

Pacific Women: Challenging the boundaries of tradition

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The art of Pacific women – bark cloth, mats, jewellery, costume/clothing, and tivaevae – traditionally, has, at best, been designated ‘craft’. Today, however, this label is not only challenged by the art/craft debate, it is both denounced and expanded upon by contemporary Pacific women artists. Women of the Pacific have always been the purveyors of cultural values and have also been the makers of economic wealth. Their arts, seen as taonga, or ‘valued items’, were essential to the socio-economic and political arenas of their lives. These taonga, however, were not afforded equitable value and recognition when introduced to the Western world. Their importance as ‘gift’, let alone their cultural significance, was overlooked, as they were merely labelled ‘artificial curiosities’.

Within these very basic facts, essential issues of cultural, political, and artistic significance are found. These are intertwined with histories of colonisation and migration, which have impacted on the myths and realities of the Pacific. Scholarship about women’s traditional art forms is scant, as the explorers and most of the early anthropologists were men, whose interactions (outside the sexual realm) focused upon the chiefs. Typically, they did not think women’s work was important, or, to give them the benefit of the doubt, did not have access to women’s knowledge. Only in the last 20 years have women’s roles within a traditional context been discussed.¹ The residual effects of this early scholarship, coupled with gender bias and ethnocentrism, are seen clearly in the ongoing art/craft debate which remains a key issue in artistic discourse today.

In 1983, Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk suggested that the artwork of the men and women of the Pacific followed the strict gender divisions often prescribed within their societies. Since then, however, Teilhet-Fisk and a number of others² have re-examined this literature to find that women and the art which they produced were essential items within the social, cultural, and economic spheres of Pacific societies. Particularly related to the hierarchical systems of daily and religious life, bark cloth, mats, and sennit literally created ‘the ties that bind.’³

Due to the cultural value of these objects, they remain integral to Pacific life today, wherever one finds it. As a result, those who have migrated to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States have maintained the knowledge and links to these traditional art forms as they reinforce cultural values in a new environment. This essay will look at these traditions, as well as the contemporary art practices which reference them. In so doing, it will become evident that Pacific women's art can not be dismissed as craft, fashion, women's art, or any other label offered to trivialise, but must be recognised as a significant movement within New Zealand's art history.

A brief segue into New Zealand's migration history and its social ramifications is essential. New Zealand's post-war economy was prosperous. Yet, with a weakened labour force, labour was sought from the islands associated with New Zealand – Samoa, Rarotonga, Tokelau, and Niue. Seeking access to a monetary economy, many left their homelands to find opportunity. The waves of migration that followed continued, although the dream sought was not easily accessible. The foundations of an urban Pacific culture slowly emerged.⁴

New Zealand, as a Pacific island, was a foreign environment, confusing and rarely friendly. By the mid 60s, there was a substantial population with its attendant social problems. Women around the country formed PACIFICA: a place where they could meet, help and learn from one another.⁵ In essence, they created an island reality in their urban environment. PACIFICA was a social organisation, whose objectives were to provide opportunities for Pacific women to contribute effectively in their new homeland.⁶ This organisation enabled the transition from the island to the urban, using cultural traditions and ideologies as their bridge.

These traditions have become stereotyped and, as such, have come to signify the Pacific as popular culture in New Zealand. *Pasifika* is the mama's crocheting and making tivaevae;⁷ it is also hip hop and urban Pacific fashion and design. Perhaps, more than anything else, it is the myriad of opportunities that foster and participate in a vital artistic phenomena, currently recognised as *Pasifika*. Focusing on the contemporary art production of Pacific women, as well as the traditions and cultural values from where it derives, this essay will demonstrate the complexity and variety of these art forms.

