

Polynesianising and regenerating urban spaces: An analysis of the artworks and interventions of the Centre des Métiers d'Art de Polynésie française and of its artists

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Abstract

This article studies the relationships that the Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française (CMA—Centre for Arts and Crafts of French Polynesia), five contemporary artists connected to it, and their artworks, have with the city of Pape'ete and its urban environment. The first part analyses the teaching philosophy of the CMA and foregrounds its role as a tool of social mobility for its students and in reinforcing positive representations of Indigenous Polynesians and heritage. The second part examines how the initiatives led by the CMA in Pape'ete are invitations to a shift in mindset. The third part explores how the artists express and reflect on their sense of belonging and highlights how their relationship with urban areas is enriched by their life experiences and their family roots in broader territories.

KEY WORDS

creativity, French Polynesia, heritage, indigenous contemporary art, Polynesian artists

Through our projects, [our aim should be to] re-think our world ... to polynesianise it by transforming it and reinventing our codes, Alexander Lee (‘Ōrama Studio, 2020, p. 147).

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I think of myself more as a city dweller, who knows about his roots that lie elsewhere. To know where my ancestors are from enriches my relationship with the city, my practice of urban life.¹ Tokainiua Devatine.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française (CMA—Centre for Arts and Crafts of French Polynesia) is located in French Polynesia's capital, Pape'ete. French Polynesia is made up of 118 islands spread out over more than 5 million square kilometres. In the 2017 census, the population amounted to 276,000 people, of whom 207,333 lived in the Windward Islands with 90% living on the island of Tahiti, which covers an area of 1045 km². The urban area extending from Punaauia in the west to Mahina in the north is home to 65% of the island's population. Operating as a government-funded public institution, the CMA is a vital centre of contemporary creativity in Pape'ete and in French Polynesia thanks to relationships developed internationally and with other islands (Mangareva, Rurutu, Ua Huka).² It was designed in 1980 and opened in 1982, at the instigation of Henri Bouvier, a sculptor and former student engraver from the prestigious college of fine arts and craft, *École Boulle*, in Paris. Bouvier is known for his anti-nuclear stance in the 1960s and the famous speech he wrote for MP, John Teariki, to address French President de Gaulle in September 1966 condemning nuclear testing in French Polynesia. A political visionary, Bouvier was a proponent of the autonomy of French Polynesia, and understood that French Polynesia had much to offer on the cultural front. The Centre's original core missions were the theoretical and practical training of highly qualified craftspersons in traditional and modern artistic disciplines, and the research and development of craftsmanship techniques. It rapidly earned a solid reputation by offering high-quality handicrafts for sale. Since the arrival as Centre Director, in 2006, of Viri Taimana, an artist and former teacher at the Toulon Beaux-Arts School, the scope of the Centre's teachings has expanded to include contemporary artistic explorations and experimentations. Temporary or permanent exhibitions, installations and artworks have, for example, been placed in Pape'ete's public spaces as well as in the interiors and on the façades of public buildings.

As we are finalising this article, the CMA is preparing to offer from September 2022 a French and European-accredited BA in Polynesian arts and visual arts in partnership with the University of French Polynesia. No tertiary education diploma in Polynesian arts exist at present in French Polynesia. Years in the making, this university degree is a significant outcome of the determination of Viri Taimana, CMA Deputy Director Tokainiua Devatine, and the CMA teaching staff, in providing 'a cultural pathway for the training of young people' (Taimana, 2022, p. 22). This article foregrounds how the CMA and its artists not only assert new visions of urbanity in French Polynesia; it also examines how they aim to ensure that a future creatively, innovatively and sustainably founded on the tangible and intangible heritage of French Polynesia becomes the present. In so doing, our research contributes to the scholarship seeking to understand 'human experiences and agency in a far-reaching Oceania ... in order to generate future imaginings that contribute not only to a mode of survival, but to an art of living' (Clifford & Kamehiro, 2022, p. 11).

The CMA's underlying teaching philosophy is to regenerate all forms of Polynesian heritage by encouraging the evolution of traditional artistic practices towards a more dynamic contemporary language using modern shapes and colours, rather than utilising potentially restrictive pedagogy that requires students to reproduce heritage objects dating from the 17th, 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. This regeneration involves learning a variety of representational techniques, studying history, acquiring an understanding of contemporary society and capitalising on the contribution of new tech-

nologies. The CMA's goal is to leave traces of the past and present vitality of Polynesian cultures, to disseminate these cultures and to ensure they are sustained and continue to develop over time.

Additionally, the CMA has established relationships and partnerships with numerous universities and institutions in Oceania and the world.³ Since 2010, the CMA has also developed the concept of Pūtahi. Pūtahi are cultural and artistic events gathering teachers, established artists and students from Pacific countries and islands (Figure 1). With these events, the CMA has strengthened its relationships with Aotearoa-New-Zealand, Hawaii, Fiji, Tonga, Rarotonga, New Caledonia-Kanaky and Papua New Guinea (Raimbault, 2016; Taimana & Devatine, 2014). This article sheds light on the many ways the locally grounded and multi-scalar vision of the CMA impacts its engagement with its close urban environment, French Polynesia and the rest of the world.

This article examines the role of the CMA and the artists connected to it in the vitality of Polynesian artistic creation and innovation by studying the relationships of the CMA, the artists and their artworks with the city of Pape'ete and its urban environment. To our knowledge, it is the first article that proposes an ethnography and an analysis of the creative processes of Indigenous visual contemporary artists from French Polynesia, while exploring the relationships these artists establish with their environment. It is also the first study that examines not only the evolution of the CMA, but also its social impact and how it has changed the French Polynesian cultural landscape. The five artists we focus on are Tokainiua Devatine (the co-author of this article), Viri Taimana, Vaihere Tauraa, Hihirau Vaitoare and Rangitea Wohler. The first part analyses the teaching philosophy of the CMA in Pape'ete; the second part examines the way the CMA relates to and influences its urban environment; the third part proposes a reading of some of the artists' works and explores how these artists engage with urban topics and the diversity of places they come from and have traversed. When we started to work on this article, we wondered to what extent the artists' sense of belonging would be grounded in the places where they were raised. Our research has shown that the five studied artists feel strongly connected to multiple places.

