

Picturing the Island

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how recollections of a colonial childhood might be re-contextualized within Pacific Ocean cultures and their histories and the fields of island studies and post-colonialism, in the language and materials of creative visual art. Examining Crawford's artist book *Picturing the Island* (2016) as a case study to resolve these questions, this paper explores whether printed artworks, and particularly artworks employing the book form, present an appropriate opportunity to gather these diverse narratives. It asks: given the historical significance of the printed page and its various origins in news media, the library, literature and fine art, does an artist-made book, with its poetic and discrete significance as an art object, carry a resonance powerful enough to contemporize the past?

Dates are important, and histories are so easily forgotten. The creative research project, *Picturing the Island*, takes the form of an artist book, as a means to measure the capacity of this form of hand-printed artwork to re-present long-forgotten histories. Does the historical significance of the printed page – given its various origins in news media, the library, literature and fine art – carry a resonance powerful enough to draw the past towards, or even into, the present?

In the 1950s my Australian parents were employed by the British Phosphate Commission (BPC) on a small island in the Central Pacific Ocean. The BPC mined the island's phosphate resources. This island, named Ocean Island by its colonial administration but now known by its indigenous name Banaba, is part of Kiribati, a nation of thirty-three islands.

The islands that comprise Kiribati have seen many visitors – the islanders of Oceania, whalers, beachcombers and escaped convicts, traders and missionaries, blackbirders [1] and miners;

as well as events such as two world wars and the colonialism of the United Kingdom and Australia – consequently the I-Kiribati (the people of Kiribati) have witnessed many cultural exchanges and overlays (Rainbird, 2004).

As a child of those empires, I wondered: could my recollections of childhood be re-presented without re-creating the colony? Could the picturing of the island of Banaba as a printed artwork test this tension?



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. *Picturing the Island*, letterpress, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016
 Figure 2. *Picturing the Island*, photopolymer intaglio print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

The presentation of this research in the form of an artist book draws on several precedents. The field of island studies suggests that an island can be many things at once – a physical geographical space, a place of lived realities and environmental issues (Hau’ofa 1994, p.158). The island is also often seen as a vehicle for literary and creative metaphor (Grydehøj 2007, p.5).

Moreover, this project delves into the fields of bibliographic studies and fine art. Although it is multiple and editioned, the limited edition hand-printed artist book is also rare. As Tallman points out, however, the printed pages of an artist book remain resolutely linked to the public form of all printed matter: ‘Simultaneously populist and elitist, the (fine art) print is enmeshed with the idea of private ownership as it is with the idea of abroad audience’ (Tallman 1996, p.114).

Picturing the Island is constructed from text and images hand-printed on paper in a printmaking studio. The signifying power of a photographic image reproduced and mediated via the photomechanical dot, and the historical significance of hand-set and printed type are the key interrogatory methods of the project.

Given these diverse links and connections, this research asks if an artist-made book, while retaining its poetic and discrete significance as an art object, also has the capacity to extract a historical narrative from a private past and re-contextualize these moments in a public present as a contemporary artwork.

A BOOK OF PAGES-PAGES IN A BOOK/A SEA OF ISLANDS-AN ISLAND IN THE SEA

Oceania scholar Epeli Hau’ofa makes an insightful distinction between the concept of the world as a ‘sea of islands’ and the world imagined as ‘islands in the sea’. For the people of Oceania, he notes, the environment of their seas, sky and land was vast, and ‘Their universe comprised not only of land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse’ (Hau’ofa 1994, p.152).

Thinking of an island’s relation to its environs as being intimate and interconnected, and of the island as an integral and active part of the oceans and skies that surround and support it, also presents an argument for new understandings of the relationships between a book and its pages. In this model, each printed page is understood as being dependent on its relationship with all the other pages for its meaning. As Maderuelo (2014, p.231) points out: ‘the idea of belonging to a series is implicit in the very notion of a page... A page implies a succession... by its position between the other pages that precede or follow it’. The page, with its recto or verso form, is one element of the totality of the book, its singularity assuaged as it contributes to a larger meaning, the physical form of the book now understood as a community of interconnected pages.

