

Shadow catchers

suburban sublimation

IN HER LEI AND BREASTPLATES
NIKI HASTINGS-MCFALL USES
 UNUSUAL MATERIALS TO TACKLE
 ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS,
 COLONIALISM, CHRISTIANITY AND
 NOTIONS OF AN URBAN PACIFIC.
CAROLINE VERCOE REPORTS

UNIFORM STREETS AND HOUSES, TIDY LAWNS, WANDERING DOGS AND SCHOOL KIDS CONSTRUCT THE BASIC VISUAL LANDSCAPE OF A TYPICAL WEST AUCKLAND ENVIRONMENT. Within this scene in the spare room of her two-storey brick and tile home, Niki Hastings-McFall is cutting up dozens of plastic milk bottles and making them into lei. Around her on the floor are boxes of plastic fish-shaped soy sauce bottles. Hastings-McFall creates works that speak of her experience living in the urban Pacific environment of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Here her experiences and memories as an artist of Pacific Islands heritage are filtered through the everyday.

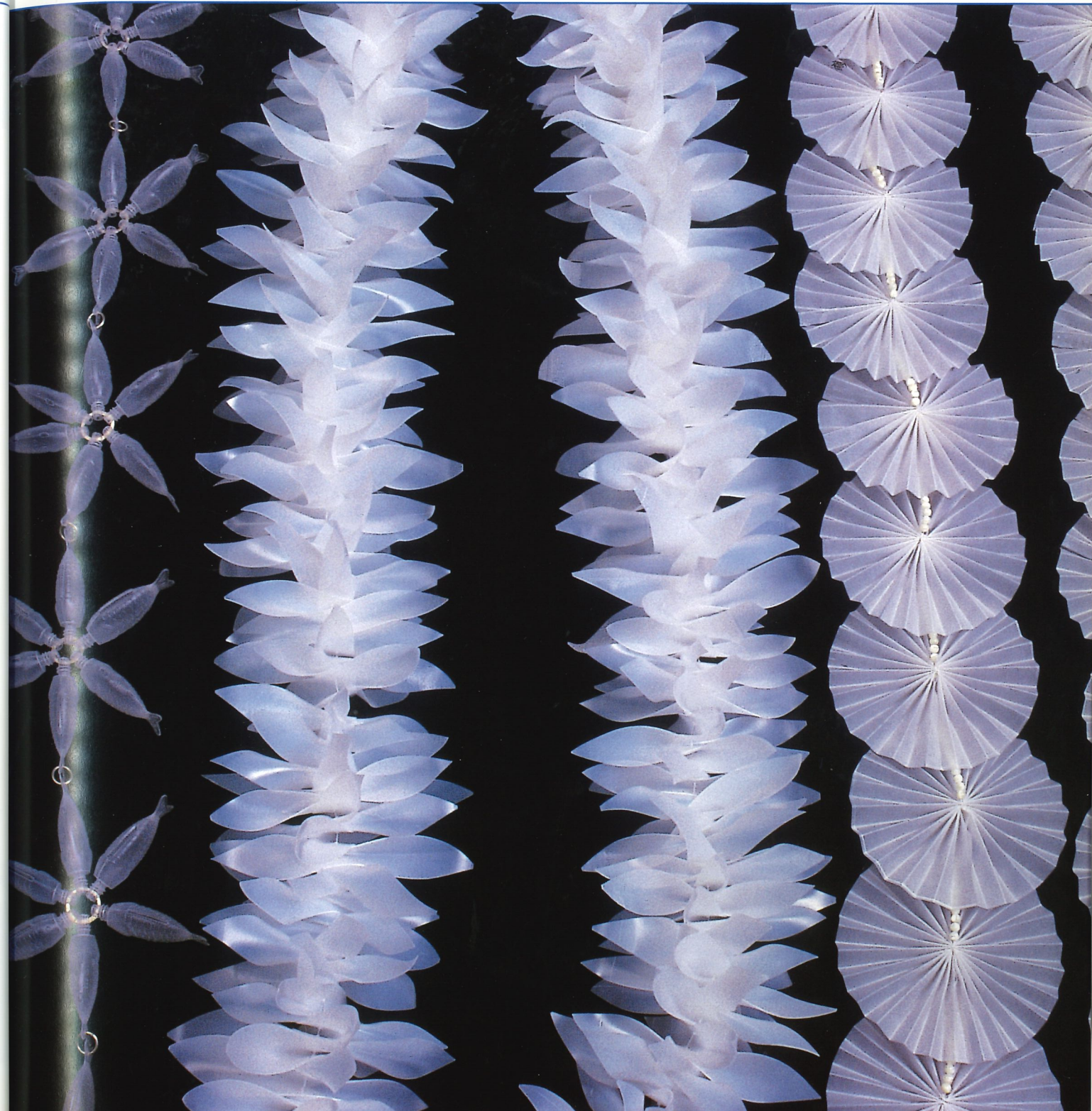
Lei and breastplate forms provide rich points of departure for the artist. Both possess great cultural significance in Pacific Islands cultures. Perhaps the most recognisable symbol of Polynesian visual culture is the lei, which plays a vital role in celebrations and rituals, and is a familiar