The range of artistic interventions in urban spaces in the conurbation around Pape'ete is broad. Some have received scholarly attention. Several works have studied the development and impact of *Heiva i Tahiti*—a wide-ranging yearly festival that takes place from the end of June to the end of July, which includes, among other events, singing and dancing competitions, Va'a (canoe) races and javelin

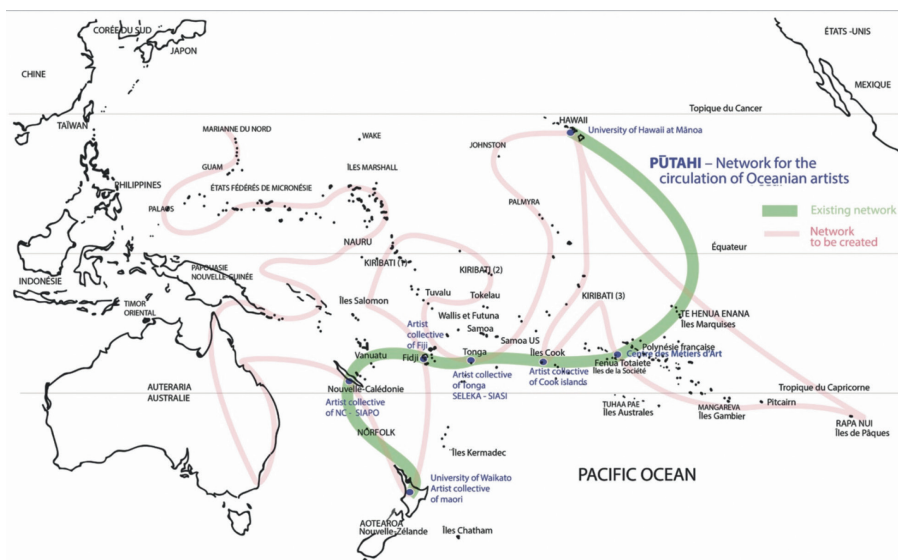


FIGURE 1 Pūtahi—Network for the circulation of Oceanian artists



throwing competitions—in Tahiti's urban area (Devatine, 2004; Saura, 2007). Devatine (2004, p. 80) has demonstrated, in particular, that large-scale community festivals such as the Heiva contribute to fostering social cohesion. His film *L'écrit dans la danse, un souffle créateur* (Devatine, 2007), also examined new creative collaborations of authors, choreographers and musicians for the Heiva. Articles—including a discussion co-authored by 19 contributors, most of whom are Indigenous Polynesian—have also examined how French Polynesian writers have sought to give further exposure to Indigenous literature and increase its presence in Pape'ete, in particular through the annual multi-arts event, *Pina'ina'i* created in 2011 by the authors' association, Littérama'ohi, and choreographed by Moana'ura Tehei'ura (Castro-Koshy et al., 2016)—and through public readings regularly organised by Littérama'ohi at Pape'ete's marketplace and Vai'ete plaza, in the heart of the city. Like other festivals and Indigenous Pacific artistic events, *Pina'ina'i* contributes to processes of heritage transmission, decolonisation and community strengthening (Castro-Koshy, 2014). When it comes to the visual arts, although a number of books have analysed Polynesian ancient objects and art as a whole (Kaufmann et al., 1993) or have presented French Polynesia's sculpture (Mu-Liepmann & Milledrogues, 2008) and weaving (Cauchois, 2013), little research has focused on Indigenous French Polynesian contemporary art, and none has specifically focused on its relationship with its urban environment.⁴ This article therefore addresses a gap in the scholarship, while responding to the theme of this special issue.

This article was co-written by two scholars and teachers and is the result of intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogues. A trained anthropologist, Tokainiua Devatine is the deputy director of the CMA, a lecturer in Polynesian history and civilisation, and an artist. His artworks have been exhibited nationally and internationally. Considering how his knowledge of the Centre and reflexive approach have shaped the writing of this article, Devatine recalls that his recruitment at the CMA was motivated by his training in anthropology and his ability to develop a critical and analytical discourse about the CMA curriculum, initiatives and future orientation. Estelle Castro-Koshy is a scholar of Indigenous Australian and French Polynesian cultural studies and literatures. She has contributed to the development of these fields of study since 2003 by collaborating with Indigenous authors and artists, co-creating research outputs in which their voices can be heard and amplified (Aurima-Devatine & Castro-Koshy, 2016; Castro-Koshy et al., 2016), and building bridges between the English-speaking and French-speaking worlds. This article is committed to incorporating and examining Indigenous knowledge and perspectives as defined by Indigenous people themselves. Since this methodological and ethical approach, which is required in other Oceanian countries such as Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand (AIATSIS, 2012; George et al., 2020; Smith, 1999), is not widespread in the French Polynesian research context, and in the context of a current absence of scholarship on Indigenous contemporary art in French Polynesia, the artists' perspectives and voices are prominently featured in the article, which also aims to eschew homogenising discourses.⁵ This article was first written in French to ensure that the artists would be able to provide feedback, and their inputs were taken into account.