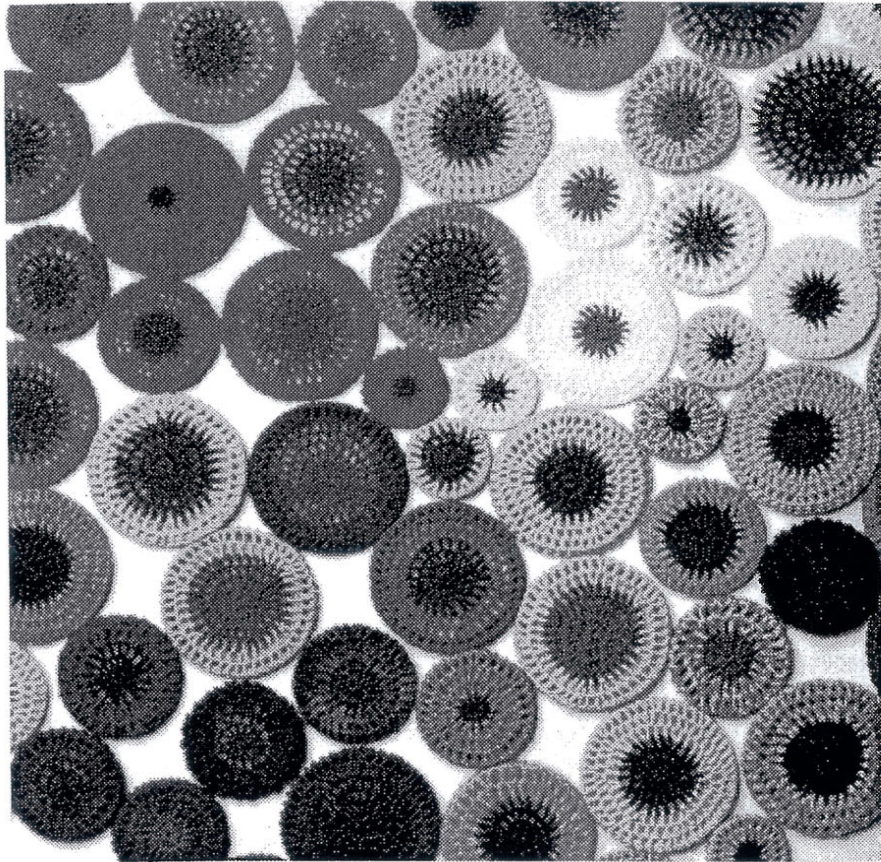
Most traditional arts are categorised as craft. They are not

allocated the cultural significance they imbue. The fact that we are discussing women's art forms, which have never been labelled 'art' in the societies that produce them, does not enhance their position as they move to another cultural sphere. However, these were labelled 'taonga', which is the essential indicator of their cultural value. This ambiguity is complicated by the realities of living in New Zealand, where the fabric of Pacific societies is at odds with the western mindset, which is New Zealand.⁸ These differences are the basis for cultural misunderstandings, both from inside and outside of these communities.⁹

One response has been the assertion of cultural identity. Drawing upon Pacific personae, individuals can create their position within a new cultural milieu. The Pacific, though, has become popular culture, and the perpetuation of Pacific stereotypes has become rampant. Seeing the islands as little more than holiday destinations, the concept or label of 'Pacific' immediately conjures up numerous mental images, involving sun-drenched beaches, palms, a beautiful maiden, and sweet-smelling flowers. For artists, or those involved in their culture, the label has both opened and closed doors. Most artists who fit the label do not appreciate having it placed upon them. Issues of identity come into play – often that of artist taking priority over Pacific islander. At the same time, the Pacific label can come with funding, exhibitions, and recognition. The result is a negotiation between traditional/contemporary, art/craft, urban/island, forming the unique practice which is Pacific art in New Zealand.

Pasifika has become a blend of traditional culture/language/ideology with an urban sophistication and savvy. *Pasifika* addresses the urban reality of islanders and their attempts to balance notions of identity and loss, migration and place, youth and age, tradition and change. These contrasts create ambiguity and the need to challenge, to experiment, to find one's place. Traditionally based ideologies (especially those based in an urban environment) create contradictions. Artists discriminantly embrace particular aspects of their heritage, which enable them to exemplify their position within this contemporary practice. The question, then, is how does the practice of traditional women's art integrate with contemporary art forms? Is there an art/craft dichotomy, or does it/can it work within the context of contemporary Pacific art?

