

LINDA VA'AE LUA

Between the Betweenness: Restoring the Vā

Abstract

Artist and designer Linda Va'aelua's work explores her identity as a female of mixed Samoan and Scottish heritage who grew up as part of the Samoan diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand. She reflects on cultural and language loss, vā (relational space), and weaving cultures together harmoniously. She expresses her gafa (genealogy) through her arrangement of patterns, shapes, colours, composition, and materials.

Keywords: Linda Va'aelua, afakasi ("half caste"), cultural mixture, Samoan diaspora, Aotearoa New Zealand, Samoan art, Scottish art, contemporary art, vā, textiles, gender

My work explores where I sit as a female of mixed Samoan and Scottish heritage who has grown up as part of the Samoan diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand. Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) is the largest Polynesian city in the world, where Samoan is the second most spoken language (after English).¹ Yet, within this context, I have still experienced loss of language and identity. Identity and "who I am?" are always at the forefront of my thoughts. As a designer by profession, I always consider how to visually communicate my ideas to the viewer. I start by arranging patterns, shapes, colours, composition, and materials as a way of expressing my gafa (genealogy).

My thoughts about the concept of vā—relational space—shape my work: the vā between myself and Sāmoa, between family and me, between Scotland and me. I think about how relationships ebb and flow. When there is crisis and breakdown, the vā becomes evident. It becomes uneasy. Eventually, there needs to be reconciliation for the vā to be restored. My ideas about relational space focus on opposites—harmony versus chaos, light versus dark. I think about how opposing cultures contrast yet work in harmony to make me who I am. For instance, in *Fa'atasiga (the coming together)* (Fig. 1), I represent the harmony of opposites by combining circles, bold contrasting colour combinations, and expressive brush strokes in divided, yet balanced, compositions. The coming together of opposites is dynamic and fluid, as indicated in the swirling, merging

forms. In *So'oga Mauga (mountain range)* (Fig. 2) and *Lagi Taimane III* (Fig. 3), I use a similar—divided and opposing—composition to express my label of being afakasi (half caste), though this time focused on triangles with sharp, perfect outlines. The triangles mirror each other and emerge as mauga (mountains), with the horizontal line dividing the canvas becoming the horizon that helps me to navigate across northern and southern hemispheres. Although the triangular forms mirror each other across the horizon, they are opposed in terms of colour. My colour choices are sometimes bold and jarring to express the tensions and possibilities of opposites coming together. They also reference the brightly coloured fale (houses) and buses—home and movement—in Sāmoa.

The paintings described above, as well as most of the other works included here, are painted on disused hessian (burlap) sacks for coffee and firewood. During the COVID-19 global pandemic that began in 2020, I had run out of art supplies and was unable to readily purchase replacements. I stumbled across a pile of firewood sacks that I had been keeping over the winter and thought I would try painting on these. The rawness of the material breathed life into a whole new body of work. The simple lines and abstract shapes in my hessian works contrast greatly with the imperfections of the hessian surface onto which they are painted. The hessian bags also materialize the export of commodities and the migration of peoples around the world.

My work also draws on patterns from my Sāmoan and Scottish heritages to help me navigate and plot my journey. My paintings incorporate motifs and patterns featured in Sāmoan tatau (tattoo) and siapo (tapa cloth), such as the gogo (frigate bird), 'alu'alu (jellyfish), aveau (starfish), fetu (star), and pua (frangipani). I also use clan tartan patterns from my Scottish culture. Straddling these contrasting cultures, I think about different kinds of value. Through mass production, the tartan has become a devalued motif. On the other hand, in my Samoan tradition I wear patterns of my ancestors on my thighs (in my malu, or Samoan female thigh tattoo) as a daily reminder of service to my aiga (family) and community. In my exhibition *From Tartan to Tatau*, I merged contrasting forms and contexts of value.² For instance, in *Upega Taimane (diamond net)* (Fig. 4), I used a low-cost polypropylene bag commonly used around the world that has a tartan-like pattern. I deconstructed the bag and painted enlarged patterns from my malu onto it. In this work, and others in this series, I explored what the malu patterns started to look like when taken out of the context of being a tattoo on skin and I elevated the cheap bag to be a canvas for these treasured Samoan patterns.

Patterns also appear on Scottish family crests. My Livingston clan crest (from my palagi Scottish grandfather) hung in my grandparents' house. It included a small wooden crest with a piece of the clan tartan, motto *Si Je Puis* ("If I can"), and symbol. My work *Crest tasi, Crest lua, Crest tolu, Crest fa, Crest lima, Crest ono* (Fig. 5) builds on the idea of the family crest. I used small plywood blocks to create my own crests using malu patterns and limited the colour palette to red, dark green, black, and white—partially referring to my tartan colours. The title includes the Samoan words for the numbers one through six. I merged English and Samoan words to again reference the merging of my two cultures. Very graphic abstract patterns resulted, which aimed to challenge viewers' perception of cultural patterns and how they could be read.