2 | FOSTERING CREATION AND INNOVATION: THE CMA'S TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

The CMA's objective is to stimulate youths' interest in the heritage of the five archipelagos that comprise French Polynesia, as well as in art. It does so by encouraging students to express their creativity, develop a sense of inner peace and fulfilment, and become fully integrated into the socio-economic networks of society. It is located in Mama'o, a neighbourhood with low-rent housing

and business offices, where prostitution and drug trafficking take place at night. However, the area is rapidly changing. The multi-storey buildings planned to provide affordable housing opportunities for modest socio-professional categories are likely to be bought for real estate speculation and eventually lead to rent increases in the area. The CMA was founded in order to allow teenagers and young adults from all over Polynesia, who are gifted but under-perform in school, have dropped out of school, or are sometimes confronted with complex social issues, to become successful in the field of Polynesian arts and crafts such as wood carving, mother-of-pearl engraving, wickerwork, weaving and drawing.⁶ Its recruitment process also allows adults who have lost their employment, are undertaking professional retraining or were unsuccessful in school and are no longer eligible for training courses because of their age, to undergo training and be recognised for their creative and conceptualising talents. In the past 16 years, the CMA has increasingly recruited students who have been awarded their *baccalauréat général* or *professionnel* (i.e., undergraduate-level students).⁷ In 2020, they make up around 50% of the student body. The complex issues CMA students face have included: being placed in foster care, precarious housing, overcrowded housing or the desire of a nuclear family to become independent from a larger household. The CMA, with its notably socially diverse student body, is therefore a tool of social (re)integration for its students who hail from all the archipelagos, although most of the students come from Tahiti and either grew up or have been living for some time in the Tahiti urban area. Only a minority of students either grew up or has been living in the rural parts of Tahiti or Mo'orea. Some students who live relatively far from Pape'ete—for example in Pueu (70 kilometres from Pape'ete) or Papara (35 kilometres from Pape'ete)—catch the bus to come to the CMA at respectively 4 am and 5.30 am, a testimony to their motivation to learn. Trainees who live in Moorea also leave the island early by the 6.30 am ferry. The average age of the students is around 20–24 years but can range anywhere from 16 to the mid-40s. In 2015, up to 60% of the students who graduated from the CMA subsequently found employment, and 80% remained in the artistic and cultural field.

Since 2006, the CMA has expanded its goals and activities to serve as an art school. Through its course offering, the CMA aims to allow its students to develop their own contemporary cultural expressions. Its philosophy is predicated on the understanding that enriching the Oceanian cultural heritage is a way to contribute to material traces and know-how (*savoir-faire*) left by the ancestors, to follow their guidance and honour their legacy. This heritage is central to the knowledge and skills imparted to CMA students and define what they—and ultimately Polynesian society as well—must acquire to project themselves into a world that resembles and is meaningful to them. The director, Viri Taimana, was born on the atoll of Aratika where he lived until he was five, before settling in Tahiti with his parents—who are both Polynesian—and his brothers and sisters, although he regularly returned to the Tuamotu throughout his childhood. He recalls how his experiences when he first arrived in Tahiti allowed him to meet and develop relationships with people from the different archipelagos:

In Titiro, down in the valley, [we were] gathered with all those who had left their archipelagos, people from the Austral Islands, from the Leeward Islands, the Tuamotu, the Marquesas. We were all crammed in together at the bottom of the valley, near the ... Bain Loti, while we waited to find a new place. It was a large dormitory community ... When you arrive from the Tuamotu and you are being told “Go home!”, it's unbearable, for sure. Because they also come from elsewhere ... [Y]ou have to gain acceptance ... [W]hen everyone would eventually get together ... there was a form of communion, an extraordinary sense of fraternity ... [A]t the CMA, we also find people from all over Polynesia, a melting-pot brought together again, whom we must educate again, [whom we must] teach again, whom we have to allow to discover things—like the small canoes—that some have not experienced at all.⁸



Both Taimana's experience of an 'extraordinary sense of fraternity' in Titiro and his frustration with the French curriculum taught at school influenced the vision he would later implement at the CMA:

At one stage, in secondary school, I was outraged. And fed up with listening to the stories of the French kings ... [I] felt that there was a contradiction. A contradiction between what we lived day to day and what they were trying to teach us ... From that point onwards, I told myself ... [t]here is no Polynesian school that teaches the geography of Polynesia, Polynesian languages, Polynesian culture, all this knowledge that makes it possible for us to truly fit into our own environment ... Later on, I had to leave, and discover the arts, in order to come back with solid training so I could contribute.

After studying, and then teaching fine arts for 8 years in France, Taimana came back to Tahiti to lead the CMA. Like his teaching, his work as a visual artist questions 'the hegemony of imported cultures over the social, environmental, economic and cultural organisation of his country' ('Ōrama Studio, 2020, p. 167).

Psychology Professor, Stephanie Fryberg (2016a, 2016b), has shown how Native American students in the US are affected by a lack of cultural awareness in the classroom and how culturally relevant messages and positive representations of Native Americans predict better academic performance for Native American students. Similarly, the accomplishment of the CMA goes beyond providing artistic training to students by promoting identity safety, and reinforcing positive representations of Indigenous Polynesians and heritage, thus increasing students' academic performance. Since the establishment of nationally recognised diplomas at the CMA in 2019, the success rate of students has been 100%.⁹ Moreover, a significant number of urban students believe that they have no culture and see urban areas as suffering from a lack of culture and history when they first come to the CMA. The CMA teaching allows them to experience a sense of 'identity and continuity' they can derive from understanding their cultural heritage¹⁰ while also bringing awareness of Polynesian cultural diversity and human creativity to students coming from rural areas. In other words, the ways in which the CMA conceptualises heritage revitalisation sheds light on the connections and solidarities between urban and—slightly remote or remote—rural areas. This holistic vision stems from the understanding that in a territory made up of 118 islands, the parts contribute to, and are determinative for, the whole, and the whole is balanced by all that the parts offer. Rather than opposing urban, semi-urban, semi-rural and rural, the CMA insists on shedding light on a multiplicity of life experiences, environments, ecosystems, histories, material and economic constraints, discourses, motifs and art forms to reflect the diversity and richness of places, family histories and experiences from which the students come.

The idea of connecting the parts to the whole also inspires the teaching of Oceanian artistic practices at the Centre, which foregrounds a holistic vision of these practices. Central to this training are the empirical knowledge of materials and how to use them, as well as their associated myths. The Centre's garden grows plants that are useful for their colourful, plastic, mechanical, olfactory, medicinal, tinctorial and gustatory qualities. The garden was planted so that students would be closer to source materials, and to become an island of greenery made accessible to Pape'ete's urban population in the midst of the concrete, metal and glass urban landscape. The peaceful atmosphere of this garden, which brings elements of rurality to the urban landscape, also contrasts with the heavy traffic that fills the streets of Pape'ete every morning and afternoon (it is worth noting that people do not use the term 'rural' but refer to 'the districts' in Tahiti). The uniqueness of this garden is indeed known beyond the school walls, as locals living nearby and all around the city come there to collect plants in order to make medicinal remedies or create vegetal dance outfits. Conceived as a miniature botanical garden, this space hosts a



selection of species from each archipelago, some of which are now found only in some wet valleys of the high islands or on the coral islets of atolls. This openness to the entire French Polynesian territory is also reflected in the teachings of the '*chantiers école*' examined in the second part of this article, which analyses how the CMA aims to create spaces—in, beyond, and even above the city—where the rich French Polynesian Indigenous cultural heritage and contemporary art can gain exposure and recognition.