The work of Ani O'Neill engages with these questions. Her work



*Fig. 1 Ani O'Neill, Rainbow Country, 2000.
Crocheted wool. Variable sizes.*

has taken a variety of directions in a very short time. The issues that she has embraced include: stereotype, tourism, representation, and the art/craft debate. These are interwoven in her practice; a practice: of hand work – crochet, plaiting, embroidery – and of women's work. *Tangaroa*, sewn from brown corduroy with embroidered eyes, acknowledged the god image, while questioning its denigration through mass production. What happens to a god once he becomes an object of ridicule? The social implications of this light-hearted work touch a very real cord of cultural loss. This loss, however, is countered by the dissemination of knowledge, and here again O'Neill is a good example. She was taught appliqué and plaiting by her grandmother, an example of Cook Island traditions spanning another generation.

O'Neill combines these techniques, creating a practice based in tradition. In the past year, she has crocheted 'paintings' (Fig.1), focusing on the issue of value *vis-a-vis* women's art. Placing these within the Gallery, O'Neill has challenged the attitudes that dismiss women's art as craft.¹⁰ At the same time, she identifies herself as an urban Polynesian combining the needlework traditions of her grandmother with the global hip hop traditions of Auckland. This is recognised in her role as one of the founding members of the Pacific Sisters – a perfect example of *Pasifika*. The Sisters combine an energised street culture with fantastic reinterpretations of Pacific tradition, thereby creating their own. With costume (Fig. 2) and performance, they play into the 'neo-tribal', recontextualising and reinterpreting ritual activity in the Pacific. As such, they do not draw on the traditional, but create traditions for a contemporary audience. Their costumes are energetic, playful, dynamic, alive. Using feathers, shells, bark cloth, and fibres the Sisters create truly remarkable ensembles. Having fabricated their own multi-cultural traditions has placed the Sisters in a unique position. Brought into the mainstream, as recognised players they have been taken off the fringe, thereby losing the edge on which they depended.¹¹

The urban Pacific is ever changing, constantly becoming, incorporating new ideologies and technologies. New media both define and re/present *Pasifika*. Veronica Vaevae's practice is an integral part of this new wave. Experimenting with the moving image as well as sound, Vaevae uses motifs of the Pacific to move beyond the stereotype. She plays with the oppositions and contradictions that create and challenge *Pasifika*. Her artwork draws upon her cultural knowledge packaged in a medium that addresses a new island culture. Vaevae's use of video imagery and sound links Pacific youth, who understand the saturated video image that comes from, and participates in, popular culture.

Writing about a series of works titled *Mix that Scratch*, John Pule comments:

The two worlds Vaevae presents to her audience are those of a young video artist. Excessive with sound, expressive with her carefully chosen subjects. Dance, music, and family are integral to Vaevae's ideas...She succeeds in a quiet way to instil a sense of cultural creativity coming to fruition, a cool handler of domestic life. Combine that with hip rhythms,

familiar grounds, and we get a glimpse of songs and dreams that represent a small portion of her psyche.¹²

It is this blending of ideas that is so exciting in Vaevae's work. She plays to her audience, Pacific youth, and captures fragments of their lives to reinterpret anew. In *O's and X's*, she combines a children's game with the foundations of Pacific culture – bark cloth and tattoo. In this way, Vaevae creates a new tradition drawn from the plaiting techniques of old. Her work reflects a very basic tendency in Pacific art to work from the grid; yet to create a variety of interesting patterns that are layered with complexity. This archetype is embedded in Polynesian cultural traditions, traditions that for many urban youth would be subconscious – and are yet, as real as *O's and X's*.

I have used 'tradition' to access the knowledge of the past, but I have also used the word to acknowledge its vitality in the present. I do so fully understanding the debate that has surrounded this battered word. Before attempting to discern the relationship of tradition to the contemporary, it is necessary to discuss the concept of 'tradition'.¹³ Recently, Albert Wendt stated: 'I don't like the word "tradition" – let's just throw it out.'¹⁴ His reasoning is that the word places Pacific art in a bell jar that was sealed in 1768, when Cook first ventured into the region. This notion ties art production into a masterpiece mentality, in other words, only that collected by or produced around the time of Cook is valid Pacific art. Wendt is not new to this argument. He entered into the authenticity debate as early as 1983.¹⁵ Since then, he has encouraged Pacific artists to speak for themselves – to discontinue the colonial process – to find their own language. He seems to forget, however, that their language is, for the most part, English.

