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JEWEL BLOCK and STACY L. KAMEHIRO

Home and Belonging: An Interview with Artist Jewel Block

Abstract
This is an interview between the artist Jewel Block and art historian Stacy L. Kamehiro, based on their conversations between May 2018 and November 2021. Block and Kamehiro discuss some of the conceptual frameworks and creative strategies developed by the artist to chronicle the experiences of her family relocating to Southern California from American Sāmoa, and address issues of memory, place-making, and Sāmoan-American identity processes.

Keywords: *Jewel Block, Sāmoan American art, Sāmoan art, diaspora, contemporary Oceanic art, materiality, memory, identity*

Stacy L. Kamehiro (SLK)*: Thank you for sharing your work with* Pacific Arts*, and for this opportunity to learn more about your creative practice. In "Lessons, Challenges, and Adaptations: Reconstructing Self within Changing Pacific Environments," your presentation at the 2018 Pacific Island Worlds symposium at the University of California–Santa Cruz, you emphasized the centrality to your paintings, drawings, and installations of your family's experience of relocating from American Sāmoa to Honolulu, and then later establishing a life and a community in San Diego.*[1] *Can you describe these experiences and how they are present in your work?*

Jewel Block (JB): Much of my work is rooted in being an afakasi (a Sāmoan person of mixed ethnicities and genealogies). My mother was Sāmoan and my father was Danish and Irish. I was raised by my Sāmoan family in San Diego, California, trying to find myself in the Pacific. I look to my family and ancestors who are the source of my "roots" and "routes," as Jim Clifford would say.[2]

My mother and other family members—including my grandfather, the late faifeʻau (minister) of the First Sāmoan Congregational Church in San Diego, Reverend Suitonu Galeaʻi of Fitiʻuta, Manuʻa, and my grandmother, Tinei, of ʻĀmanave, American Sāmoa—traveled to Honolulu in the 1940s. My family moved to San Diego in 1957. My grandparents were very concerned about me assimilating into American culture and would take me aside to teach me things about Sāmoan culture. For instance, in my grandfather's office was a map of the Sāmoan Islands. It was very important to him that I knew where we were from; when I was little, every time I went to his office, he would grill me, asking "Where is the village of Fitiʻuta?" "Where are we from?" He would remind me that Fitiʻuta was the oldest Sāmoan village on the island of Taʻū in the Manuʻa archipelago. I would recite the information and point to the spot on the map. So, I think from a young age, I became sensitive to spaces that locate our family and connect to our past.

It was even more important to my grandmother, Tinei, that I learn how to be Sāmoan. She would always speak to me in the Sāmoan language. Tinei figures prominently in my art, and in all but one in the group of paintings and drawings featured in this issue of *Pacific Arts*. I didn't realize how strong her influence on me was until I started making art about her experiences and the things she taught me. Once I started, I couldn't stop making work about her or with her in it. She was a proud woman. Her presence was both commanding and delicately feminine. I often paint her to represent those dual qualities that I see present in Sāmoan women.

My *Fishing Lesson* series of ink-wash drawings focuses on the lessons and stories my grandmother conveyed to me about how to fish properly. One day, in her living room, I was talking about a place I had visited and this evoked a memory for her of this same place, where she used to fish when my mother was a child. The first painting in the series is called *Fishing Lesson No. 1, Patience* (Fig. 1) and corresponds to my grandmother explaining that one needed to wade out into the water and patiently stand still so that the fish would come near. She called the fish "somebodies" and would say, "Pretty soon, somebody's coming, and more somebodies are coming, getting close in because you aren't moving, so they aren't troubled." Finally, a fish would get close enough so you could pierce it with a fishing spear. Another painting in this series is called *Fishing Lesson No. 2, Reach* (Fig. 2) and responds to the physical aspect of her teaching me another way of fishing. My grandmother made me sit on the floor so that I could feel what it would be like to sit in the water and reach under rocks to find the fish hiding. *Fishing Lesson No. 6, Done* (Fig. 3) shows what you do with the fish once you catch them; you bite them in the head to kill them, and then bring them home.

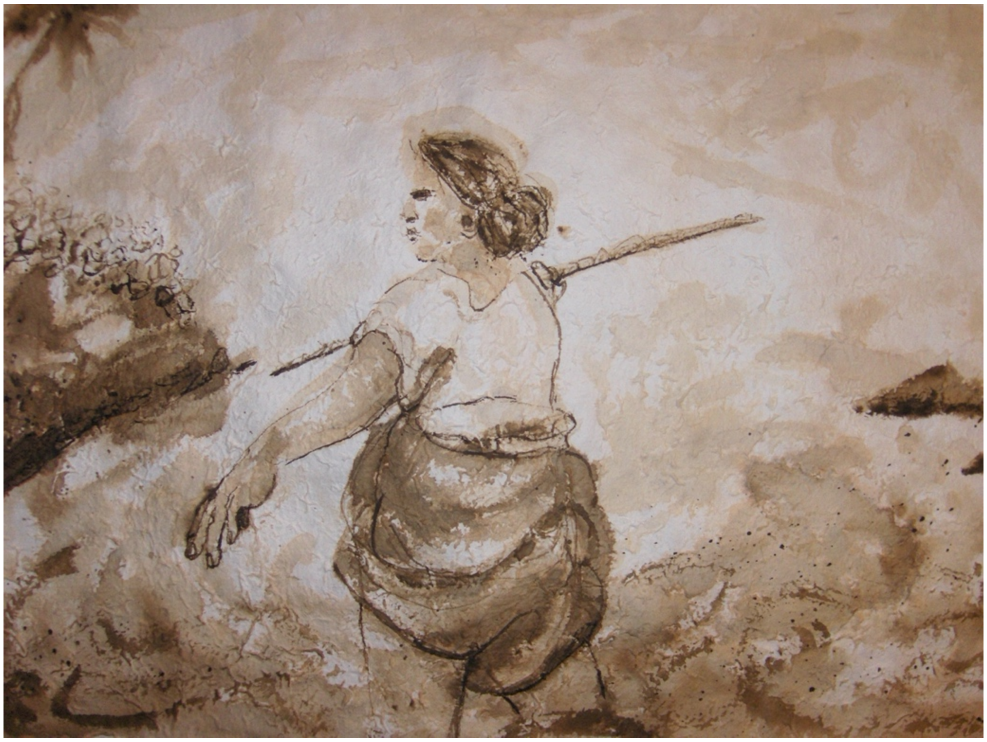

Figure 1. Jewel Block, *Fishing Lesson No 1, Patience*, 2013. Acrylic ink on mulberry paper, approximately 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