3 | POLYNESIANISING THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT AND INVITING A MENTALITY CHANGE

The CMA approaches teaching in two significant ways: it requires students to conduct individual artistic projects and participate in '*chantiers école*' projects (major works undertaken by the school) conducted over a relatively long period. These '*chantiers école*' projects conceive original Polynesian artworks requiring the continuous intervention of several teachers and several students. These artworks are conceptualised by Viri Taimana, who discusses them with Tokainiua Devatine and sculptor teacher Hirirau Vaitoare. Students are involved in assembling, building, carving and sculpting the artworks, as well as adapting the artworks dimensions if the material sourced for the artwork requires it. The produced works are aimed at the local population more than at those who have commissioned them, because 'there are messages ... that the people who are from here, those who will be interested in them, will be able to understand', Taimana explains.

In the '*chantiers école*' context, the CMA has created four works for three French State institutions located in Pape'ete, to which a significant portion of the local population goes for all kinds of administrative procedures. In French Polynesia, the French State is the sole decision maker on issues of justice, defence, foreign policy (the so-called '*compétences régaliennes*') and also tertiary education. While many Polynesian people work in these institutions and buildings, the decisions and model upon which they are founded are based in France. The CMA artworks subtly and powerfully convey specifically Polynesian values and political messages at the heart, or on the façade, of these buildings. Polynesian people are sensitive to these messages, which also express a vision for French Polynesia that has been imagined by and for Polynesians.

The Office of the High Commissioner of the Republic—who is the highest representative of France in French Polynesia—hosts a monumental sculpture—the first of the four works—entitled *Tūti'i*, which consists of a revisited column of symbolised ancestors that is inspired by pre-European sculptures featured on the sterns of long canoes (Figure 2). Taimana says:

[The artwork] can also be a boundary marker. The idea is somewhat similar to what the early navigators did when they first arrived and planted their flag on this land ... Placing [our artwork] in there is a way of signifying that this space belongs to us ... [I]n my head, it is the same act. This is our place, with this column going up, with our stylised *ti'i*'.

While *Tūti'i* highlights the sovereignty of Polynesian people in French Polynesia, other artworks assert the continuing political and cultural agency of Polynesian people. Pape'ete's Court of First Instance—which is a court of justice—hosts a panel on the building's façade (Figure 3). On each side of the inscription that presents the Court, two motifs in the shape of stylised arrows point in diametrically opposed directions, as if they are inviting people to leave the building. The *Tribunal Foncier* (Land Title Court) hosts the third work, which is a panel representing a bas-relief of a sprouted coconut (Figure 4). Taimana explains:

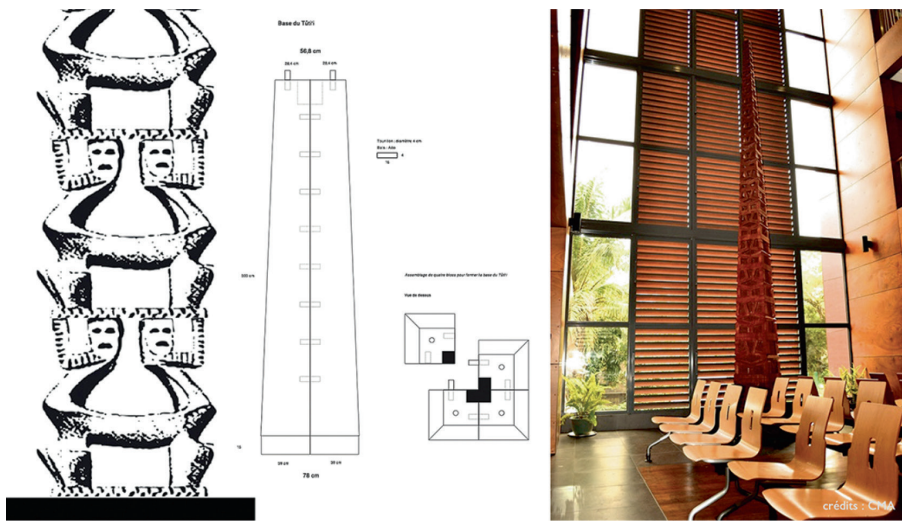


FIGURE 2 *Tūti'i 'auuiui, Tahiti*



FIGURE 3 Panel on the court of first instance façade

We gave what is most precious to us: a coconut. It is a powerful symbol. With its roots ... very significantly, it is a young shoot ... I thought that was the only symbol that could speak of our connection, our bond to the land. What was the other reason for which we chose this coconut? Because it was able to travel all over the ocean, land on a shore, and start growing. The coconut brought about a continuation, and during our migrations, we brought many coconuts and planted them everywhere. So it was a symbolic element.

Lastly, the Vice-Rectorate—which is the French administration and authority holding some decision-making power regarding secondary education—features two walls engraved with Polynesian bas-reliefs on which the sculpted motifs represent a combination of several elements that include adults, children, mobility-impaired persons, and so on (Figure 5). Taimana explains:



FIGURE 4 Tribunal Foncier panel



FIGURE 5 Vice-rectorate bas-reliefs

We have connected all these people. We need to connect with one another; ... if we do not connect, we are always divided. The idea behind these panels is to come back together, united. All together, side by side, these people represent strength, the public opinion, society ... Way up top, there is a reference to vegetation, medicine, with the ferns above, and the shining suns which announce a bright future. At the bottom, everyone should work together ... Taho'e and Autaea'era'a ... Unity, solidarity. We will have put all the ingredients there ...

