

**COMMUNICATING TRADITION IN SAMOAN AMERICAN ART:
AN ARTIST'S REFLECTION**

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Last millennium I was there—
With every laughter of sunlight
With every whisper of wind
With every beat of sound
I saw you standing
On the edge of nowhere
This millennium I am here—
With every ripple of thought
With every pulse of feeling
With every rhythm of life
I see you smiling
On the edge of everywhere.
Déjà vu.

Momoe Malietoa Von Reiche,
“Marius,” from *Tai heart of a tree*.

I REMEMBER AS A CHILD watching my Great-Aunties Maofa and Tuiamafua perform the *sasa* (seated Samoan dance) in a crowd of other aunties and cousins. Their powerful claps and slaps were sometimes quick and rapid-fire. Other times just a loud threesome—slap, slap, slap—the last one like an exclamation point. Then every so often, a quiet ruffling. And if my eyes had been closed I would pop them open to find their hands flicking out movement while their knees bounced the beat from a cross-legged position.

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The force of their gestures always surprised me because in life my old aunties were my gentle brown marshmallow women, all soft and sweet. But when they danced, every part of their being became charged with youthful energy. They almost became sexy. Big knowing smiles lit their faces, like secrets. Their heads moved side to side, up and down, flowers dancing from gigantic buns of hair. Then in exact coordination their voices would shout a resounding, "SHOO!" Some say that *sasa* were traditionally performed to offer encouragement to the men before war or to celebrate the success of war or some other collective endeavor. When *sasa* are performed today, they resound like a great gathering and shoving of positive energy. Rows and rows of women, chanting, slapping, and flicking hands in synchronized percussion. I have no doubt that the *mana* (spiritual power) is at work when these dances are underway.

Those dances were personally transforming for me; a time when my family's tradition was re-enacted, taught, and absorbed. A time when I identified myself unconditionally as one of these women. One of these Samoan people. Even though I was probably no more than eight years old and, in terms of ancestry, half Samoan. Now as a Samoan American artist I revisit such transformative experiences often in my work as a way of communicating the notion of tradition. Tradition is my muse. I look for the variety of places where tradition manifests. For example, it is present in the inflection of speech, the smell of skin, the body's posture, the style of clothing and hair, the choice of food. It is in choice of color, style of warfare, of music, of making art. Tradition is holographic, blending time and space and experience. It is present in every human culture. For this reason I have found it fruitful to use the search for Samoan tradition in my art. People viewing my work may not understand Samoan culture. But there is a universal understanding of tradition. And so a mutual flow of communication can begin. I communicate tradition as I understand it, and viewers are receptive to the degree that they can relate it to their own experience.

I approach all of my work as a painter because that is where I began and how I understand the process of making art. However, my form of artistic communication has evolved to the art genre of installation. Installation art generally exists in some kind of three-dimensional form. Unlike sculpture, however, installation intends to communicate an idea by transforming a space. It can be as simple as a cup against a wall, or as elaborate as a theatrical set. Often it is site specific and displayed for a limited time at only that location. The architecture of the site challenges the artist either to obscure it from the final art form, or to use it to lend a layer of meaning to the piece. I usually build an installation for a specific site, with the intention to obscure it, but in such a way that it is portable and can expand or reduce to suit many other site configurations. That way it can travel, making the work available

for viewing by as many people as possible. My installations are large scale. And I like to call them story-telling environments. My intention is that viewers should move through them as actors on a stage do. But instead of relating to furniture and assorted props, they must maneuver through a space that is primarily constructed from paintings, drawings, sculpture, lights, scent, and sound. I try to tease as many senses as possible in order to assist viewers to access altered states of reception. I do this because when I think of tradition—its sights, sounds, smells, and tactile qualities—I think of an all-encompassing internal and external environment.