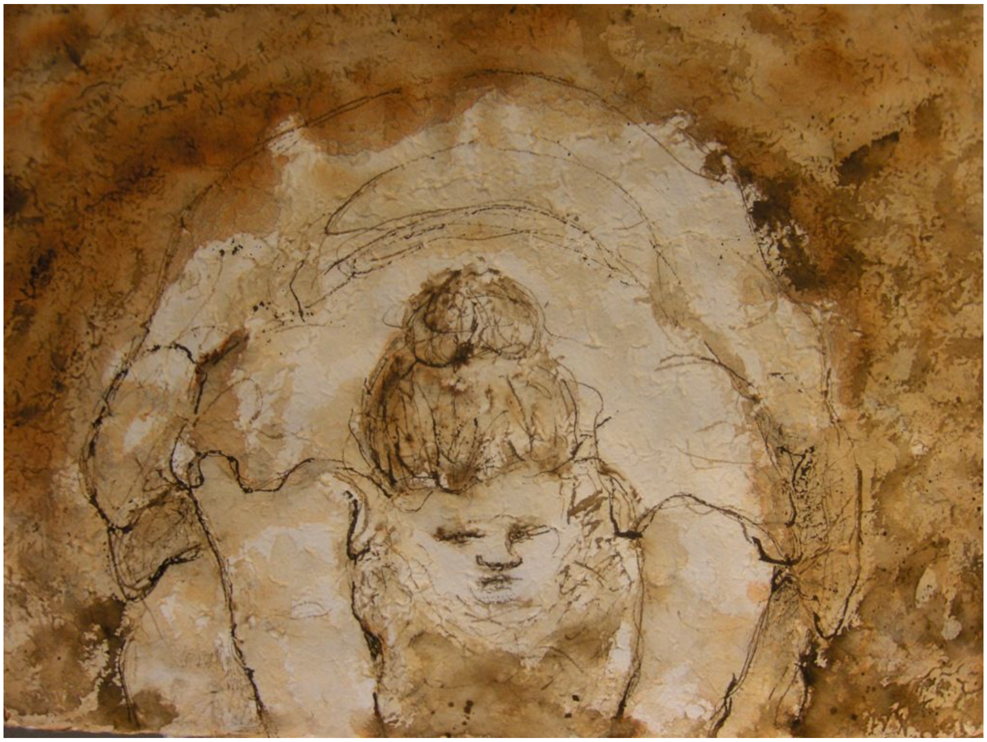

Figure 2. Jewel Block, *Fishing Lesson No 2, Reach*, 2013. Acrylic ink on mulberry paper, approximately 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