The panels encourage Polynesians to further consider what interactions are needed to create a balanced society that is respectful of people and the ecosystem.

As the above examples show, the scope and impact of the CMA interventions go well beyond the moment when the art or event is produced, and aim to transform people's relationship with urban spaces. They aim to challenge Polynesian people to think critically and reflexively about their place in, and contribution to, the world. The CMA also engages with the city through proposing initiatives and participating in new events. In 2014, International Women's Day provided an opportunity for the CMA's students to create a painting exhibition called 'An Ocean of Women'. Portraits of women, printed on PVC sheets, were hung in the recently opened To'ata Park, which is the only large green space on Pape'ete's seafront. The park faces the harbour and is a meeting place for different generations. The exhibition was the first artistic intervention in To'ata Park. Very often, the paintings were the student's silent, humble way of expressing their affection for their mothers, grandmothers, cousins and *fa'amu* (adoptive) mothers, which geographical separation, conflicts or death had prevented them from expressing. While the design of To'ata Park does not emphasise the connection between



the ocean and Polynesian life, the exhibition was a reminder of this connection. By welcoming and bringing together a constellation of Polynesian women and their families, this urban site was 'polynesianised' during the exhibition.

More recently, between 2017 and 2019, as part of the 'Christmas of Solidarities' event, the CMA organised two regattas, in which children took part, for miniature sailing canoes in a pool specially created for the occasion. The initiative's participatory dimension aimed at keeping alive the bond that links the lagoon and the ocean to Polynesians through navigation. Navigation and the knowledge and skills it requires are connected with other knowledge and skills needed for shipbuilding, fishing, managing marine resources, respect for the environment and for responding to challenges presented by climate change. As he reflected upon the event, Taimana concluded: 'Christmas for "underprivileged" children' ... I hate this term. No, they are not underprivileged, we just need to illuminate them a little bit'. Another school project consisted of creating liveries for three new airplanes owned by the local airline company, Air Tahiti, which operates throughout Polynesia.¹¹ The idea was to give a visual identity to each plane. One plane livery was covered with patterns from the Society Islands, another with patterns from the Austral Islands, while the third featured motifs from the Marquesas. These works make it possible to show in various aerial visual landscapes the artistic heritage of the archipelagos. They are also a reminder that exchanges between islands live on and are reconfigured, and that the capital city feeds on and is enriched by them. According to Taimana, 'placing these motifs on airplanes is a way of giving back to the archipelagos what belongs to them. It is a beautiful visual operation that strengthens ... and brings comfort to the people from the archipelagos. It is almost as if the plane actually belonged to them.'

The exhibitions-sales of the works of students from the CMA also feature prominently among the initiatives undertaken by the CMA in order to 'polynesianise' the urban, artistic, cultural, visual, mental and intellectual space of Tahiti and French Polynesia. Held every other year, they have become one of Pape'ete's awaited cultural events. The crowds that come to these events are evidence of the CMA's growing influence on the urban population's interest in Polynesian arts. Attendees include people who have taken an interest in the CMA work for many years, the families of the CMA students, gallerists who buy artworks for a low price to sell them for higher prices in the galleries in Pape'ete or at the airport duty free shops, and personalities from different ministries. Some attendees, who never miss these events, appreciate the opportunity to buy small-sized artworks; an increasing number of young people aged 20–40 also attend the exhibitions. The large number of attendees can also be explained by the 'first-come, first-served' principle that governs the sale's organisation as a way to encourage equal access to the works for everyone. Additionally, reasonably priced works demonstrate the Centre's willingness to facilitate a democratisation of art, since they make it possible for Polynesian contemporary artworks to be purchased and brought into a large number of homes.¹² The CMA is not only dedicated to introducing remarkable Polynesian artworks in public buildings and areas; it also aims to bring them into private spaces.

We have demonstrated that the CMA is a place of polycultural creation, where the creativity of students and artists can be encouraged and grow in close relationship with the rest of the Pacific and the world. By increasingly making Polynesian artistic productions visible in Pape'ete and abroad, the Centre also seeks to nurture a sense of pride in Polynesian culture, both for its specificity—without reducing differences—and its diversity. The willingness of the CMA and its artists to train future generations so that they are proud of their roots is very much present in the works of the five examined artists, who want relationships to be established between urbanites from different neighbourhoods and people who grew up on the Tahitian peninsula or other islands.



4 | 'ARTISTIC LANGUAGE AS A SPACE FOR FREEDOM AND THE EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL CONCERNS':¹³ THE ARTISTS' POLYCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CITY AND BEYOND

The artists we focus on are teaching or have previously taught at the CMA. The interviews conducted for this article highlight that they have very diverse personal and educational backgrounds and identify with multiple places. All but one have a polycultural identity—grounded in different archipelagos—rather than an urban or rural identity. They all studied in France, except for Hihirau Vaitoare, who studied, first, at the University of French Polynesia in Pape'ete's urban area, and then at the CMA. As they reflected upon their trajectories, the artists articulated how their sense of identity or belonging was formed. Before examining how the artists express their relationship to the city through their artworks and analysing the novelty their works bring to their urban environment, we shed light here on some of their words to help understand how their relationship with urban areas is enriched by their life experiences and their family roots in broader territories.

Born in Pape'ete to a Tahitian mother and a *pied-noir* father (an Algeria-born Frenchman), Tokainiua Devatine spent his childhood in the family home in Fa'a'a, the city adjacent to Pape'ete, but went to school in Pape'ete. He often spent his weekends in the rural part of Tahiti, in Tautira, the village where his maternal grandparents lived. Travels have always been a part of his family's life. His ancestors hail from several places that include the islands of Moorea and Rotuma. He explains: 'I think of myself as being in continuity with my ancestors, so wherever they are from is also where I am from. The way I tend to think of my origins is in terms of network.'

Vaihere Tauraa is originally from Pape'ete and grew up in Pape'ete's agglomeration. Her father is from Pape'ete and her mother from Moorea. She studied at the CMA before travelling to Toulon, France to study arts. She returned to Tahiti to teach at the CMA in 2016.