But tradition is not a nasty word, and their language is an artistic one.¹⁶ Tradition is loaded with ambiguity. It has survived many a battle and is, perhaps, a bit threadbare. The debates that hijacked its essence are similar to those that focused on authenticity and tourist art, as well as the art/craft debate. Scholars have grown weary, and the debate is passé. Yet, the problems surrounding these issues have not been resolved, just dismissed. Notwithstanding, artists continue to peruse these issues and have added a further dimension to the above, when the concepts of ownership, knowledge, cultural property, appropriation, and representation are also acknowledged. What we see in contemporary practice is the attempt to negotiate tradition, which



Fig. 2 Pacific Sisters performing at the VIIth Festival of Pacific Arts, Samoa 1996. Photograph, Karen Stevenson.

is at the heart and soul of Polynesian society, to address other social and historical inequities, which are the consequences of colonialism.

One such is cultural loss. Lily Laita's work focuses on the complexities of this issue. She is interested in knowledge, its dissemination, its importance, its essence in tradition. Language, a key to knowledge, is an important element in her work. She includes a phrase here, a word there – either Maori, Samoan, or English – her languages. Interested in the relationship of idea and image in oral tradition, Laita uses words, colour, and metaphor to strike at the heart of Polynesian culture and tradition, that of 'veiled knowledge'. Her figurative (yet often seen as abstract) canvases reinterpret a knowledge acquired over time. An obligation to learn, to look, to understand is demanded from her viewer. With this knowledge comes responsibility. *Vahine Pasifika* offers a narrative over time and space. Re/presenting Samoan élite placed on exhibition in German zoos, the colonial history is not alluring; nor is the migration history – grandmothers with grandchildren in tow break the link of cultural knowledge. Most horrifying, however, is the contemporary *taupo* consigned to her position as cleaning woman. Such images of Pacific women are real, but what does one do with these insights? Clearly, the viewer's social and cultural background, and the knowledge which that provides, are necessary components to Laita's work.

Laita does not restrict herself to the canvas,¹⁷ but works in a variety of media – whichever is most appropriate for her narrative. Her focus brings cultural values into question. Drawing upon the value of cultural treasures, as well as current attitudes towards their imprisonment, Laita has challenged the notion of ownership – both of knowledge and objects. Many believe that the gods and their realm, in both oral traditions and physical manifestation (their sculpted or woven form), have been captured from their rightful owners and imprisoned within western institutions. The Auckland Museum was the focus for such an inquiry – *Redress*. Feeling that 'a sadness prevailed over the room; that valued objects, taken from their homes, [were] dusty and mistreated', Laita placed cloth over the old cases as references to shrouds and colonial flags. In this way, Laita offered the objects and the space its rightful burial. In this work, she demonstrates that the issue of cultural property is not being acknowledged in this 'post-colonial' era.

Yet, there is an ambiguity here, for without the museum many of

the objects they hold in trust would have disappeared. This does not present a contradiction, because Laita's work thrives on ambiguity. Nothing is straightforward – abstraction becomes figurative, theory becomes real. The multiple layers, the variety of readings, depend not only on the viewer, but on the traditions, the ideologies, the knowledge that Laita instils in her work. She creates a visual language reflecting the complexity and importance of these traditions. In this way, the past and the present combine. Referencing the political energies of PACIFICA, Laita offers a different perspective into the current phenomenon of *Pasifika*.

Representation, the way that Pacific islanders have been portrayed by others, plays a large role in the positioning of New Zealand as a Pacific island. Recognising both a geographical and social reality, it also continues the colonial process by subscribing to the Pacific as popular culture, as stereotype. Many artists wanting to express or draw upon the cultural practices, either traditional or contemporary, comment upon and critique this stereotype. As such, *Pasifika* invigorates the artistic debate. *Pasifika* enables urban/New Zealand-born Pacific women to create an art of their own – their own traditions, derivative of the cultural and ideological practices of the islands. But islands often not theirs. The relationship between an idealised past and an all too real present demands a critical reappraisal of cultures changed through migration. More than a cultural heritage, the fact that these artists are all New Zealand born is essential. The re/presentation of the myth – the cliché – offers a cultural critique and underlies this growing artistic movement. Drawing upon culture, tradition and identity, these women have created a niche that is uniquely theirs.