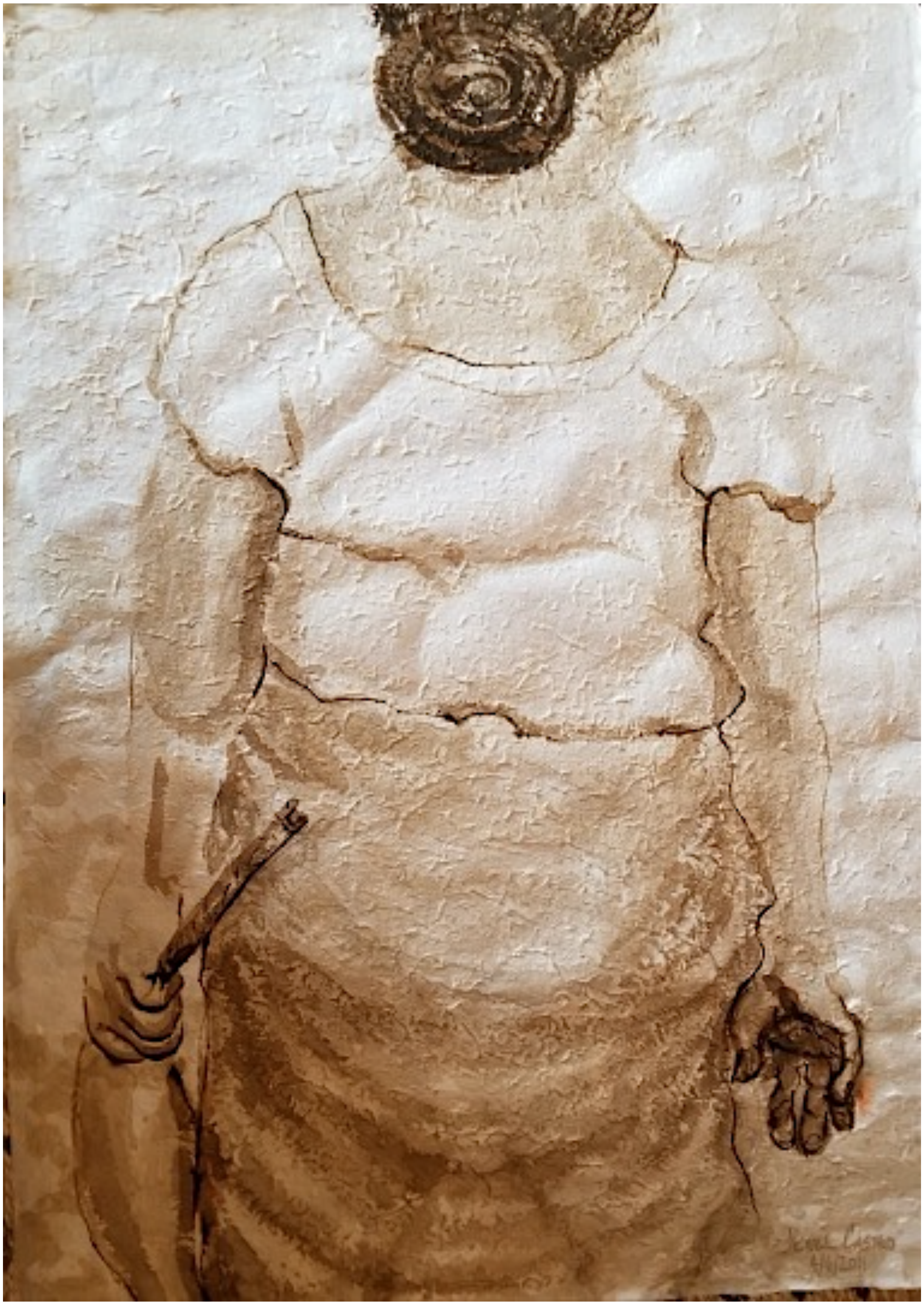

Figure 3. Jewel Block, *Fishing Lesson No. 6, Done*, 2013. Acrylic ink on mulberry paper, approximately 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

***SLK**: The church your grandfather established is in the Barrio Logan neighborhood of San Diego, next to the USS Midway Museum and directly across the bay from the North Island Naval Air Station and the Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado. References to the impact of the US military in Oceania are faintly, yet weightily, present in some of your work. Can you elaborate on this?*

JB: My grandfather worked with the US Navy in American Sāmoa, facilitating negotiations of various things between the military and the local community, and later became a soldier in the Fita-Fita Guard.[3] Because of this work, the US military gave him housing on the naval base in Honolulu, where he lived in a Quonset hut with his family. My grandparents had eleven children at that time (eventually, they had seventeen children), who were very much reared in a military environment. When the family moved to San Diego, my grandfather established the First Sāmoan Congregational Church. He and his parishioners erected the church from building materials acquired from the San Diego military base. The navy was dismantling buildings on the base and my grandfather asked if he could have the materials, which he was granted. He and his parishioners recycled the wood to build the church in Barrio Logan, which is still an active church. So, in my images of the church and my grandparents' home (e.g., Figs. 4–5), our long relationship with the military and its role in our trans-Pacific movements are there.

***SLK**: Your paintings reflect on the different responses among your family members to making a life in California. Can you describe some of those differences as they appear in your art practice?*

JB: My mother really wanted to fully assimilate into American culture but others in my family did not. My *Assimilation* series of paintings (2001–2) addresses these different approaches to belonging and creating a home.[4] For example, I have a painting of my uncle, who joined the US Marines to serve his country in Vietnam, and others of my mother and her sisters, who delighted in American fashion and Southern California urban cultural experiences.