Hihirau Vaitoare was born in Pape'ete. Her father is from Tautira and her mother is from Moorea. She grew up at the Fenua 'Aihere, in Tautira. (The Fenua 'Aihere, which means 'bush', 'uncultivated lands', is the part of the Tautira district between the village and the beginning of the Pari, an area of cliffs that can only be reached by boat.) When she was five, her family moved to Taravao, a developing, rural town situated on the isthmus between Tahiti's bigger, northwestern region and its southwestern peninsula. She joined the CMA teaching staff in 2014. She has resided in Pape'ete for the past 7 years and, prior to this, lived in Pira'e. She returns regularly to Taravao.

I feel that I belong to two places: the peninsula and the city ... The fact that I grew up on the peninsula helps me every day in my urban life. The relationship I have with these two places gives me balance. Each place helps me go through difficult moments in the other place. On the peninsula ... there is less concrete and people take themselves less seriously ... Vegetation is all around and ... the spirit there is different.¹⁴

For Vaitoare, the city exemplifies the pressures and advantages inherent in every urban centre, resulting in a reduced quality of life. At the same time, the city is also a better resourced place of greater opportunities. To Vaitoare, Devatine and Wohler, the city and rural areas are complementary to each other.

Rangitea Wohler's parents and grandparents are from Ra'iatea, the Tuamotu islands (Makatea and Fakarava) and from France. She was born in Pape'ete and lived on Tupuai island, 600 km south of Tahiti, until she was 10. She subsequently lived in Pira'e and Fa'a'a in the urban area of Pape'ete before moving to France to study when she was 15. These transitions between Tupuai Island, Tahiti



and, later on, France, where she graduated in architectural studies, taught her to adapt to new life circumstances. They also allowed her to be mindful of the ways urban landscapes influence people's internal landscapes:

When you are in an urban space, you are conditioned to live and think in a specific way; you are faced with a lot of information—in the landscape, through advertising, with the press and everything you hear; ... the further away you go from the city, the more easily you can forge your own opinion. Conversely, when you are in the city, you are more easily influenced and confronted with repeated pieces of information that condition your way of thinking.¹⁵

In order to pursue a variety of opportunities, her family moved around a lot, as Wohler did. Consequently, she does not feel she is from one place in particular.

The way I see it is that in every place where I lived, I experienced something. At the moment, I live in Papara. Let us see where I will go next ... I know that a lot of people are able to say: 'I am from the peninsula.' This is not true at all for me. I cannot see myself stating where I come from ... The reason is that I did not live in on Tupuai island long enough.

The artists' discourses do not embrace binary oppositions between urbanity and rurality. The city, which is perceived as a place for residency, work, creativity, opportunity and exhibition, connected to other places—including the places where the artists spent their childhood—is not envisaged as a place where they think they will settle for life. As we are finishing this article, both Tauraa and Vaitoare have moved to Taravao but keep working in Pape'ete.

The following analysis of artworks by the five artists shows that the way they are rooted in their urban environment takes on different forms of expression: some of them reflect upon this urban environment; others address an urban audience or find it important to refer to places from regional Tahiti or other islands. We explore how they help rethink urban practices and present other modes of living—from different parts of Tahiti or other islands—and how they encourage urban dwellers to reflect upon alternative modes of consuming, town and country planning, and to value Polynesian culture.

With her work on blue tarpaulins, Rangitea Wohler invites spectators to rethink the way they see urban spaces and to 'break down clichés' (Figures 6 and 7).¹⁶ While blue tarpaulins are associated in the collective imaginary and urban landscape with poor or relatively poor neighbourhoods, they are in fact owned by people from all social classes. The artist states: 'Even rich people have blue tarpaulins; everyone owns one'. With a series of garments made out of tarpaulin that she presented at Tahiti Fashion Week, the artist demonstrated that creativity is accessible to everyone and thus offered 'a different perspective' on Tahiti Fashion Week, which is generally perceived as inaccessible, showcasing 'clothes that can only be seen from afar and that no-one will ever wear'. Wohler wanted spectators to see the tarpaulin in a new way: 'I would like people to see poor neighbourhoods in a different manner', she explained. Her works invite us to regard even the most humble, utilitarian things as significant. She also wanted to show that 'the tarpaulin is not just the slums, and the slums are not just the tarpaulin', thus foregrounding the idea that art can be used as a critical and political medium to address urban issues that affect cities worldwide. Taking Hotuarea, a neighbourhood that has been undergoing a programme of slum clearance, as an example, she explains: 'I just want people to see that Hotuarea is a neighbourhood where people live, have learnt to cooperate, a place with fishermen, small stores; it not just an area for which solutions have to be found because people living there only have problems'.



FIGURE 6 Rangitea Wohler. *Marumaru 2*, tarpaulin, 580×180, 2016

Tokainiua Devatine's artwork also reflects his interest in the observation of social, cultural, environmental and economic realities of Pacific societies, and in the relationship that city dwellers have with their environment. In his triptych, *Connectés—déconnectés* (Figure 8), the first photograph, which features a young woman and a young man standing behind a wire fence as they face the ocean, is a reminder of the seafront in Pape'ete where wire fencing has been installed all along the shoreline. The artist explains that people could fish in the harbour as recently as 7 years ago, and that internationally recognised outrigger canoe sportsmen would also train in these waters. By 2020, however, such activities had become impossible. The fence that has been erected between the people and the ocean indicates that urban planning in Pape'ete has disregarded Polynesian culture. As anthropologist, Tamatoa Bambridge (Cordobes & Bambridge, 2019, p. 28), explains,

[in] traditional Polynesian culture, the land and the sea are not separate entities, they are part of a continuum that is both territorial and symbolic. You cannot think about one without thinking about the other. One could, therefore, imagine that urban planning



FIGURE 7 Rangitea Wohler. *Marumaru 3*, performance, variable dimensions, 2018



FIGURE 8 Tokainiua Devatine. *Connectés - déconnectés* (triptych), digital print, cardboard, 60×40 (each), 2018

would apprehend these two realities as a whole, without establishing a frontier between two worlds whose separation makes sense in western culture but does not in Polynesia.