At first glance, Picturing the Island could be described as a series of

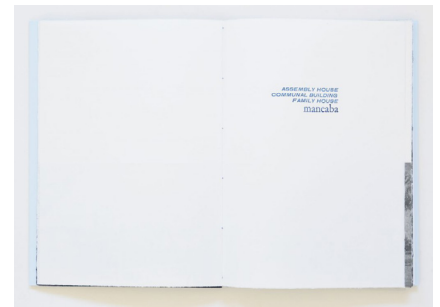


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 3. Picturing the Island, letterpress, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

Figure 4. Picturing the Island, letterpress, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

Figure 5. Picturing the Island, photopolymer relief print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

Figure 6. Picturing the Island, photopolymer relief print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

single A4-sized pages detailing aspects of Kiribati culture. On many of its pages, two lines of text present translations of phrases from English to Kiribati and Kiribati to English, printed in blue ink and surrounded by the space of the page that supports them. Throughout the book, these islands of text float in the sea of the page, echoing Hau'ofa's distinction. The space that surrounds the texts directs the eye to wander across the page, and also presents an expanse as if for marginalia. Intaglio and relief-printed photographic images are printed in monochromatic greys and blues, imitating the many blues of the ocean and sky. Sited on the lower half of many pages, the horizon line of the page is lowered as if by force of gravity. All of the images and texts are citations, and a list of the sources of these citations is inserted as a loose leaf between the last pages of the book.

On closer inspection the sequence of images, space and text reveals a loose chronology: an introduction to 'I-KIRIBATI the people of the Gilberts' with their 'ASSEMBLY HOUSE/COMMUNAL BUILDING/FAMILYHOUSE maneaba'; the geography, culture and myths of origin of I-Kiribati are suggested – 'THE SPIDER WEAVES ITS WEB e katea maneaba te nareau', the British Phosphate Commission's mining of phosphate deposits there and its subsequent relocation of the islanders from their depleted home to Rabi, an island in Fiji, in the 1940s. The book's final pages consider this loss of homeland. The definition 'UMANA to dwell in, under, to take as one's dwelling' is paired with reclusive Australian artist Ian Fairweather's Biblical reference to his remote island home on Bribie Island, just off the coast of the Australian state of Queensland, in another reminder of the evangelical work of the LMS: 'In my Father's House there are many mansions... To the Seeing Eye the multiplicity of things is all contained beneath a single thatch... no memory is ever abandoned... Not even my grass hut here on Bribie... in memory I dwell there still...' (Ludlow 2007, p.62).

The pages of *Picturing the Island* are folded and stitched together with a pale blue thread, but no adhesive has been used to hold its seven sections together. The pages consequently fall open easily and lie flat. This looseness suggests that any connection forged by stitching could easily be undone. Although ostensibly business like in its familiar A4 shape, this binding counters the possibility that this is a stack of neutral documents. This collection is denied the fixed permanency of the traditional codex, as the content could once again be swept away by the haste of history. The title and artist's name are printed in pale blue in the lower half of a cool-blue dust jacket, which wraps around the dark-blue end papers.

TEXT

The dictionary definitions that form much of the text of *Picturing the Island* are the result of the tireless work of the London Missionary Society's (LMS) proselytisers who lived and worked in Kiribati. In 1893 Reverend and Mrs Hiram Bingham (with Moses Kaure) translated and printed *The Bible* into the language of Kiribati. In 1908 Bingham wrote and published the first Kiribati-English dictionary; printing this volume



Figure 7

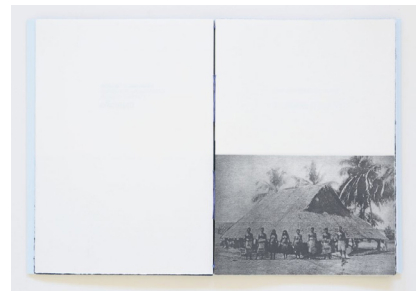


Figure 8

with letterpress technology in the hot and salty outdoor environment of the Central Pacific Ocean.