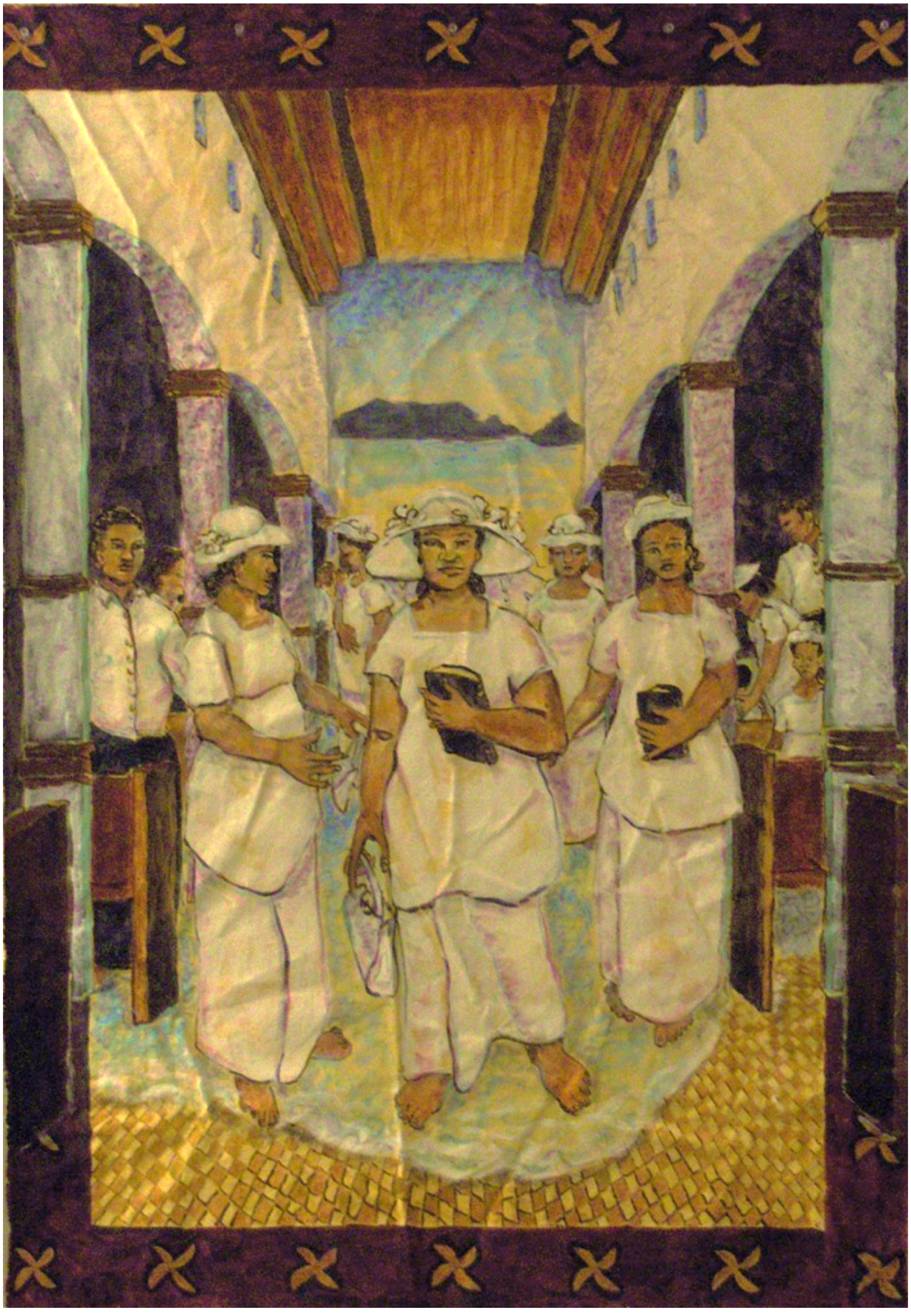

Figure 4. Jewel Block, *The Pastor's Wife*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, approximately 24 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist

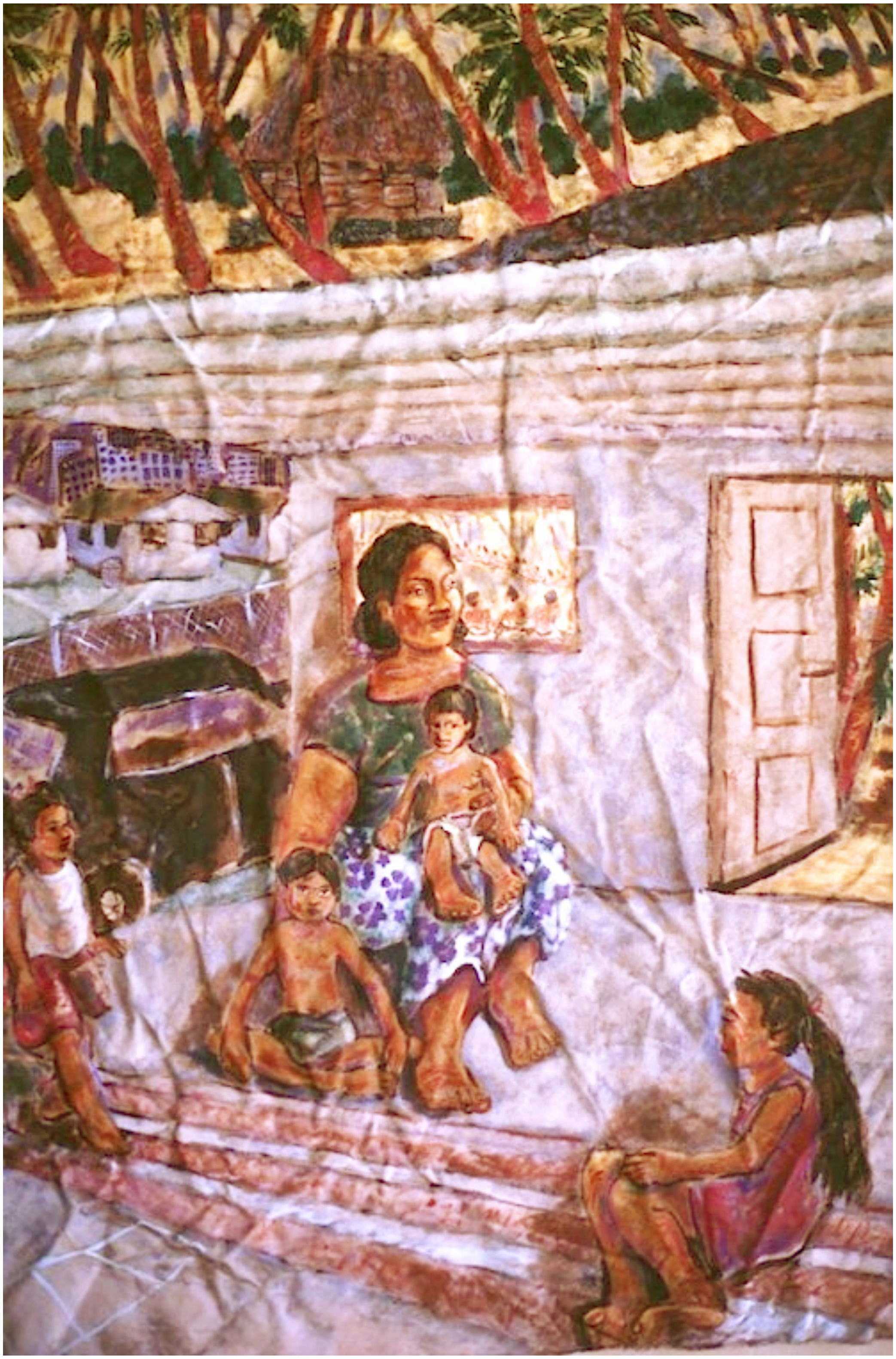

Figure 5. Jewel Block, *Auntie's House*, from the *Assimilation* series, 2001. Acrylic on canvas, approximately 36 x 48 inches. Photograph by the artist. Courtesy of Teri Sowell

One of my favorite paintings, *Auntie's House* (Fig. 5), focuses on my grandfather's sister, Tuʻimafua, who wanted to maintain her Sāmoan identity and culture. It depicts what was actually my grandparents' home (which Tuʻimafua maintained), located on the church grounds in San Diego, and what the Barrio Logan neighborhood looked like. There are several children around her—she was unmarried and didn't have children of her own, so she took care of everyone's children for generations. The images above and inside the house represent my auntie's longings and perspective. When you walked into the house, it was like you left the US and walked into Sāmoa. Tuʻimafua looks through the open front door—where you can see a sunny exterior scene with tropical plants—projecting memories of her home. Behind her, a window reveals a community gathering in Sāmoa. Above and behind the house is a fale (house) amidst a grove of coconut trees. This is how she pictured her Barrio Logan home and neighborhood; she refused to accept what she saw around her and created a Sāmoan space in San Diego.