This first photograph thus denounces the programmed disconnection between Polynesians and their environment that comes as a result of a lack of—or bad—urban planning. The two other photographs—showing the couple facing the ocean while the woman is using her iPad as a mirror, and the couple using a laptop in a taro field—suggest that we might all insidiously create our own disconnection (with the environment, with others, with reality) when we carry around our technological devices.

With her two most personal artworks, *Mata i'a* and *Unahinahi*, that represent fishing scenes (Figures 9 and 10), Hirirau Vaitoare sheds light on the possibility for young Polynesians to reconnect with their environment, and the ocean in particular. As she reflected upon the generations of students that had a very different upbringing from hers at the Fenua 'Aihere, Vaitoare decided to conjure up the peninsula where she grew up in. She wanted to paint 'these small moments that today one might not enjoy in the city',¹⁷ and show that she and her father were living off fishing at the Fenua 'Aihere. For the artist, one thinks differently in the city and on the peninsula; the city is characterised by movements while the peninsula is restful and relaxing. The attractive and calm colours of the artworks convey the soothing atmosphere of the everyday moments of sharing, which, according to the artist, take on deeper meaning if her artworks are exhibited in the city. She recalls some spectators' reactions: 'Afterwards you hear them [say]: "this is true, this is what we did in the past!"', and notes that 'on the peninsula all this is still practised; fish are still sold by the road side'.

Vaihere Tauraa's artworks also invite the audience to change their mindset. The artist seeks to denounce the representations of the vahine as an object (Figure 11). She recalls that when she was young, 'calendars of the women of the South seas'—with their naked breasts and smiling faces—were hung in her father's dental prosthetist practice.¹⁸ Some of her friends were featured on these calendars. These calendars are still sold in many shops in the city. Wishing to remind her audience of the fact that Polynesian women cannot be reduced to a wreath of flowers over their heads or a naked breast on an anonymous body, she made a diptych with acrylic entitled *Rauvahivaha*. On both paintings, a vahine is represented from the middle of her belly up to her head in naive pink and yellow colours. On the left painting, only the floral head wreath above a deep stare is visible. By contrast, on the right painting, the face and one arm have been covered with paint and only the breast remains visible. Using urban exhibition places to debunk clichés, the diptych criticises reductionist representations to which Polynesian women have been confined and underlines the artist's refusal of the idea that women should be 'ambulatory display cases'.

Calling for a cultural and political awakening, Viri Taimana's triptych *E'ere au i te hotu painu* (I am not a drifting seed), *E Fatu fenua* (I am a land owner: I am from here) and *E Tama 'Ai'a* (I am



FIGURE 9 Hirirau Vaitoare. *Mata i'a*, acrylic on plywood, 50×40, 2018



FIGURE 10 Hirirau Vaitoare. *Unahinahi*, acrylic on plywood, 50×40, 2018

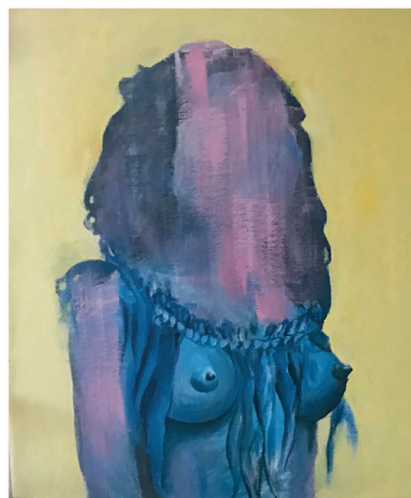


FIGURE 11 Vaihere Tauraa. *Rauvahivaha* (dipthych), acrylic on canvas, 50×40 (each), 2018

a child of this country)¹⁹ encourages audiences to question the contemporary evolution of the law based on colonial epistemological frameworks that deny the collective rights of Indigenous people. It addresses the choices that will contribute to dispossess Polynesians from their cultural—and land—base (Figures 12–14). The title Taimana chose for the last portrait, *E Tama 'Ai'a*, reflects his desire to 'assert that we are from here and not from elsewhere'.²⁰ The triptych features a mature man with a serious and worried look, a younger man who is angry, and a smiling and carefree girl. The work is Taimana's personal response to the setting up of the Land Title Tribunal and the expression of his concern about the evolution of the law in French Polynesia that would make it possible to renounce jointly-held property under yet unknown conditions. The triptych represents 'three different feelings at



the same moment', 'a generation that looks at itself' and thinks 'we are going to be taken in'. Giving up jointly held property is synonymous with Polynesians being dispossessed from their land, from 'where our feet stand strong', Taimana states.²¹