Letterpress printing enabled the spread of information that had been made possible with the invention of the printing press, and printed text became immediately more available than its handwritten precedent, less likely to be lost, and reproducible. As Eisenstein argues (1979, p.116), 'the democratizing aspect of the preservative powers of print... secured precious documents not by putting them under lock and key but by removing them from chests and vaults and duplicating them for all to see'.

Although clearly not evangelically-minded, *Picturing the Island's* hand-printed letterpress texts echo the Bingham's nineteenth century printing activities and, in the living language of I-Kiribati, conjure the lost voices of the past into the present of its pages. Following Eisenstein's lead, the texts of *Picturing the Island* unearth and recirculate fragments of the culture and language of I-Kiribati from the 'chests and vaults' of the library. These notations are printed on a variety of paper stocks, and the fonts and sizes of the texts are as assorted as Kiribati's colonial and post-colonial histories. These texts privilege neither Kiribati nor English in a visual re adjustment of once-unchallenged power structures:

UMA

a system of navigation for travelling at night

and

I AM BLINDED BY WIND

e ka matau n te ang

Small paragraphs of text citing scholarly works about the history and culture of Kiribati are set in sans serif type, and these too drift in the oceanic space of the page.

While this choice of method evokes the publications of those early LMS evangelicals, letterpress processes also intrinsically suggest various states of retrieval, multiplication and dispersal; processes that might also describe the shifts and erosions of the language and culture of i-Kiribati. The printed text on paper is the only evidence of the once-resolute solid *forme*, that grouping of otherwise singular pieces of lead assembled together and locked into a metal chase. The texts take on a rather more unsettling impermanence when the *forme* is unlocked, and each letter and space distributed back into its drawer. What had been so solid and irrefutable dissolves and returns into neutrality, waiting to be re-assembled.

These cycles of forming, dissolving and re-forming that are inherent to the mechanical and technical process of printing type further suggest

another sense of history and time, and a disorientation or steering away from achronologically organized sense of time. This shifts attention from being fixed 'on... objects... [which is] to the detriment of the relationships that those objects establish, and by which they are established' (Didi-Huberman 2017, p.23) to a sense of the object as traversing time from one place to another, and of being in more than one relationship to the context from which it is born. Well-worn type was set and printed to form the texts and the unique material presence of *Picturing the Island*, only to be re-assembled to form new meanings and relationships in its next outing. Just as the Reverend Bingham's type was formed and dissolved to record the language of Kiribati and to spread the evangelical message of the LMS, the type used in *Picturing the Island* shapes these lead letter forms into artwork.

IMAGE

The images presented in *Picturing the Island* were initially found in library holdings of the State Library Queensland. The images clearly reveal their origins as archives – their subjects are formally posed in rows, their clarity is occluded by a layer of half-tone dots, their grey-scale analogue surfaces eschew the millions of colours of contemporary digital technologies.

The process of producing the images in *Picturing the Island* from these found images is supported by several precedents. The German artist Aby Warburg drew on the rich links between memory and time, and the powerful evidence of these links that he found between historical and contemporary images (Johnson 2012; Didi-Huberman, 2017). And, as Tallman (1996, p.204) points out, a 'large amount of contemporary printmaking, from Hamilton to Johns to Levine, can be seen as a study of the involuntary revelation of content that occurs when a supposedly transparent medium – printing, photography, memory – becomes occluded'. The German artist Gerhard Richter's methodology also infers that it is only when a found image is managed and manipulated almost to the limits of familiarity or recognition that it may begin to represent what is un-known (Paoletti, 1988). Given these arguments, the images that originated in the colonial and ethnographic records of the subjects of *Picturing the Island* demanded mediation.