***SLK**: Many of your paintings have a crinkled surface or texture that emphasizes the tactile quality of the two-dimensional surface and lends itself to making both the painting and the subject matter quite palpable. This stylistic feature seems to facilitate the people and activities depicted in the paintings to enter into the viewer's time and space. Your work makes me think about vā (space-time relationality) and the materiality of memory—how, in many parts of Oceania, cultural objects are not just things, but materially manifest social and historical relationships; processes of learning, preserving, and making cultural knowledge; memories of movement; and homes past and present. Can you share your thoughts about the relationship between materiality, memory, and your work?*

JB: As in the learning of oral histories through memorization, we (Sāmoans) learn how to make traditional art forms, like siapo (barkcloth) through memorization. My family members learned how to work the natural resources to create the siapo that dressed our weddings, were gifted to recognize dignitaries, and wrapped our dead. They learned how to properly apply designs and what they meant. And, I understand now that applying those designs permanently changed the surface of the cloth; it gave it memory, a way of remembering, and a link to our history. People would learn from a skilled master and develop a relationship with them; that relationship and the passing of knowledge through time and people becomes essential to the object that is made. Producing a material object is a method of learning who we are. I like to refer to siapo made by earlier generations of women in my family (cf. Figs. 6–7); whenever I am working, they are in my view.

I purposefully emulate the wrinkles seen in siapo on my canvases as a way of physically and visually making memories of people, relationships, and identities—of creating and communicating tradition in Sāmoan-American art.[5] In fact, my *Fishing Lesson* series is drawn on paper made from the paper mulberry tree, which is used to make siapo. I also think of my drawings and paintings like I do siapo—as objects. You can see grommets at the top of many of my paintings. At first, they were exhibited with a loop of rope through each grommet and with a black metal curtain rod fed through the loops so that they hung against walls like tapestries. Something didn't seem right about that, but I couldn't decide what it was. Then, one year, just by a fluke, I put a wooden rod through the loops and that changed everything. The rope that was tied around the wood and the way they hung reminded me of sails. Ever since, I think of my paintings as sails, which link to movement, travel, voyaging, and navigating memories.[6]

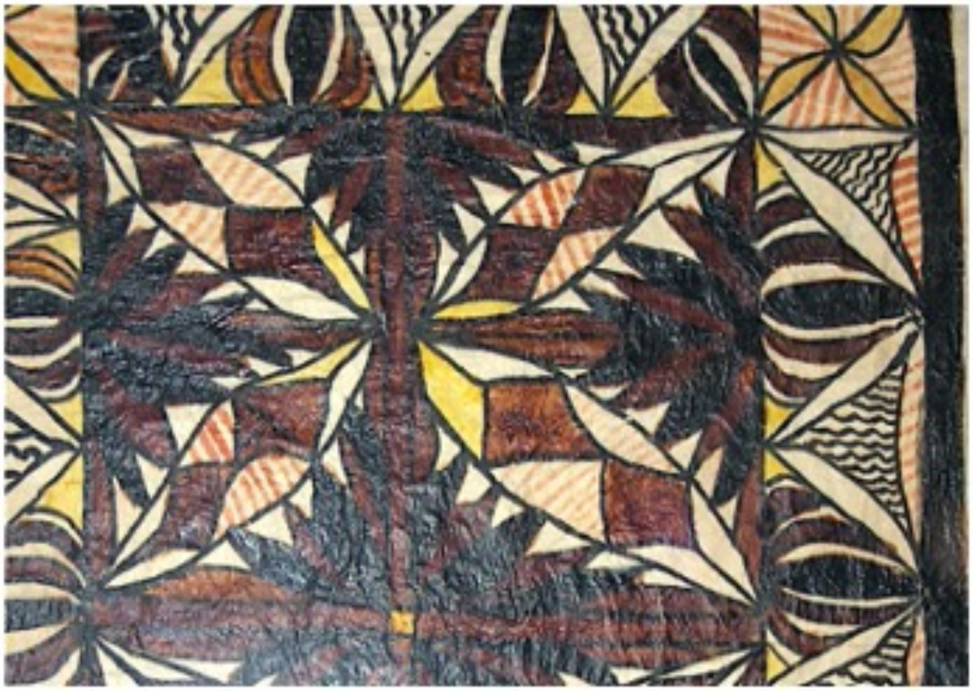

Figure 6. Detail of siapo (barkcloth) in the artist's collection, pre-1940, American Sāmoa. Courtesy of Jewel Block

***SLK**: And you have likened siapo to human bodies and tatau (tattoo).*

JB: I think of our art forms, like siapo and the markings on it, as a visual language because of the way they are made. For example, in painting siapo, the liquid media is applied to a flat, porous surface of processed paper mulberry bark. It isn't like a canvas that has a sealed surface. Instead, the pigment is soaked into the bark, the *skin* of the tree, in thin, pooled layers. If you were to peel away the layers, you would see it "bleeding" through underneath. The pigment in the layers of bark is like the imprint of our tattoos into, not onto, our skin and our blood. The colors in siapo and the way they saturate the cloth are like tattooing the bark; it has permanence. Some of the colors—the reds and browns—are like the blood of our people, like the dried blood that would be left behind by those who came before.