My formal education was made extraordinary, thanks to master painter Faith Ringgold (<http://www.artincontext.com/artist/ringgold> and <http://www.faithringgold.com/>). Faith teaches at the University of California in San Diego, and she basically got me into graduate school. There is no point in trying to say it any other way or to explain more. Except perhaps to say that Faith is probably the most forthright and courageous person I have ever met. She was my advisor, and from the beginning gave me a sense of confidence and hope. She encouraged me to direct my focus onto my own life experience. “Express your own truth,” she would say. I had thought I was already doing that. But she was not satisfied and urged me to dig deeper. There is something about Faith’s big black eyes that makes you understand you have to do something immediately. It’s also in her voice. I would sit in her studio spellbound while she melodically spoke treasures of instruction. That resonant voice would fill her big white studio like a rhythmic chant. As she spoke she sort of swayed from side to side working across a new painting. There was something comforting and vaguely familiar about all of this. Even when almost panting from the mania of graduate school, I could not help relaxing into absorb mode when sitting in her studio. Faith does not simply go to a canvas and work. While she was creating her American Collection, I studied her technique very closely. When Faith is painting, a wide grin settles on her face and she literally loves her work up until it’s done. After stirring colors into new colors in little paper cups, she pushes the watery pigments deep into the fibers of her canvas. Layer upon glittering layer. Stirring up color, swaying to and fro, pushing color on, urging the composition into life. Faith Ringgold definitely has mana.

I have watched Faith flesh out her stories into enormous paintings. Visual stories that did not require, but could include, text. Stories specific to her African American experience. Her process is a synthesis of her western European art education, her investigation of African art forms, and her experience as an African American woman/artist. Once I understood that, a revolution took place in my own creative process. It allowed me to relax. To feel secure about working from a more intuitive place. Once that happened, my Samoanness began to spill out.

There are aspects of my work that were inspired by my maternal grandfather. He was the late Reverend Suitoanu of the Galea'i family. He was from the village of Fituita in Manua, and he established the first Samoan Congregational Church in Honolulu in the 1950s. He did the same in San Diego by 1956, and later in Oceanside, CA, and on up the west coast to Seattle. He was a powerful figure in the Southern California Samoan community, and to this day if you mention his name among local elders, many almost swoon retelling stories of his accomplishments and leadership. The church was virtually his home. My grandfather and grandmother, some or all of their seventeen children, countless grandchildren, and extended family all resided in a small house on the church grounds. Aspects of its location are an important element of my work today. For instance, the sound of the choirs rehearsing in the church is always present in my work because even if you were not in the church when rehearsal was ongoing, the sound of it would drift into the house from all of the windows. Those voices are part of my experience.

And the deep raw quality of the harmonies would immediately send me into another consciousness. The sound is similar to Tibetan chants. It affects more than the ears. It is percussive and vibrates through the skin. I can feel it down into my DNA and interpret it as one of those holographic aspects of tradition. That sound must have been present when my great-great-grandparents lived. And when viewers hear it in my installations, they often relate how emotional it makes them feel. And that is what I am trying to do. To scrape raw an emotional response from the viewers so that they can begin to relate to what I am trying to communicate. Usually I record the choirs who actually sing at my grandfather's old church in what is now called Barrio Logan in South San Diego. But I have also used the wonderful voices of choirs from churches in various areas near Oceanside in San Diego's North County. Representing the church, no matter what its denomination, is important to me because it is the cornerstone of Samoan culture in the diaspora. My cousin's daughter explained this well recently when she said, "If we don't recognize somebody walking down the street, someone will say, 'Oh that's so and so from such and such church.' And then we know who they are." And as an elder further explained, "We used to identify a person by the village they were from. Now we do it by the church that they attend." So often I will let architectural aspects of the church influence the way I construct my installation spaces.

I remember spying my grandfather in his office just before Sunday services. He was a large, 300-pound man, and cloaked in a black minister's robe he looked formidable. Everything about him was thick. Especially his feet. His feet were so wide and thick I do not remember ever seeing him in shoes, and certainly if he did wear them they must have been uncomfortable.