Many of the images I discovered were portraits of unidentified groups of people, staring resentfully at a photographer's apparatus, the camera. None of the images were taken by the inhabitants of Kiribati. I re-photographed images from the pages of the books in which they were published, aiming my camera at these unsuspecting subjects yet again. The now digital images were then reversed and overlaid with a digital half-tone dot, one of the mechanisms that, as Lambert (2001, p.6) describes, 'underpin[s] the dissemination of popular visual culture today' and reduces the image to a pattern of dots of various sizes. The images were processed as photographic relief prints and printed in a monochromatic blue to echo black-and-white photographic printing.

Some of the archival images were processed and printed as intaglio

images, remaining closer to their origins as analogue photographs. The texture of the hand-printed page, the tactile matte surface of the etching ink on rag paper, and the placement of the image at the base of the page are the mediations that shift their context into the realm of the fine art print. These images' closer links to their origins, and their difference to the relief-printed images adds another layer of context to the collection that makes up *Picturing the Island*.

These small but profound technical mediations of the images distance them from their ethnographic origins and engages them in a more contemporary dialogue, although the troubling ethical dilemma of using images of people who are certainly no longer alive and without easily-found relatives who could agree to this appropriation remains.

This mediation of the images also deflects agency away from the original photographer and returns it to the de-identified subjects, giving the contemporary viewer a brief chance to receive their gaze as authoritative. These citizens of Oceania are, for that moment, no longer the subjects of a colonizing survey.

In this shift from photographic documentation to artist book page, the newly-mediated images of *Picturing the Island* are released from the ostensible neutrality of historical archives to be granted a moment of contemporary life.

The last image of *Picturing the Island* is from my family's collection, and is included to clarify my private connection to the life of Banaba as a child of the colonizing power. My mother, Lesley Crawford, was the photographer. My sister and I are on the beach, in our bathing suits. We are perched on a small rock, another little island. This image is printed as an intaglio photopolymer print, and remains close to its origins in the smoothly-graded tones of a photograph. It is printed in blue, however, shifting the image from the historical and archival to the register of fine art. In contrast to the stern and confrontational stares of the subjects of the other photographs, my sister and I smile happily up at my mother. Perhaps here we have an illustration of the power structures of colonialism, in this gulf between willingly photographed subjects happily engaging with their photographer and the previous anonymous subjects of ethnographic documentation.

Picturing the Island also includes images of the thatched roofed maneaba, a Banaban community meeting house. Kiribati, as a nation of low-lying islands, will lose land area as a result of global climate change and rising sea levels.

In an image printed in the few last pages of *Picturing the Island*, the Kiribati Climate Action Network's (CAN) Facebook page clearly advises the world: We are not drowning. Farbotko (2010) points out that an 'eco-colonial' view of the islands of Oceania as canaries-in-the-coalmine of climate change leaves little room for agency for the people living in those locations. Furthermore, the 'island studies community as a whole takes pride in its activist orientation' and is aware of the potential of

re-creating a hegemonic power structure (Grydehøj 2017 p.9). It is the islanders who should set the agenda, as Kiribati CAN and this page in *Picturing the Island* proclaim.

CONCLUSION

As an artist with an interest in printed matter's history and culture, I argue – using this artist book as material proof – that the printed image is a social thing. A print might begin life as a solitary image on one piece of paper. When this image is mediated and editioned beyond its singularity it can then be shared by a community of viewers over time. The most special quality of the print is in this happy vibration of shared interests and, to use Hau'ofa's terminology, a printed artwork is more likely to signal the world as a sea of islands, than to live the solitary and isolated life of an island in the sea.

A rendezvous with a book means engaging with its contents and form, knowing that many others may have read it before you. A book also signifies the history of ideas and the social forces that have enabled its production and circulation.

The ambitions to return, re-contextualize and explore the un-known are the generative processes that led to the production of the *Picturing the Island*. This difficult task is perhaps best attempted poetically, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida suggests:

Where the world is... infinitely distant... I must... make the gift or present of this as if come uppoetically, which is the only thing... that can make it possible... without anything happening and leaving a trace in the world...