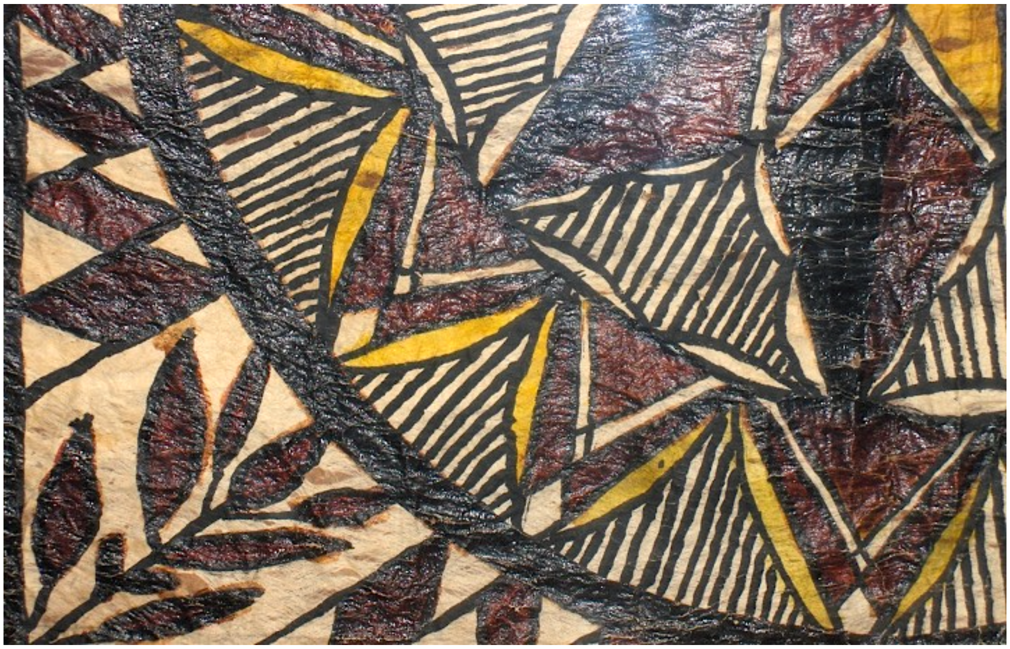

Figure 7. Detail of siapo (barkcloth) in the artist's collection, pre-1940, American Sāmoa. Courtesy of Jewel Block

JB: The motifs in siapo form patterns that are repeated. The repetition of lines and shapes reminds me of the repetition in Sāmoan dance movements, the structure of our songs, and the call and response in our religious practices. The repetition creates a pattern. Even though you might not see obvious patterns in my work, the idea of pattern and repetition pervades it. I think of the repetition and patterns

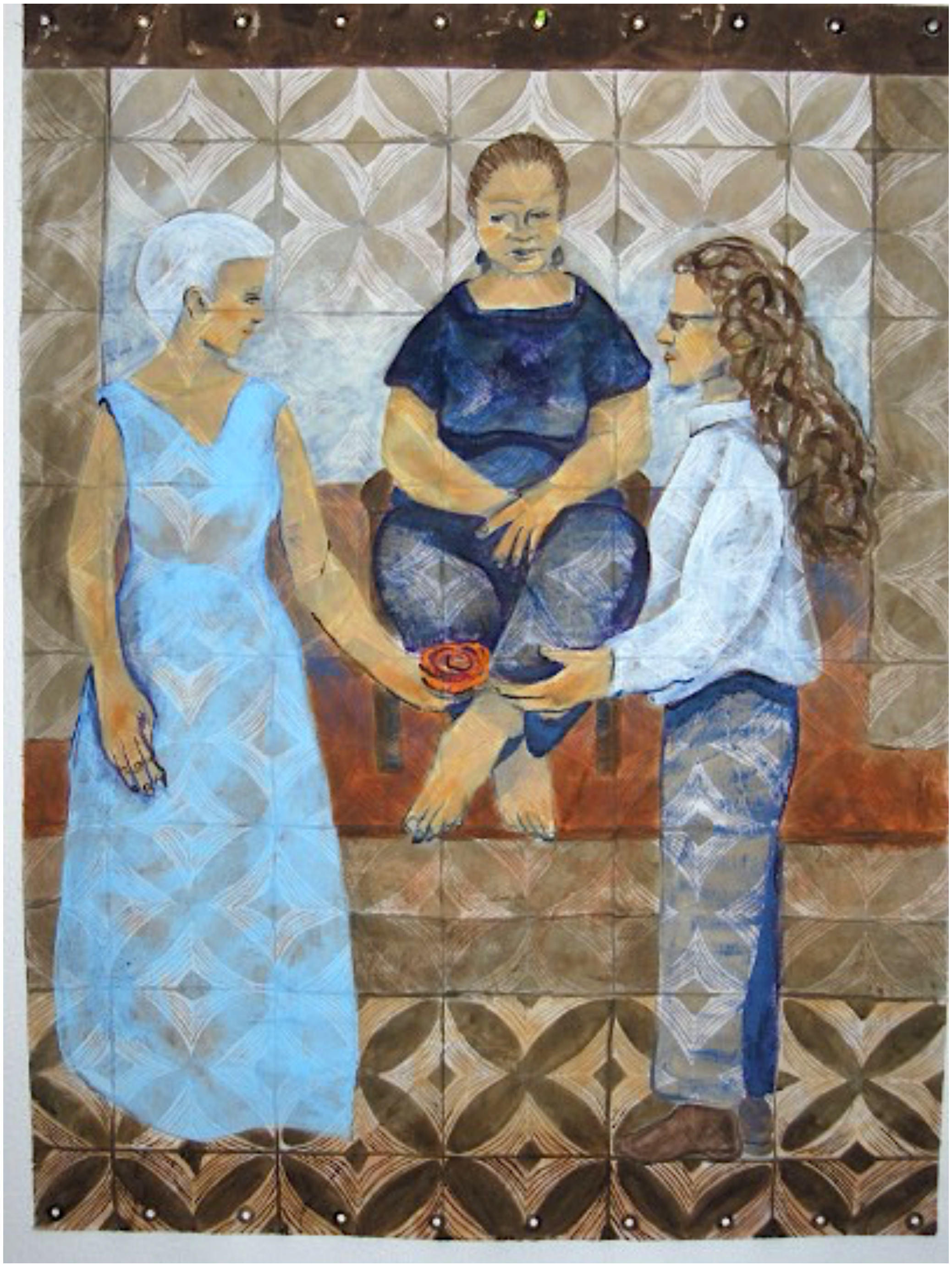

Figure 8. Jewel Block, *Trio*, 2013–16. Acrylic and acrylic ink on canvas, approximately 60 x 84 inches. Courtesy of the artist

as an ongoing conversation between the past and the present. This is something I call holographic time and holographic space—it entails the idea of backing into the future while facing the past, or holding the hands of our ancestors while moving forward. The process for conceiving of and producing art, song, dance, siapo, tattoo, architecture, or literature, forms a pattern of actions that connects us with our ancestors. Through this process the past meets and informs the present. I think of that connection as "the vā," the meeting space between now and then.