For other artworks, I researched Scottish heraldry and the use of standards and banners to identify an approaching group as friend or foe and their display in royal houses and castles. These banners were ancient forms of graphic design in which colours and symbols had genealogical significance and visualized family identities. In *Saleaula standard* (Fig. 6) and *Mauga ma le Lā* (Fig. 7), I created my own banners using abstracted shapes such as the triangle to represent mauga (mountains) and semicircles to symbolize the sun or moon. Presented on metal rods, the paintings were transformed into banners that herald both my Samoan and Scottish heritages. Further connecting my cultures, I digitally superimposed my banners on a fale (house) in Sāmoa (*Fale banners*, Fig. 8) and then, in *Saleaula standard in Scotland* (Fig. 9), on a castle ruin in Scotland.

My largest work to date, *Story Mat* (Fig. 10), took inspiration from the repeated bold patterns of pua (frangipani) in Samoan siapo (tapa cloth). I painted only triangles and semicircles in a grid pattern, similar to the visual structure of siapo, on six large squares. I then sewed the squares together to create a large mat. Viewed from a distance, the painting/textile looks like a series of large shapes, but when viewed up close, one can see where the designs do not line up precisely. These "imperfections" are characteristic of siapo designs, which are made with freehand painting, but the overall effect is one of continuity, repetition, and beauty. I incorporated wool stitching, adapted from the use of wool on Samoan woven mats (fala), to create lines, patterns, depth, and added physical and conceptual layers. In *Story Mat* the red stitching creates lines that complete the triangle patterns. I also stitched a red wool fringe along the bottom edge much like our woven fala (floor mats).

Chapter 1 (Fig. 11) is a smaller work that follows in the same vein as *Story Mat* by expressing similar themes through semicircle and triangle shapes. I hand-dyed the loose weave hessian and then layered pieces on top of each other. This

made the work feel more like a textile than a painting. I took the raw undyed hessian and created a trim along the bottom of the work, adding another nod to the yarn fringe found on the edge of Samoan fala.

Overall, my work expresses an effort to navigate my relationship with heritage and identity by bringing together an amalgamation of diverse cultural signifiers. As a Samoan-Scottish woman, I use women's arts—such as siapo, malu, and wool stitching—to weave together the various aspects of my identity. Like the coarse but unified texture of hessian sacks, my wayfinding across different lands, cultures, and oceans is rough and bumpy but also coalescing and harmonious.

Linda Va'aelua is of Samoan and Scottish heritage and grew up in West Auckland, New Zealand. She graduated in 1999 with a bachelor of design (visual communications) from Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland. With more than twenty years of experience as a graphic designer, she was the first Pasifika art director for the publication New Zealand Woman's Weekly and has worked on other publications including the New Zealand Listener. More recently, Linda designed the award-winning book NUKU: Stories of 100 Indigenous Women (Ockham New Zealand Book Awards 2022 finalist and PANZ Book Design Awards 2022 finalist). In 2023, she self-published Tusiata ole Tala ole Vavau: Artists of the Forever Stories. In 2021, she launched her visual arts career with a virtual exhibition HALF, and has since been practising as a full-time artist with numerous group and solo exhibitions to date.

Notes

¹ Tāmaki Makaurau is the Māori name for Auckland.

² The exhibition *From Tartan to Tatau* was held at Studio One, Auckland, April 7–May 5, 2022. See “Studio One Toi Tū—Linda Va'aelua—*From tartan to tatau*,” artsdiary.co.nz, April 6, 2022, <https://artsdiary.co.nz/160/3675.html>.



Figure 1. Linda Va'aelua, *Fa'atasiga (the coming together)*, 2021. Acrylic paint on hessian, 80 x 100 cm. Photograph by Sait Akkirman. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 2. Linda Va'aelua, *So'oga Mauga (mountain range)*, 2021. Acrylic paint on hessian, 80 x 100 cm. Photograph by Sait Akkirman. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3. Linda Va'aelua, *Lagi Taimane III*, 2022. Acrylic paint on hessian, 200 x 73 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Linda Va'aelua, *Upega Taimane (diamond net)*, 2022. Acrylic paint on Polypropylene bag, 50 x 84 cm (including frame). Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. Linda Va'aelua, *Crest series: Crest tasi, Crest lua, Crest tolu, Crest fa, Crest lima, Crest ono*, 2022. Acrylic paint on plywood, each 20 x 20 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 6. Linda Va'aelua, *Saleaula standard*, 2022. Acrylic paint on hessian, 180 x 40 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 7. Linda Va'aelua, *Mauga ma le Lā*, 2022. Acrylic paint on hessian and mixed media, 140 x 100 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. Linda Va'aelua, *Fale banners*, 2022. Digital work. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. Linda Va'aelua, *Saleaula standard in Scotland*, 2022. Ilford smooth pearl lustre print, 59.4 x 84.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 10. Linda Va'aelua, *Story Mat*, 2023. Acrylic paint and stitched wool on hessian, 208 x 135 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 11. Linda Va'aelua, *Chapter 1*, 2023. Hand-dyed hessian and acrylic paint, 95 x 80.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the artist