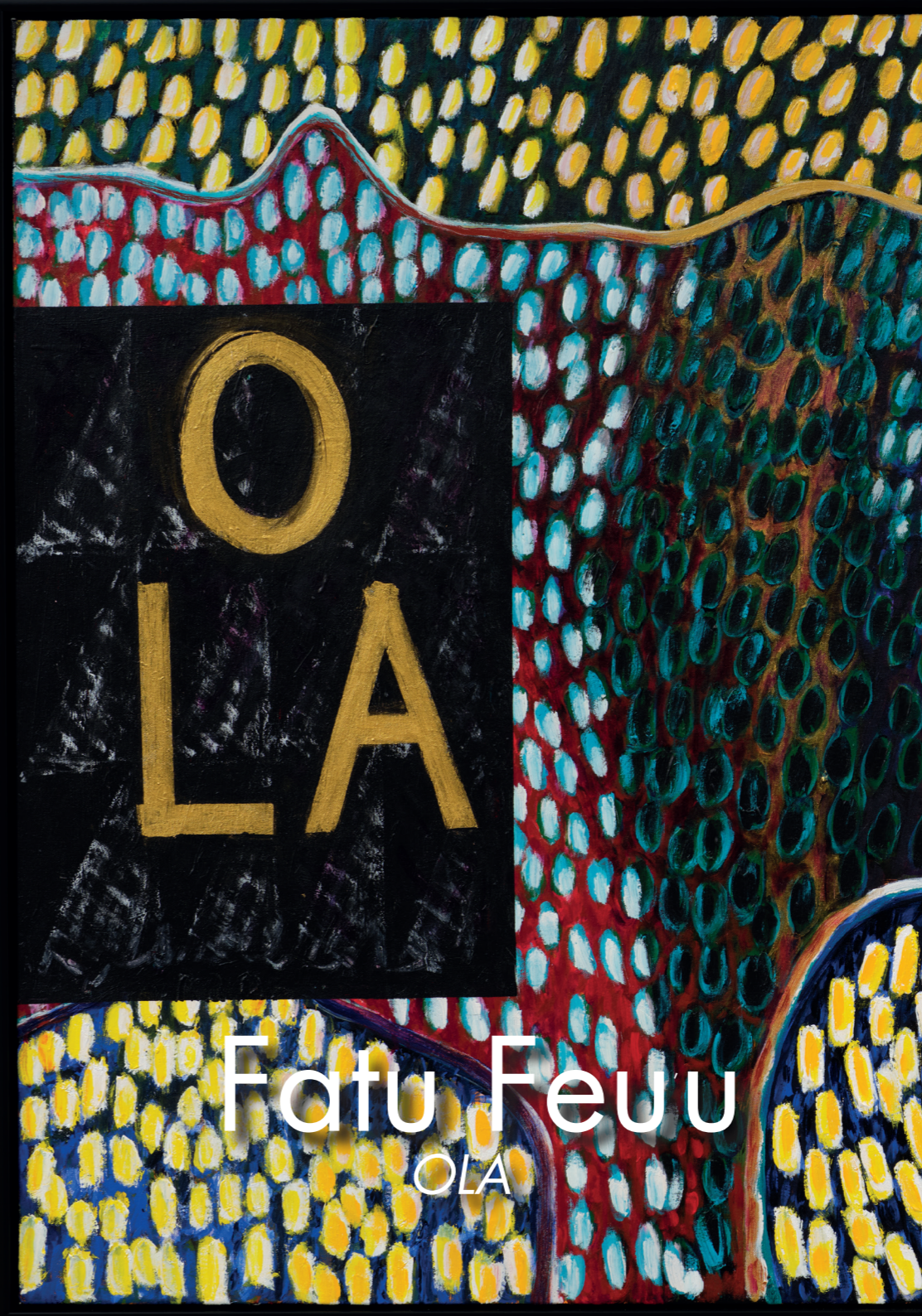
depictions of ancestral masks, drawn from and elaborating dentate-stamped Lapita pottery, which have become a signature of sorts in Feu’u’s work, a reminder of the omnipresence of *aitu* (spirits) and ancestors. Here, some filter or focus a European gaze, a personal and privileged view into *fa’a Samoa*, an invitation into the frame. As Samoan scholars Albert Wendt and Albert Refiti have reminded us, the space between us—*vā*—is simultaneously the potential for connection or rupture. Here are real and imagined boundaries, semi-permanent and semi-permeable, the possibility of balance, symmetry and reciprocity; the potential for *ifoga*, reconciliation or rebuilding.

Painted in the time of Covid-19 – an invisible, indiscriminatory foe—these reminders of division and connection have an added poignancy and urgency. Today’s acts of respect for one another are pulling a tighter focus on the local, slowing us down, keeping us in place and in pace with the lands and seas where we live, reminding us to tend to the space between and around us, to live and be well.

Here, then, are new conditions for *Ola*:  
for *Fa’a ola*: to make grow;  
for *Olaola*: to flourish;  
for *Ola’a*: a lifetime.



