

VAULT talks to artist Angela Tiatia as she finishes work on her most ambitious video work to date.

WRITTEN by BRI LEE

# FORECAST ANGELA TIATIA



Angela Tiatia's latest exhibition will be her biggest yet, but the heart and drive of her practice has stayed remarkably focused since her first solo exhibition eight years ago. Like a compass pointed simultaneously inward and outward, Tiatia's work explores themes of postcolonial reclamation, women's bodies, identity and representation, regardless of the varied mediums she travels through to see her messages manifest.

*Love Object* (opening at Sullivan+Strumpf from 23 March) is the name of both the video work and the exhibition, and Tiatia describes it as a "reimagining" of the Greek mythological figure of Narcissus. "I'm so excited about it," she says of the 75-person crew she has standing by ready to film at the time of talking with VAULT, "It's a reflection of the current culture we're living in, with the rise of narcissism and how it's seeping into our daily lives, especially on social media."

Since presenting *Foreign Objects* straight after graduating from art school in New Zealand, Tiatia's prolific practice has skipped across oceans and mediums, and she now lives and works in Sydney. In 2018 she was awarded the 2018 Creative New Zealand Contemporary Pacific Artist Award. Her first solo exhibition in 2011 was an installation, and her works in the 8<sup>th</sup> Asia Pacific Triennial in 2015 were all video. In 2018 she unveiled a painted self-portrait so powerful that it was named a finalist for the Archibald Prize. "I'm not very known for a painting practice, but that's how I got into art school, and it means a lot to me to start to be recognised not just as a video artist," tells VAULT. *Love Object* is video work, but audiences should look out for more painting from Tiatia in the near future as well.

"In a way, the painting side (of my practice) is so intimate and private that

I even almost stopped myself from entering." Her original idea was taken from a Matisse pose of a reclining nude, but part-way through she realised she needed something more "active" that let her be in charge of her own representation. "It feels very vulnerable putting work out there that I'm not so known for," she says, "I was pre-empting the judgment of others." The final piece, *Study for a self-portrait*, is almost two metres tall, and is bold and strong: the artist is crouching on a stack of stools, poised ready to jump or strike, wearing sneakers and staring straight back at the viewer.

The gaze in that painted self-portrait is one of the most striking and consistent factors across her entire oeuvre, and in video work it's an almost accusatory stare through the lens. "I find it such a defiant and powerful thing to do when you're staring down the barrel of the camera because there are so many different layers of who is looking at you. Number one is the artist that sees the image of themselves, and once there's an audience there are so many different layers of who that gaze is penetrating." It's present in her 2010 work *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis* as she eats the hibiscus flower, reclaiming the floral symbol so corrupted by colonialism and sexism, then it hits the viewer again in *The Fall* (2017), a commission for the Australian War Memorial Museum, Canberra, about the fall of Singapore in World War II. "The orchid is the national flower of Singapore. So I felt, again, that that was so fitting, to open with that flower," she says of the other element of repeated imagery – the flower in

Left to right  
Top to bottom  
ANGELA TIATIA  
*The Fall* (video still), 2017  
two-channel high definition video 16:9, colour, no sound  
ANGELA TIATIA  
*Soft Power*, 2015  
7 channel moving image installation  
Variable durations

ANGELA TIATIA  
*Heels*, 2014  
single-channel high definition video  
1 minute 50 seconds  
ANGELA TIATIA  
*Walking The Wall*, 2014  
single-channel high definition video

Opposite  
ANGELA TIATIA  
*Love Object*, 2018  
Photo: Kieren Cooney  
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore



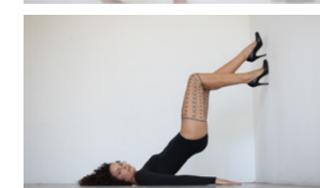
the mouth – describing it as an "artist's signature" in video form.

*The Fall* was also the first time Tiatia worked with a large cast and crew for a video. The most interesting challenge is how Tiatia's gaze – that uniquely piercing look simultaneously inward and outward – might translate from her individual, solitary works to this mass scale she is now exploring. She often chooses to work independently: most of her videos feature only the artist herself; but *Love Object* is the opposite.

She uses the word "potent" to describe the effect she can achieve when working on a grand scale. "Narcissus has always been portrayed as the singular male figure and so for *Love Object* it's 40 actors. It's the same stream of thinking as when I did *Foreign Objects*: it's very clear and direct messaging." Tiatia had collected hundreds of objects over a 15-year period, finding antique listings of artworks, décor

and furniture supposedly depicting a rich diversity of Pacific identities, but extremely objectified in their representations and labelled for searches with terms like "bare-breasted savages" or "bare-breasted hula girls". "When I had all those objects in a single space, the direct message was how obscene that was," she says, describing this as "the power and the poetry when either objects or people are presented en masse."

Conflict is what keeps stories and art compelling in a sociopolitical context. Tiatia frequently refers to frictions and tensions between themes in her practice and its results: the "power and vulnerability" in painting herself; the "mythology compared to the reality" of representations of the Pacific woman; and of course, the gaze both inward and outward. "When I see myself gazing at myself there is a knowing, that 'I see you'. There is a moment of tension between power and disempowerment. To be in a



position where I am in control of my own representation, rather than being rendered powerless by the narratives of my image by others, is liberating." With *Love Object* Tiatia will undoubtedly place her perspective (if not herself) front and centre, asking questions about both obvious and insidious issues in society. The exhibition makes large promises but with such a consistent yet dynamic body of work behind her, Tiatia is staring at us again, rightfully confident. **V**

*Love Object* is at Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney, from March 23 to April 30, 2019.  
Angela Tiatia is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.  
sullivanstrumpf.com