Using the familiar to critique the stereotype, ideally to demand a second look, is also evoked in Pacific jewellery. Niki Hasting-McFall and Sofia Tekela-Smith create jewellery which allows the wearer to signal an allegiance to and, ideally, an understanding of, the derivative tradition. This is a tradition often based on hierarchy and status; and status is signalled by adornment. Both Hastings-McFall and Tekela-Smith unabashedly take on the Pacific (Fig. 3). The lei, frangipani, and cowry shells are refashioned, often entwined into contemporary lei, creating jewellery immediately recognisable as Pacific. The frangipani or hibiscus, those ubiquitous Pacific icons, are the cornerstone of *Pasifika*. One would be hard pressed to find a more

familiar icon. Yet these are not the floral variety that greet one on arrival in the Pacific. These works of art become individual statements of both cultural loss and critique, as well as pride and aspiration for the future.

Hastings-McFall is interested in cultural impact and its consequences. Using the necklace/lei as her object, she creates a contemporary piece of value intermingling modern and traditional materials. In *Two Kinds of Gold* and *Past Currency II*, she addresses the value placed upon objects, combining valued currency from Pacific and Western cultures. Sofia Tekela-Smith also creates contemporary lei, which allude to objects of cultural value. Pearl shell and pearls are fashioned with twined silver. The frangipani, as a motif, comes forth again, often comprised of cowry shell, beads or greenstone. The importance of status objects – objects reflecting the hierarchical societies of the Pacific – offers another dimension. As artists re/presenting ethnocentric stereotypes, attributing chiefly status and authority to the lei suggests a forgotten nobility. Pacific peoples, once seen as Noble Savages, have become little more than objects of lust. This is clearly seen in the representation of the dusky maiden, a pliant female ready for the taking. Tekela-Smith renounces this myth with her ‘Dusky Maiden’ label. Using images created for the male gaze, she turns the cliché around. As brooches or lapel pins, they redefine the Pacific woman as self-confident and assertive – matching the male gaze at every turn.

In these ways, and again through the guise of a Pacific icon, Hastings-McFall and Tekela-Smith redress historical interactions re/presenting the Pacific. The exploration and promotion of valued cultural traditions – traditions created within the Pacific but for communities in New Zealand – link the past, its knowledge, custom, and ritual, to an assertion of identity.

Challenging the conventions of the Pacific, wanting to undermine the paradigm, underlies the intent of Sima Urale’s film *Otamaiti*. She constructs an image, not of bright colours and hibiscus, but of a bleak reality of Pacific immigration. Drawn to New Zealand with a dream of economic prosperity, many find the socio-economic reality hard to negotiate. These issues are articulated in a number of ways. Laugutu Poloai focuses upon the economic, creating in *Economical Resources* (Fig. 4) a spiralling piece made from plastic shopping bags. Referencing the change from a subsistence to market economy, she