He had thick snow-white hair, which always seemed strange because his skin was so smooth and young looking. On those Sunday mornings, unknown men would be seated around him, and by his tone I could tell the conversation was important. For some reason he frightened me at these moments. I perceived him as formidable and not especially friendly then. All of us children understood not to pester Grandpa before church. But after the services, after all of the strangers had left the house, if he happened to see me he would gather me into his great body for a big hug and always had a loud, belly-jiggling, deep-in-the-chest laugh. And then I loved him again. And I would give him a big kiss on the cheek and then move out of the way as one of my aunts would serve him lunch.

I was not raised in the fa'a Samoa, or traditional ways. My only exposure was when my mother and father brought me to my grandparents' house. Once you walked through their front door, it was as if you had stepped into a Samoan fale. I tended to think that my grandfather worried about my not being raised in the culture. Many times he would bring me into his office and point to a large map on the wall, indicating the places where our family still lived, where my mother was born. "Do you know what this is?" he would ask me expectantly. "The island of Manua, where my Mom was born," I would recite proudly for him. "Some day you have to go there with me and meet all of your family," he would say. This exchange happened many times. And season after season I would watch him prepare to go to the islands to take care of church business or to bring a choir over for an event. I wondered which of the family would meet him there. When I was nineteen, my grandfather asked me to make the trip to American and Western Samoa with him. It felt like an honor because there were so many grandchildren he could choose from. Often he brought other members of the church with him, too. But we went on this journey alone. And I recognized this trip as something he had always intended, like a deeper initiation into the family. The memories of it fill a special place in my heart, especially because he died shortly thereafter.

Many years later I wondered if I were able to take people into this memory space, what would it look like? And this became the impetus for my installation *Talalelagi, Samoa* (Story of the Skies, Samoa). The layout of *Talalelagi, Samoa* begins with a blue entrance hallway that reduces in size like a funnel. The floor of this hallway is treated in a way to suggest the texture of fine mats, and it continues like a pathway throughout the rest of the installation. The viewer follows it and exits the small end of the tunnel, entering a large gallery on the other side. The mat-like pathway winds and loops in and around paintings and sculptures and assemblage pieces that suggest memories. Although they are fragmented ideas, they flow together as though they are all part of

one whole. Again, I wanted to convey an imaginary place that is within me. The viewer is enveloped by images, scent, sound, and lights, which I hope convey some understanding of my experience and my emotional response.

Having men as inspiration for my work is rare and apparently reserved for my family members. The usual source of my creative imaginings is women. At the beginning of this statement I described my great-aunties. These loving women, especially Auntie Maofa, are so much a part of my deepest understanding of what it is to be a fine, completely evolved human being. However, it is Auntie Maofa's sister, my grandmother Tinei, who is most often referred to in my work. She is often my mental model. Because Tinei was a reverend's wife, she had to behave publicly in a very reserved manner. She always wore big, wide-brimmed hats. The more flowers on them the better! She was a big woman. Tall, large boned, and heavy. But not fat. Just big. Even with her size she moved in a smooth, graceful manner that seemed natural rather than learned. Her size and movements are things that I often consider when making parts of my installations, whether they be paintings or sculptures. There was a certain dignity about her even when she was walking across the church parking lot. I have noticed this dignity also was present in the circle of women around her. I try to convey that in my art.

Tinei had another side, a private side, what the family likes to call comically cruel. For example, when I returned from the trip with Grandpa, I told her of a lagoon we visited. She related that it had been the spot where she taught my mother about leeches. My mother had been three or four years old and had joined my grandmother as she fished. Grandma would stab the fish through with the filed-down point of a long strong stick. Then she would pull it out of the water and bite it in the head to kill it. She was in the process of doing this when she noticed my mother was playing with a leech. She told my mother to discontinue this activity, but my mother was absorbed, and continued to investigate these water creatures. After no response to her repeated reprimands, my grandmother got so angry that she threw a leech on my mother's back, whereupon my mother began jumping around and screaming in terror. When my grandmother finished telling me this story she nearly fell out of her seat laughing. I was appalled. But in the end I witnessed a relaxed beauty and mischievous side to her that I had never seen. I appreciated her telling me this story as if I were an old friend, and I imagined what she must have been like in her youth. That moment became the inspiration for my mural-sized painting, *Legend of the Leech*.