My painting titled *Trio* (Fig. 8) is trying to think through these ideas. It includes my grandmother in the background and my deceased mother facing me in the foreground. The figures are somewhat transparent to show that patterns are within us and link us. The pattern extends behind my grandmother to indicate that these patterns go way behind her, both spatially (back to Sāmoa) and temporally (back in time).

***SLK**: There is a lot of play, or blurring, or combining of interior and exterior spaces in your work. Is this related to your thinking about being inside and outside of Sāmoan spaces? I think about your observations of the different ways your family members worked to fit "in" American spaces while others tried to keep America (or San Diego) "out," to some extent, by creating Sāmoan places and homes in California, as you described earlier. Does the in/outside of your work speak to your efforts to produce a multi-spatial Sāmoan-American place, identity, and culture by navigating through memories, patterns, objects, and time?*

JB: Some of my family's homes in Sāmoa had no windows or doors because they were open structures; it was like being inside and outside at the same time. Once, while in Sāmoa with my grandfather, he had to be taken to the hospital. The structure of the ward he was in was open in this way too. I remember standing near his bed one evening, noticing how dark it was outside while watching a large lizard that was near him. Years later, while doing research for my art, I learned how woven mats were used as walls between posts in architectural structures. These walls would be lifted to open the structure to the outdoors. This flexibility between indoors and outdoors, and the idea that it was happening in the past and the present, has resonated with me. I began to see it not just as in/outside living, but also as a way for expressing how I saw my family members living both in the US and in the islands, whether through physically traveling back and forth or within their spirit.

The Pastor's Wife (Fig. 4) depicts my grandmother and other ladies leaving the church dressed in their White Sunday attire.[7] In place of the front wall of the church, which you see behind my grandmother, is a view of the island of Taʻū where she is from, rather than the San Diego neighborhood of the church. The ocean rolls in from the island, flowing beneath the parishioners' bare feet. I substituted woven mats for the actual carpeting on the church floor. Past homes and lifeways of Sāmoa are represented as outdoor spaces while homes and lifeways of San Diego are represented as interior spaces (e.g., the church, my grandparents' home). It is as though the natural and cultural environment of Sāmoa sustains us, reminds us of past homes, and carries us forward in our present homes. Like the tides, the water moves—ebbing and flowing; it's a continuous pattern, though the water in those tides is constantly changing.

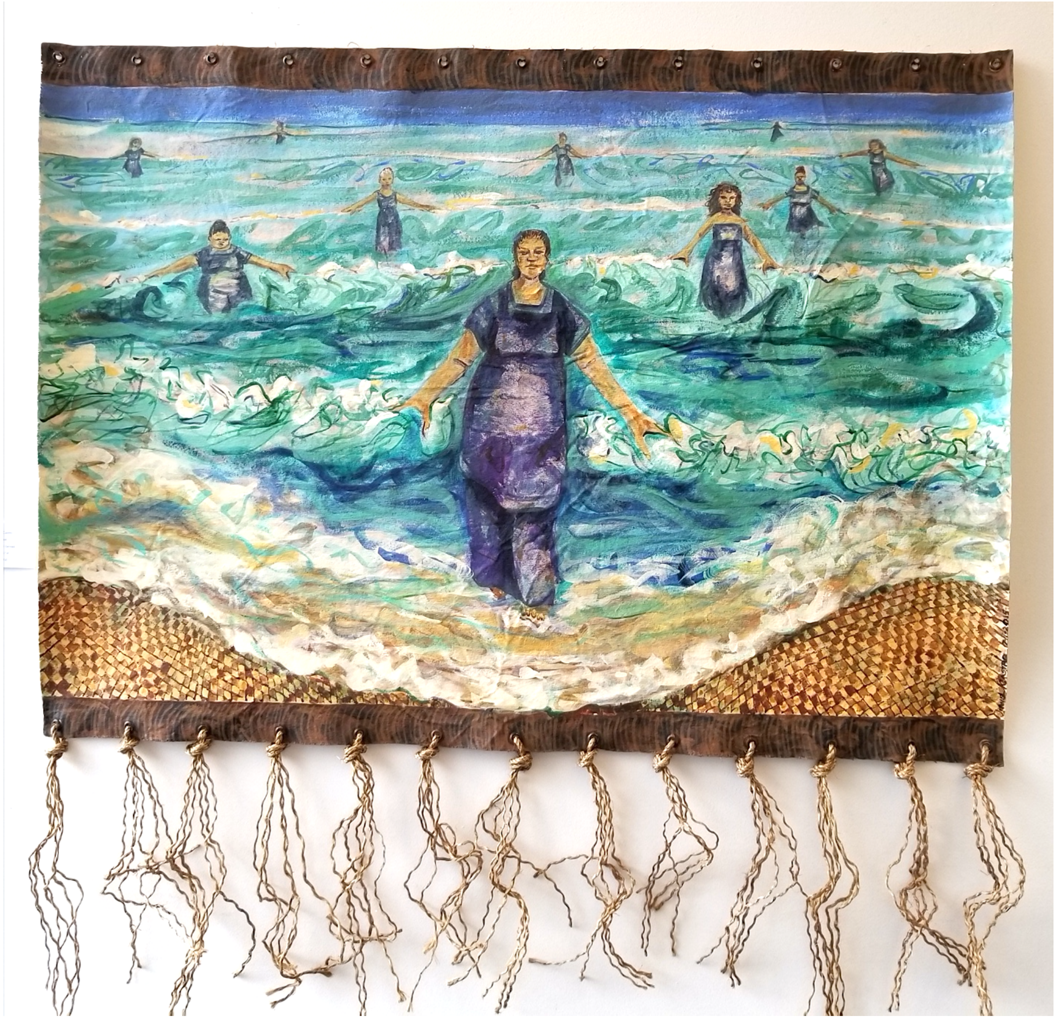

Figure 9. Jewel Block, *Dusk*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, approximately 36 x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist

There is a similar dynamic in *Dusk* (Fig. 9). In part, the painting is a response to the common stereotype of Polynesian women as "dusky maidens" but more so, I was imagining dusk happening. When dusk happens, the sea looks a particular kind of way. At first, it's rough and then it becomes smoother, but it's not quite calm yet. As the surf begins to smooth, I think of my women ancestors (with my grandmother in the lead) carrying it in and walking it to shore, which is painted as a continuous ʻie toga (fine mat).