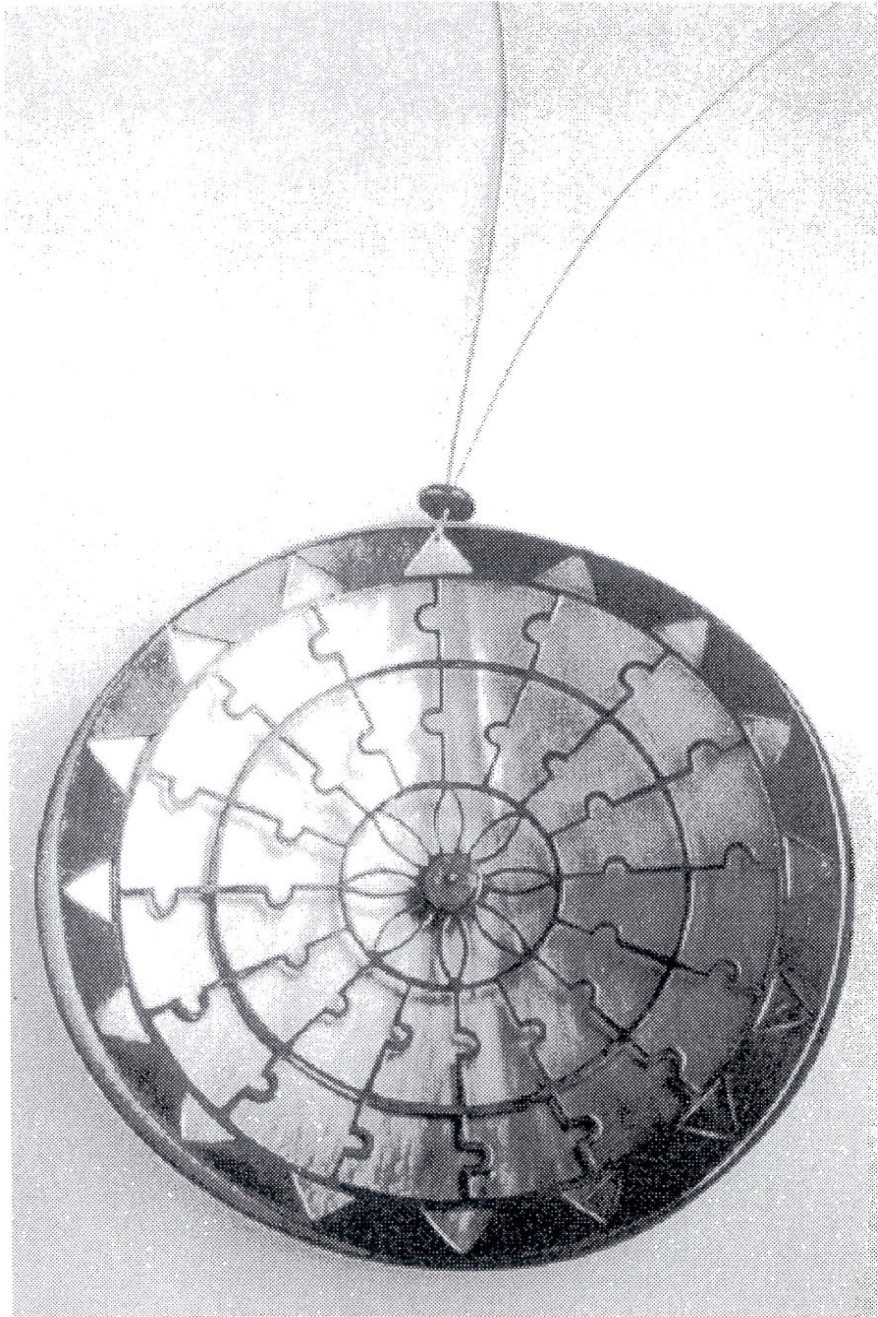


Fig. 3 Niki Hastings-McFall, Silver Kapkap, 1997. Sterling silver and black lipped pearl. 10cm in diameter.



Fig. 4 Laugutu Poloi, *Economical Resources*, 1994. Recycled shopping bags.

reflects both the dream and the nightmare.

Urale's work deals with this economic reality, and, more importantly the social ramifications appended to it. *Otamaiti* ('The Children') demonstrates the losers in the desire to get ahead. Parents with multiple jobs leave children to fend for themselves. With the extended family left behind in the islands, the network of social responsibility has unravelled. This film not only critiques this social truth, but questions the cultural obligations that *fa'asamoa* both enforces and perpetuates. The question is not whether *fa'asamoa* is good or bad, but whether it can play itself out in a new land.

The importance of the church within the Samoan community is one outcome. The church, dominated by male elders, emulates the chiefly system of the islands. A refuge where one can find familiarity in a foreign environment, the church has reinforced many cultural traditions. However, the church is also an object of cultural critique. Loretta Young exposes the control the church wields over the community, as well as its greed.

In *O Le Salamo 23* Young creates an installation using gold and silver fabric. With this she plaits mats – integral to Samoan culture – on which sit beanbag chairs: the old and the new combine. On each seat the 23rd Psalm is printed. The contradiction between the 'We shall not want ...' and the material on which it is placed is quite unsettling. Young is not the only woman to vilify the church. Hastings-McFall, in *Red Feather Ula*, questions the sanctity of a religious endeavour which sought to destroy that which it did not understand. These critiques of the church demonstrate the importance of women's art production in New Zealand. As noted above, the politics of PACIFICA have engendered this art movement. PACIFICA can also be seen as the balance or contrast to the church. An organisation of women for women, emulating the roles of women's art forms in the islands, has encouraged and supported the artistic critique seen today. These artists illustrate the complexities of cultural change and acknowledge the social ramifications that are the consequence of missionisation, migration, and integration.