There was one thing about my grandmother that fascinated me more than anything else. She had the *malu* (ceremonial women's tattoo). It was customary for an auntie to massage my grandmother's feet and legs with baby oil. I loved this procedure because I loved the smell, and my grandmother looked

so beautiful and restful when this was happening. One day when I was quite small I noticed that she had blue-green marks just above her calves. To my amazement they traveled in patterns over and around and above her knees. They traveled to the top of her thighs and were intricate, and in some places the pigment covered large areas. I asked her about her malu and she said she had received it at about thirteen years of age. As she described the painful procedure, it made me squirm. I asked her about the designs, and she said they told stories about the family. The notion of those designs communicating information about my family has truly influenced my art making. Here was story-telling in the skin, not just on top of it. Tradition. In my work I am always considering how to make the images saturate the surface of whatever I am using. In more ways than I can mention here, my grandmother influences my work every day.

As I consider my family and the people who inspire me, I constantly return to the women. Their relationship to Samoan tradition inspires me. The women are the undisputed keepers of the knowledge of who is who and who was who. My search is ongoing to discover what their roles were in history, how they have changed over time, and what has remained constant. In his accounts of the war of 1893 in Samoa, Robert Louis Stevenson reported two incidents, in which a woman “dragged her skulking husband from a hole and drove him to the front. Another, seeing her lover fall, snatched up his gun, kept the headhunters at bay, and drew him unmutilated from the field.” This description of Amazonian Samoan women seems accurate to me today, as I consider the women in my living family, in the community, and those from our distant past. They were/are not delicate flowers for the pleasure of the likes of Gauguin. The women I know are warriors. They fight to protect their children. They fight to sustain their churches. And those following the fa’a Samoa fight to save their culture. They are formidable in size, strength, and personality. And that understanding is what I try to convey in my work, particularly in my installation, *Red House/The Daughters of Salamasina*. This work concentrates on the women in my family and the presence of women in Samoan history through contemporary times.

Traditional Samoan art forms such as *siapo* and tattoo are also something I refer to often when making my work. Although trained to make paintings in the western European sense, I am interested in the idea of staining a surface to achieve an image, much like the process for creating designs on *siapo*, and tattooing the skin. This interest was also bolstered by my study of Faith Ringgold’s work. Like Faith, I use layers of watered-down acrylic paints to create paintings. I usually work flat on the floor, letting the media pool and dry at will. Texture is also important to me. I usually try to emulate the

texture of siapo, that rough, wrinkled, and uneven quality of hand-beaten mulberry paper. I also refer to the work of the late Samoan siapo artist, Mary Pritchard. I love how Pritchard's work, even with that geometric restraint consistent to siapo designs, has a definite sense of intuitive abandon. There appears to be little or no prior measurement or layout. She seemed to know just how far to move her hand before finishing a section so that all of it fit perfectly together as a balanced whole in the end. I wish I had had the opportunity to talk about this with her. She must have had a great deal of mana.

I have written at length here about my paintings because I consider myself a painter first. But another integral part of my installations is sculptures. Sometimes they depict a character from my past, such as a calico pig I made friends with in Western Samoa. Other times they help to suggest elements of landscape, or the presence of ancestors, such as the stone-like women in my *Red House* installation. Lately, I am considering the notion of sculptural paintings, and only time will tell where that takes me. There are many other things about my family and Samoan culture that influence my work, but all of my work is designed to suggest my sense of ambiguous time and space in relation to the multi-present aspects of tradition. My work is a combination of Western artistic training, investigations of traditional Samoan art forms and history, and personal experience as a Samoan American woman/artist. And my hope is that this work will inspire young Samoans to search for their own answers about the contributions made by Samoans throughout history so that they can communicate them to future generations.

REFERENCE

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