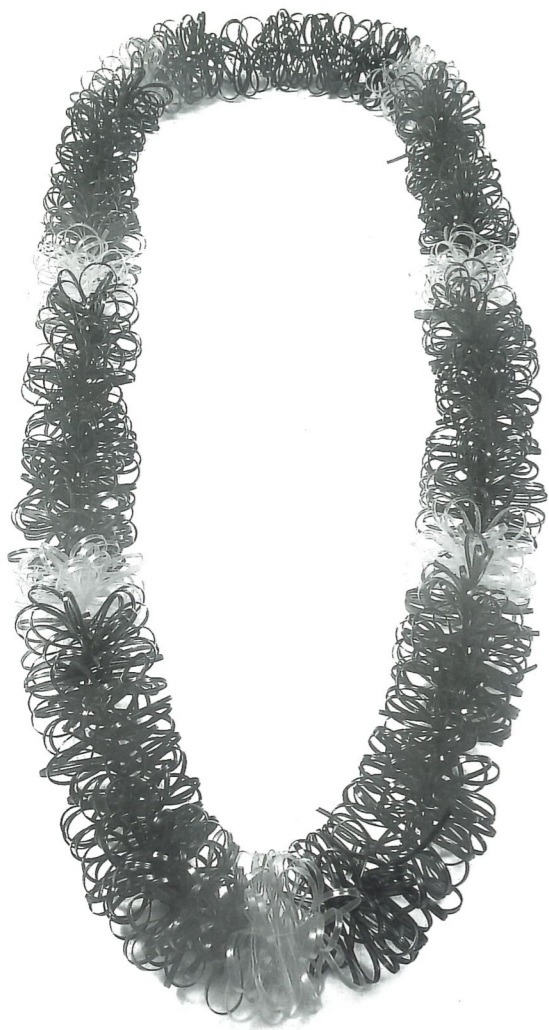
stereotype of things Pacific, immortalised in Hollywood movies and tourist promotions. Chosen for its familiarity, Hastings-McFall weaves narratives relating to environmental concerns, colonialism, Christianity and notions of an urban Pacific into her lei, through metaphor and materials.

Large warehouse outlets and '\$2 shops' found in the suburbs provide Hastings-McFall with the 'raw materials' for works such as her *Nuclei* series (1999), made from glow-in-the-dark flowers and beads, sold as children's toys. Selected because of their ability to absorb light and then reflect it in darkness, she uses them to highlight her concerns relating to nuclear testing in the Pacific. Hastings-McFall also makes reference to the saying 'The coming of the light' to refer to the arrival of Christianity in the Pacific Islands, which she feels in many cases worked to dismantle indigenous belief systems and cultural practices. In earlier works, Hastings-McFall alluded to the effects of colonialism and subsequent missionisation in the Pacific.¹ A *Lei for George Westbrook* (1996) featured a lei made for the missionary Westbrook, made from the pages of a hymn book for the early settler who was highly critical of missionary agendas in the Pacific. "For better or for worse" she says, "Christianity has had a profound impact upon the cultures of the Pacific. I perceive Christianity as an interface, and as such, a classic microcosm of the interaction between two cultures which largely comprise my ethnic heredity—Samoaan and European."²

One effect of colonial settlement in the Pacific has been the move by many Islanders into urban areas. The 50s

Niki Hastings-McFall, Suburban Lei series, *Too Much Sushi*, 2000, plastic soy bottles.