FIGURE 12 Viri Taimana. *E'ere au i te hotu painu*, oil on canvas, 160×200, 2018

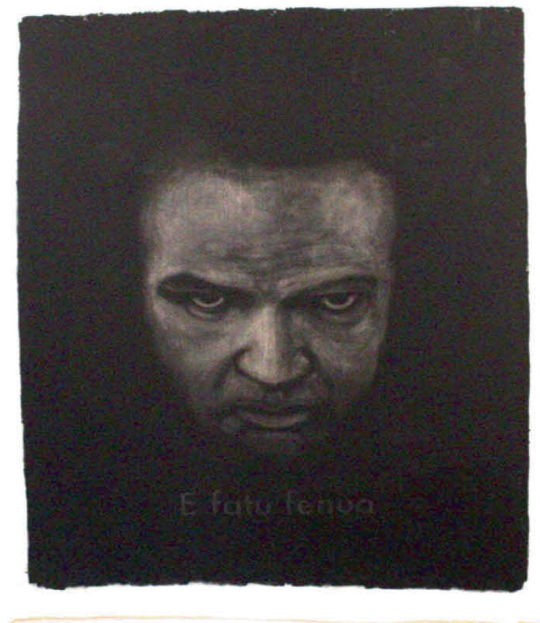


FIGURE 13 Viri Taimana. *E Fatu fenua*, oil on canvas, 160×200, 2018



FIGURE 14 Viri Taimana. *E Tama 'Ai'a*, oil on canvas, 160×200, 2018

5 | CONTEMPORARY POLYNESIAN ART AS AN ASSERTION OF INDIGENEITY: CONCLUSION

The study conducted here helps better understand the way in which Pape'ete opens out onto the ocean and how its melting-pot of cultures from all over French Polynesia and beyond contributes—and could even more intentionally contribute—to the richness of urban life. By organising initiatives such as the two regattas for miniature sailing canoes in a basin facing the Pape'ete harbour, the CMA has created the possibility of acquiring new knowledge (how to build canoes) and building on the richness of Polynesian *savoir-faire*, while artistically challenging the increasingly restricted access to the harbour. Through their work, the CMA and the five artists invite us to understand that there is an underlying connection between urban and rural areas (the 'districts'), and between the self-confidence of young Polynesians today and the future that will be built for the territory.

As a response to systemic and emerging problems in Pape'ete, such as unemployment, homelessness or drug trafficking, the CMA responds through providing professional training and teaching young people a trade. Although it is located in Pape'ete, its director develops projects across French Polynesia and seeks to create opportunities for students from the different archipelagos. Additionally, in order to increase the educational opportunities of its students and French Polynesian students, the CMA seeks to counter through education and creative actions both the effects of colonisation regarding the content that is taught in public institutions and the 'invisibilisation' of Indigenous creativity. Its objectives also include the identification of students who will be able to become teachers of Polynesian arts, techniques, design and art history, at the CMA, replacing the current teachers and thus regenerating pedagogical, technical, theoretical, professional, cultural, heritage and creative approaches.

This article underlines, although briefly, the five artists' elaborate artistic discourse. It foregrounds their singular trajectories, which are also representative of some of the varied journeys that can be

found in the Pape'ete agglomeration. As catalysts for inspiring present and future generations, their perspectives and ideas are foundational and bear witness to the vitality of Polynesian artistic creation and innovation. They are reminders that a living culture evolves with time and lives in the present. They also express a Polynesian consciousness, which we define as an internalised relationship that Indigenous artists establish with the world or wish to see established in the world. The maintenance of the relationship with the ocean, an emphasis on the important transmission of Indigenous cultural heritage, an openness to the world, the nourishment of a sense of self-esteem and pride in culture, the reflections on other modes of living or town planning, and the training of young people and creation of links between different social strata and neighbourhoods are all elements stemming from this Indigenous Polynesian consciousness, and what we would like to propose to see as a new school of thought that has originated in the CMA.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks go to Viri Taimana, Vaihere Tauraa, Hihirau Vaitoare and Rangitea Wohler for answering our questions and providing feedback on this article, to Linda Neil for her meticulous editorial work and to Géraldine Le Roux for her judicious comments. This article was translated by Estelle Castro-Koshy. Open access publishing facilitated by James Cook University, as part of the Wiley - James Cook University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Tokainiua Devatine, conversation with Estelle Castro-Koshy, 29 January 2019.
- ² Around 5% of the CMA's budget is generated by its own activities (mostly the sale of artworks).
- ³ In 2014, Polynesian contemporary art exhibition, *Manava*, showcasing artworks by CMA students and teachers, travelled to the Los Angeles Woodbury University art gallery. In 2019, *Puhoro o mua, Puhoro ki tua* (a collective exhibition of Indigenous artists) was held in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and an exhibition entitled *Maeva. Polynesian Contemporary Art from Tahiti and French Polynesian Islands* featuring artists from the CMA was curated in Brest, France, by Géraldine Le Roux in collaboration with the CMA.
- ⁴ Nena and Selva (2005) introduce 11 Indigenous artists in their book for the general public on contemporary art in Tahiti. Also intended for the general public, *Tahitian Street Art* offers a presentation of urban art by graffiti artists from the *fenua*, who the author, an architect, presents as street magicians (Esquevin, 2017). Gaëtan Deso's (2016) thesis, which provides a detailed overview of the emergence and development of contemporary art in French Polynesia, dedicates only two pages to Indigenous art from 1991 to 2016 by focusing on the work of artists Tihoti Guy and Laiza Pautheha.
- ⁵ Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each artist.
- ⁶ For an analysis on the discourses on school participation in French Polynesia, see Salaün (2016).
- ⁷ The *baccalauréat professionnel* includes strong vocational components.
- ⁸ Viri Taimana, interview with Tokainiua Devatine, 12 March 2019.
- ⁹ For Fryberg (2016a), 'identity-safe spaces communicate to ALL people that they belong and can be successful in that context'. These spaces 'promote cultural-congruent (matching) models of self', are 'free from stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination', and 'include positive and inclusive representations of diversity'.
- ¹⁰ For a definition of intangible cultural heritage, see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.
- ¹¹ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Riz9_Ujtx6Q and https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=22&v=_bCMY4GSFIs



- ¹² See, for example, <http://www.cma.pf/galerie/gallery/2-exposition-vente-des-travaux-eleves-nov2017>
- ¹³ Taimana, interview with Devatine.
- ¹⁴ Hihirau Vaitoare, interview with Tokainiua Devatine, 18 January 2019.
- ¹⁵ Rangitea Wohler, interview with Tokainiua Devatine, 29 January 2019.
- ¹⁶ Wohler, interview with Devatine.
- ¹⁷ Vaitoare, interview with Devatine.
- ¹⁸ Vaihere Tauraa, interview with Tokainiua Devatine, 28 January 2019.
- ¹⁹ These translations are not provided in the catalogue.
- ²⁰ On the colonial leitmotiv and French metropolitan point of view regarding jointly held property as temporary although it is long-lasting from a Polynesian point of view, see Bambridge in Cordobes & Bambridge, 2019 (pp. 32–33).
- ²¹ Taimana, interview with Devatine.

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How to cite this article: Castro-Koshy, E. & Devatine, T. (2022) Polynesianising and regenerating urban spaces: An analysis of the artworks and interventions of the Centre des Métiers d'Art de Polynésie française and of its artists. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 33, 152–172. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12435>