

Michel Tuffery 'Standing Bull, Povi Tama', 2005



Michel Tuffery is one of the Pacific's most established contemporary artists. Of Samoan, Tahitian and Cook Island descent, Tuffery is known for his witty and insightful comments into cultural, environmental and political issues. In particular, Tuffery is concerned with matters of local cultural survival and identity in the Pacific.

Tuffery's work is held in public collections throughout New Zealand

and internationally and he was included in both the First and Thirds Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions in Brisbane, in 1993 and 1999.

Michel Tuffery's 'Standing Bull, Povi Tama' was made in 2005 specifically for a group sculpture exhibition at SOCA Gallery. In addition to the large bull sculptures that belong to all major public gallery collections including Auckland Art Gallery, Christchurch Art gallery & Queensland Art Gallery (Brisbane); Tuffery has over the last ten years created a series of one-off smaller bull works.

'Povi Tama' is one of the last works remaining from his most recognised series of corned beef sculptures, made from recycled corn beef tins, and steel wire- and one of the only ones that feature the bull's upper body in erect position, referencing the mythological character of Minotaur (Greek mythology and the guardian of the labyrinth).

Tuffery further personalises this mythological character through the additional set of eyes on the back, reminiscent of Pacific deities that form local mythologies.

The works seek to address the social, political and environmental issues related to the cultural importation and consumption of Western style canned foods in the Pacific. Performances associated with these 'bulls' were held in New Caledonia, Auckland, NZ, New York, USA (as part of Paradise Now ? Exhibition) and in Brisbane, often involving local indigenous communities and children. Many of Tuffery's works are inspired by a love of the natural world of the Pacific Islands and during his many visits there, he has observed the influence of Western culture and the ensuing consequences for the environment.

The introduced species of the bull has had a harmful effect on Samoa's fragile ecosystem and the destructive situation is also critiqued by Tuffery in this sculpture. Other work such as his mechanical fish-tin crabs, turtles and tuna – all

recycled and artificial, point to the dire, irrevocable changes wreaked in the ocean due to an introduced super-species of tuna, pollution and drift-net fishing.

Although Tuffery relays a serious message in his work, he asserts that art need not be taken too seriously, as all individuals approach art according to their own perspectives and experiences of the world.

Although the multiple use of tins is a reminder of Pop Art's incorporation of objects common to everyday life (such as Andy Warhol's *Campbell Soup Cans* and *Brillo Boxes*), the bull cleverly comments on the shifting perceptions of contemporary Pacific Island life.

While and 'exotic', idealised Pacifica is represented to us through travel brochures, television documentaries, movies and music, the social and cultural realities of unrest and political discontent relay a different message.

Across his sculptures, performances and mixed media work in the last ten years, environmental and ecological issues have been continuing themes for exploration by Tuffery, as have general matters of local cultural survival in the Pacific and New Zealand.

His latest sculptural works are made of more straightforward materials such as bronze, steel and kauri.

For more information on the artists see:
www.micheltuffery.co.nz