SLK: *It appears that these women facilitate the changing of time (dusk) and space (the sea and shore). The changing nature of the water meeting the shifting sands of the beach is presented as ʻie toga (fine mats, a treasured cultural valuable and a key form of family wealth). Because ʻie toga would not be used as floor mats, their presence in the painting doesn't seem to literally suggest an indoor floor covering but rather, perhaps, the homes that carefully protect and preserve these family valuables. The patterned mats create relationships between people and over time. Just as ʻie toga link families through exchanges at important occasions and through time, as they are passed from one generation to the next, the beach of fine mats in the painting extends into our unfinished, ongoing time and space. Unwoven strands of fibers emerge from the grommets at the base of the painting as though indicating that the future is yet to be formed, but, as underscored in the material substance of the fibers, this future depends on present and future people drawing on specific cultural knowledges and ancestral histories to continue weaving their patterns in new spaces and new times. Is that something you were thinking about in painting* Dusk*?*

JB: In addition to the idea of ʻie toga, there are also utilitarian woven mats called fala that include floor coverings. When my mom was a child, the floor of her family home mainly consisted of broken coral and shells. Mats were laid on top of this to protect their feet. Mats were used to cover the floor of important meeting spaces. The finest mats were brought out for this purpose when certain dignitaries visited or significant events were happening; their feet and bodies would touch the mats and not the everyday rawness of the floor. In my paintings, I typically locate fala on the ground and usually under the feet of people I want to honor. This is another way I'm making a connection between the past and present. So, for *Dusk*, I made the sand that the women's feet touch one endless fine mat.

SLK: *The grommets at the top and bottom of* Dusk*, the wrinkled surface of the canvas, the hanging fibers, the upper and lower borders that are painted to* *resemble coconut tree logs, and even the way the waves seep over the lower border into the space of the viewer—these all underscore the "objectness" of the painting. Do these features connect with some of the ideas about materiality and memory you discussed earlier?*

JB: Performing the task of making the art is a very physical and hard labor. It's tough; it's not easy to make siapo—it kills your back, shoulders, and neck. Producing and pounding the bark to make cloth requires a lot of hand, arm, and body strength. It's hard work to make a fine mat, from preparing the fibers to intricately weaving them. It's difficult to do a tattoo and to withstand the intense pain of receiving one. But enacting these are lessons. The physicality of making the art, and the final product itself, are ways of learning and remembering. Performance is a way of remembering. The performance of the task, of making the art, transforms meaning. The physicality and objectness of *Dusk* and other of my paintings are ways of expressing those connections.

Jewel Block (formerly Jewel Castro) is a Sāmoan American artist who was born in Chicago, raised in San Diego, and is currently based in Washington state. She received her BA in art, with distinction, from San Diego State University and her MFA in visual arts from the University of California–San Diego. Her work is strongly influenced by Oceanic art and cultural forms, especially those from Sāmoa, as well as the natural environment, sea vessels, and the trans-Pacific movements of her family. Block is a Lecturer in Culture, Arts, and Communication for the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington–Tacoma.

Stacy L. Kamehiro is a member of the History of Art and Visual Culture Department faculty at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research focuses on colonial-era Native Hawaiian visual and material culture. She has published on topics such as textiles, public art, architecture, arts organizations, collecting and exhibition practices, activist conservation, the arts of diplomacy, and connections between Oceanic visual studies and imperialism in American art history.

Notes

[1] Jewel Castro, "Lessons, Challenges, and Adaptations: Reconstructing Self within Changing Pacific Environments" (paper presented at Pacific Island Worlds: Transpacific Dis/Positions symposium, University of California, Santa Cruz, May 5, 2018).

[2] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[3] The Fita-Fita Guard, established in 1900, was originally called the Samoan Naval Militia. It served the US Navy until 1951, when it was disbanded. During World War II, the Fita-Fita Guard manned anti-aircraft batteries near the US Naval Station in Tutuila. See "World War II," National Museum of the U.S. Navy, accessed Sept. 26, 2021, https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nmusn/explore/photography/diversity/asian-americans/world-war-ii/fita-fita-guard.html.

[4] Several of the paintings in this series are published in Stacy L. Kamehiro, "About the Artist: Jewel Castro," *The Contemporary Pacific* 20, no. 2 (2008): vii–xv.

[5] Jewel Castro, "Communicating Tradition in Samoan American Art: An Artist's Reflection," *Pacific Studies* 30, no. 1/2 (2007): 122–9.

[6] Several of my paintings were displayed in this way in an exhibition called *Sail!*, curated by Heather Waldroup and held at the Catherine J. Smith Gallery at Appalachian State University, September 15–November 17, 2014. See "Sail! into CJS Gallery," *Mountain Times*, August 14, 2014, https://www.wataugademocrat.com/mountaintimes/entertainment/art/sail-into-cjs-gallery/article_4e7d92f9-82d7-5e86-926b-867a216fe1e1.html.

[7] White Sunday is a designated Sunday in October when children are celebrated and white is worn to church. It is a special day. For many years, Jewel's mother would buy her grandmother a new white hat for the occasion.