Jacques Derrida (Naas 2014, pp.59-60)

While the methodology of this artwork, *Picturing the Island*, is resolutely visual and anchored in the materials of printmaking and the book, it also grapples with how to think of and present the past in a new way, to model optimistic relationships with cultures other than one's own, to posit the world as a community and also acknowledge an artwork as something that is ontologically inquiring, elusive and inconstant.

Developed in the shared space of a studio, this project proposes an ecology of making that is both social and individual. This ecology is reflected in the shared processes found in the environment and production methods and materials of a printmaking studio, and informed by the rich history of the sociable and serial printed image.

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. Picturing the Island, letterpress, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016



Figure 2. Picturing the Island, photopolymer intaglio print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

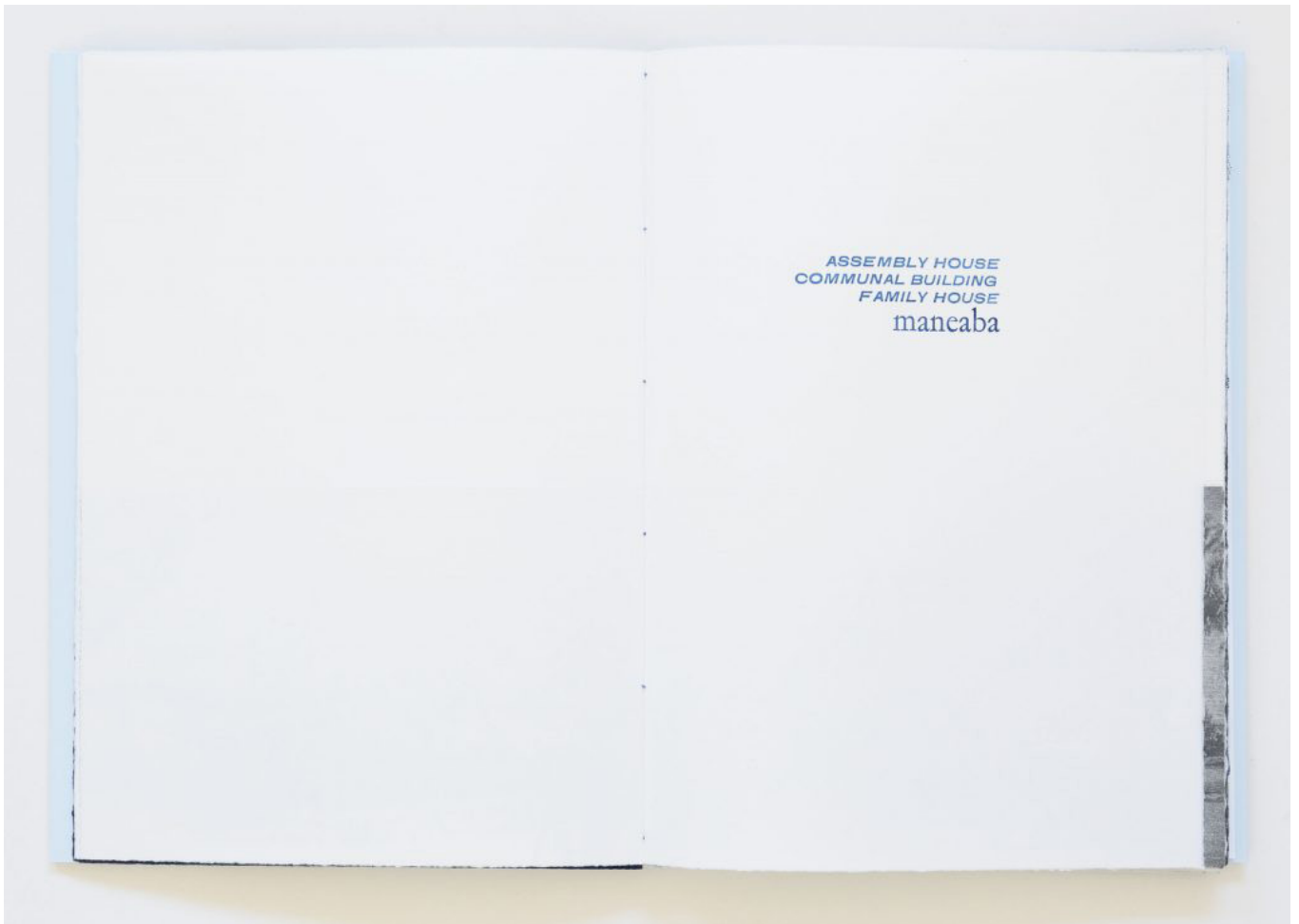


Figure 3. Picturing the Island, letterpress, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016



Figure 4. Picturing the Island, letterpress, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

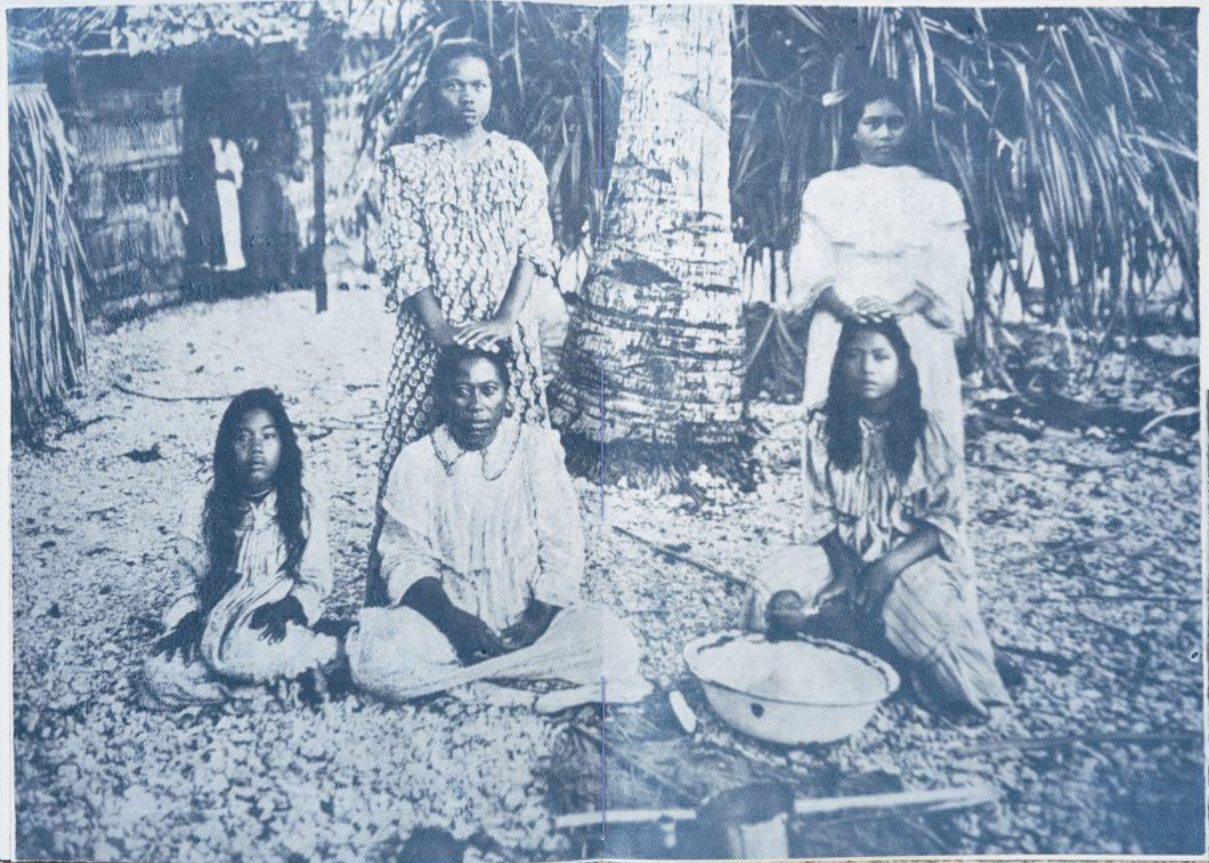


Figure 5. Picturing the Island, photopolymer relief print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016