*Ritual*,  
Acrylic on canvas, 1210 x 1210 mm



Cover detail:  
*OLA*  
Acrylic on canvas, 1010 x 1510 mm

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## OLA: new works by Fatu Feu’u – Billie Lythberg

*All is Ola.*  
*All is Life.*  
Albert Wendt, *Ola* (1991).

If artists and writers are, as Fatu Feu’u says, keepers of history and custodians of old stories yearning to be told anew, then he is uniquely qualified for this responsibility. He is the celebrated ‘Father of contemporary Pacific arts’ in Aotearoa and the bearer of two Samoan *matai* titles: the *ali’i* title of *Lesā*, given by his mother’s family, of Sa’anapu, and the *tulafale* title of *Si’a*, conferred by his father’s family, of Poutasi. The *ali’i* or ‘sacred chief’ title acknowledges genealogical links to the gods, endowing Feu’u with authority and responsibility for his family and their resources. The secular *tulafale* ‘orator’ title, bestowed upon those who may advise and give voice to the *ali’i*, recognises his knowing and rearticulating of Samoan histories and traditions, and the *gafa* genealogies that bind people and the world together. In 2001, Feu’u also

became an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (O.N.Z.M.) for services to art. Brought together in one body, these acknowledgements and modes of being describe the relational responsibilities and understandings Feu’u brings to bear on lives lived in both Samoa and Aotearoa – with all their ensuing obligations—and his world-renowned practice as an artist, educator and storyteller.

Working since the 1980s across media including painting, sculpture, printmaking, and stained and etched glass, Feu’u’s bold and inimitable style has been anchored not only in recurring motifs and compositional structures but also *fa’a Samoa*—the Samoan way—and the many socio-cultural conventions and ideals it holds in balance. Among these, *ola*.



Fatu Feu’u in his studio  
Image courtesy of Specsavers



*Fa'a Ola*  
Acrylic on canvas, 1450 x 1800 mm



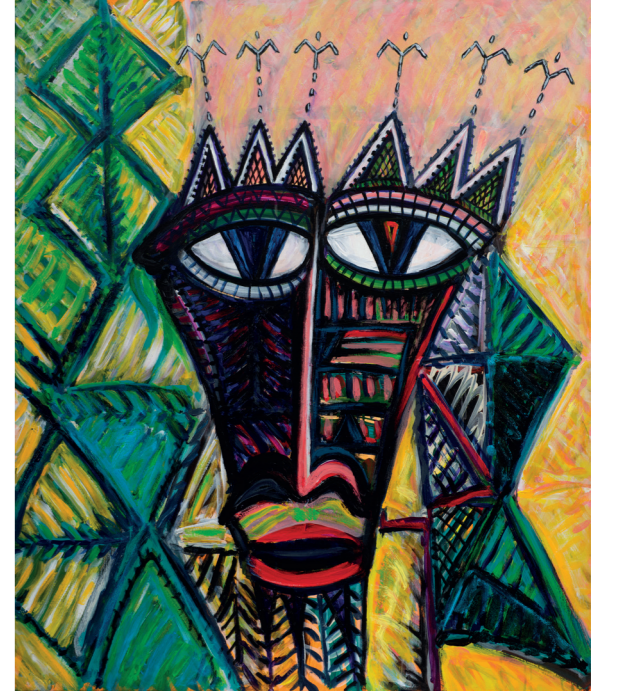
*Untitled*  
Acrylic on canvas, 1000 x 750 mm



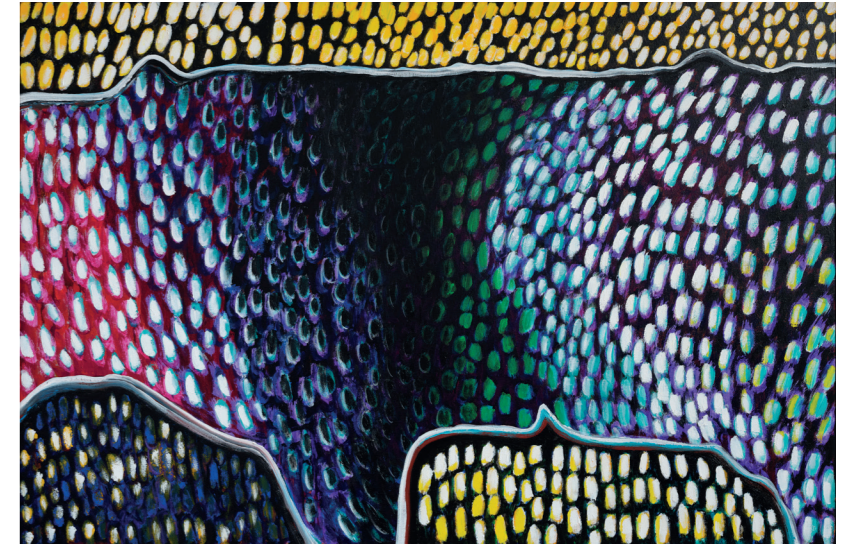
*Ritual II*  
Acrylic on canvas, 1015 x 1525 mm



*The Rainmakers*  
Acrylic on canvas, 1210 x 1200 mm



*Rainman*  
Acrylic on canvas, 1220 x 1000 mm



*Dawn Breaker*  
Acrylic on canvas, 1010 x 1510 mm