Niki Hastings-McFall,
Suburban Lei series,
Islander, 1999.

Niki Hastings-McFall,
Computer Disk
series, *Stored
Knowledge*, 1999,
95mm.

and 60s saw a large-scale migration of people from the Islands to Aotearoa/New Zealand (often Auckland) in search of jobs and better financial and educational prospects. Large suburban areas, especially in South Auckland, host growing numbers of Pacific Islands communities enabling cultural activities to be retained and flourish in urban settings. Hastings-McFall is not alone in her use of manufactured western materials in her artistic practice, Pacific weavers working in community-based contexts have long employed raffia and plastics in their work. The *Suburban Lei* series (1999), features *Mortgage Lei* comprised of round brick beads and *Nets* made from net curtains. The brick beads of *Mortgage Lei* not only refer to traditional brick and tile housing in her area, they convey the 'heavy' feeling many have due to the responsibilities and stresses of having a mortgage.

Hastings-McFall's love of pattern and design found in nature is transferred to her urban environment. Driving to work in the morning intricate patterns emerge in the 'theatre' of the traffic jam, in which cars sporting designer

mag wheels vie for space. The *Automotive Breastplate* series (1999) features gold-lipped mother of pearl shells with pierced copper sheets, each hung on a braided steel brakeline. Inspired by designs on the interiors of mag wheels, she has created intricately crafted breastplates. The designs that emerge are similar to those found on *Pacific Tapa* cloth, which often draws on natural forms. She reworks the traditional breastplate form, originally produced by Pacific Islanders for protection during warfare, to reflect designs and materials from her immediate environment.

Surfaces also come into play. The surface, or immediate visual effect of the works, takes the form of lavish lei, hanging against the white walls of a gallery space. On closer inspection, the 'ingredients' of the lei emerge—plastic shopping bags and small throw-away plastic fish-shaped soy sauce bottles. Hastings-McFall conveys messages relating to the environment and the effects of mass-produced, unbiodegradable refuse that threatens to devastate Pacific Islands nations. The fish is also referred



to as the universal symbol of Christianity. Fish and fishing feature prominently in Pacific legends and these stories serve to emphasise the fact that these are Oceanic rather than landlocked cultures. Fish are also seen by many cultures as souls or spirit forms.³

Most recently, Hastings-McFall has been developing works that explore her concerns with history, memory and the colonial continuum in the Pacific. Her *Coming of the Light* series (2000), featuring the work *Soul Catcher I* utilises plastic fish-shaped soy bottles which she constructs in star shaped forms against a demolition window frame. "The repetitive star forms of the fish units are reminiscent of net curtains, another suburban reference. Nets are also depicted as a symbol of catching souls, fishing for Christ and as a symbol of mankind's attempt to capture enlightenment. The negative space between each individual unit forms a cross, which references the religious imagery within the work".⁴

Hastings-McFall's work draws from a mixture of cultural messages and designs that depict contemporary urban Pacific living. They speak of her concerns for the future of the environment and also demonstrate ways in which traditional practices can be re-presented and re-enacted, engaging with and reflecting the realities of urban Pacific living. "By combining iconic Pacific forms and distinctly urban 'non-Pacific' materials, my intent is to create a visual representation of what it means to me to be of Pacific descent, living in Aotearoa today".⁵

endnotes

1. For a discussion of works in *Past Pacific* see the *Past Pacific* catalogue (1996); Caroline Vercoe. 'Objects to be-hold: at the interface' in *Object* magazine issue 2/99, pp 66-69.
- 2, 3, 4 and 5. Unpublished artist's statement, September 2000.

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Niki Hastings-McFall, Suburban Lei series, *Automotive Breastplate*, 1999, patinated copper, 15cm. diam.