Figure 6. Picturing the Island, photopolymer relief print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016



Figure 7. Picturing the Island, letterpress and photopolymer intaglio print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

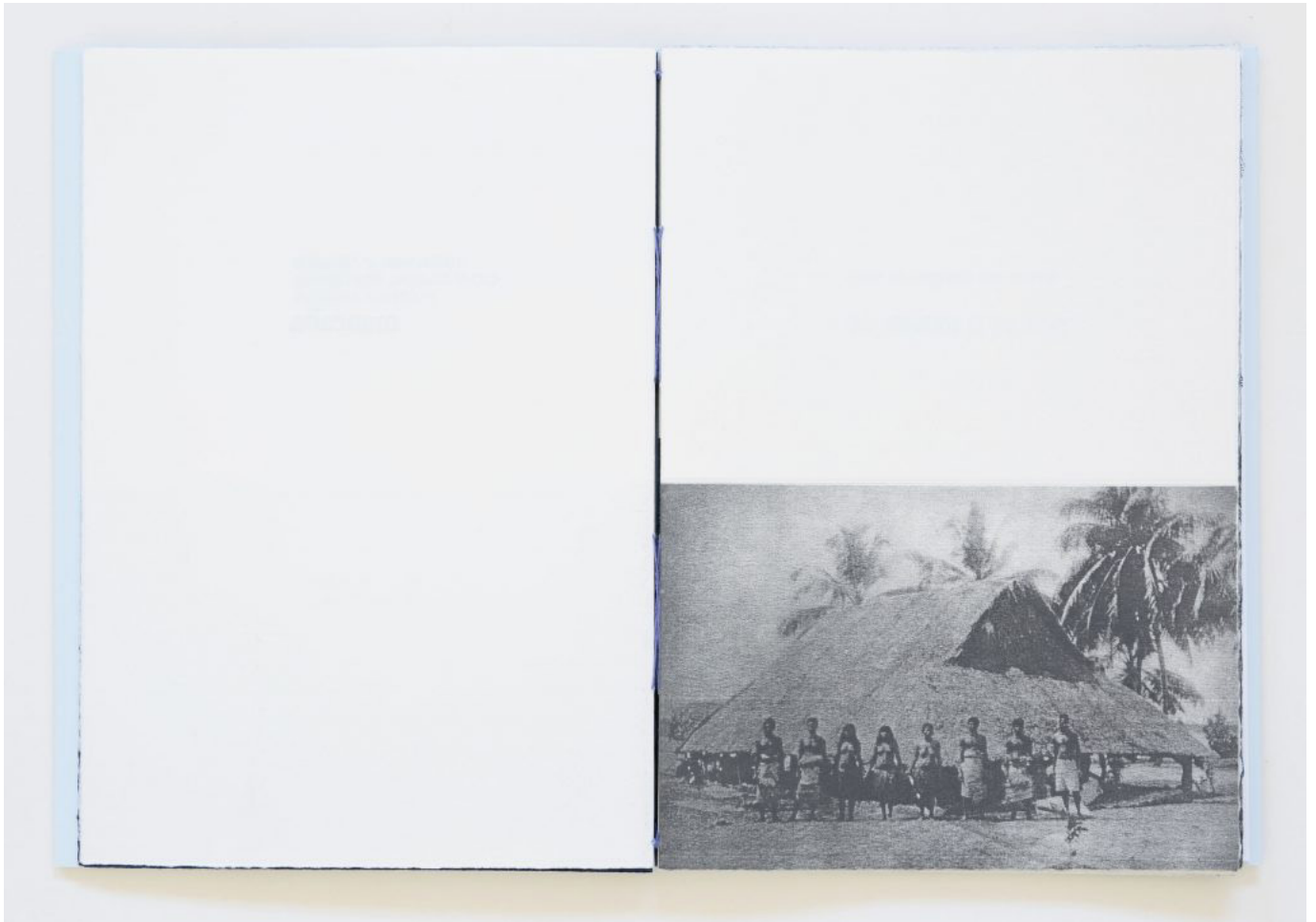


Figure 8. Picturing the Island, photopolymer intaglio print, 28.8 x 42cm, 2016

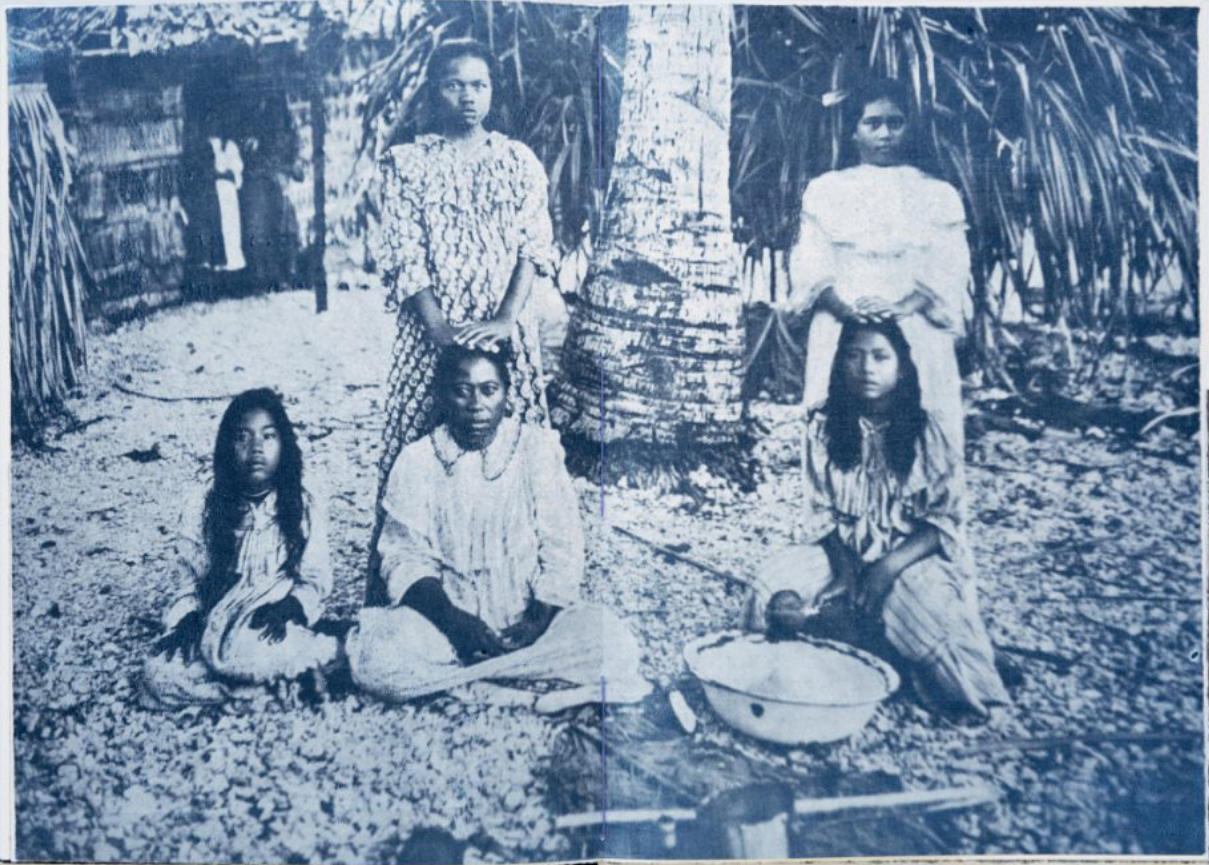


Figure 6.