Challenging the boundaries of traditional art practice in the Pacific, these women move beyond the past, beyond the stereotype. The traditions, oral histories, the cultural value of women's art – the islands left behind – are re-negotiated to create new traditions, histories, new value in their art practice. *Pasifika* as a movement has

been fuelled by a sense of loss and the necessity to reinforce a cultural identity. More than fashion, *Pasifika* gives women a platform, a voice, a means of expressing their creative potential. Critical of the *status quo*, yet wanting to assert their position, Pacific women are the driving force behind *Pasifika*. Integrally linked to place – identity – tradition, these contemporary art forms demonstrate that the past is not static. By negotiating tradition, challenging its boundaries, Pacific women are creating a vital and living future.

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Notes

- ¹ There are exceptions to this, including the work of Willowdean Handy, Teuira Henry, and Margaret.
- ² A brief example of this literature includes: Easterday, Kaeppler, Linnekin, Shorr, Teilhet-Fisk, and Weiner.
- ³ See Shorr, Brad. Mana and Tapu, in *Developments in Polynesian Ethnology*, Howard and Borofsky, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989.
- ⁴ For an intriguing literary account of urban Pacific culture in New Zealand, see Pule, *The Shark that Ate the Sun*, Penguin Books, 1992.
- ⁵ PACIFICA stands for: Pacific Allied (women's) Council Inspires Faith in Ideals Concerning All.
- ⁶ PACIFICA's objectives are:
 - a) To present policies and programmes that will provide opportunities for Pacific women to contribute effectively to the social, economic, and political development of New Zealand and its people.
 - b) To give Pacific women opportunities to plan and work together for the stability and development of themselves, their communities and so contribute to the development of the country.
 - c) To create ways and means of involving Pacific women in overcoming obstacles on the achievement of equal opportunities and responsibilities.
 - d) To master the means of communication bringing Pacific women to the point of understanding a vision of a life in which they are fully participating.

- e) To inspire unity among women of Pacific island origins in the furtherance of these aims so that all can speak with one voice, in true fellowship.
- ⁷ This cliché, seen as popular culture in television advertising, suggests a sedentary, matronly role for Pacific women. This is in distinct contrast to the politically active women who organised and maintain PACIFICA.
- ⁸ One example of this dialogue focused on an exhibition of *tivaevae* at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Critic, Keith Stewart, titled his review of 'Patterns of Paradise, Cook Island Tivaevae' Craft Not Art. *Sunday Star Times*, 22 January 1996, p.D4.
- ⁹ These social realities and contradictions are the focus of Tiatia's *Caught Between Cultures, a New Zealand Born Pacific Island Perspective*. Auckland: Christian Research Association. 1998.
- ¹⁰ These paintings were the focus of Cottage Industry in Wellington and Auckland, and have been O'Neill's contribution to a variety of other exhibitions, including the Sydney Biennial and Close Quarters.
- ¹¹ See also, Vercoe and Leonard. Pacific Sisters, Doing it for Themselves. *Art and AsiaPacific* 1997, 14:42-45.
- ¹² Pule, John. The Navigator, *The Log Illustrated*, Winter 1997 1(1):8-9.
- ¹³ Jocelyn Linnekin reviews this literature in The Politics of Culture in the Pacific, *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*, Linnekin and Poyer eds, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1990. See also Keesing and Tonkinson, *Mankind*, 1982, v13, and Linnekin, J. Defining Tradition: Variations on the Hawaiian Identity, *American Ethnologists*, 1983, 10:241-252.
- ¹⁴ This comment was made at the Tautai Trust Sculpture Symposium, Auckland Institute of Technology, March 1998.
- ¹⁵ Wendt, Albert. Contemporary Arts in Oceania: Trying to Stay Alive in Paradise as an Artist. *Art and Artists of Oceania*, Mead and Kernot, eds. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1983.
- ¹⁶ See Stevenson, Karen. Negotiating Tradition: The Art of Lily Laita and Ani O'Neill, in *Art and AsiaPacific*, 1998, 18:68-73.
- ¹⁷ Her paintings are actually on builders paper and not canvas.

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