

A'ANOALI'I ROWENA FULUIFAGA In Memoriam: Lily Laita (1969–2023)

Abstract

Tautai Pacific Arts Trust in Tāmaka Makaurau, Aotearoa New Zealand, remembers and honors the artist Lily Laita.

Keywords: *Lily Laita, contemporary art, Oceania, painting, arts education*



Figure 1. Lily Laita. Photograph courtesy of Dana Meleisea

Lily Aitui Laita (Ngāti Raukawa ki te Tonga, Tanugamanono, Sāmoa) was an artist, an art educator, and mother of two who inspired a generation of Pacific people to pursue visual arts as a career and a teaching vocation.

She was part of the first generation of Pacific artists to study Fine Arts in Aotearoa in the 1980s and emerged onto the art scene as part of the early contemporaries who led a vast generation in expressive painting and making. She was a graduate of the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland (1990) where she later returned to complete her Masters in Painting (2002). She also completed her Diploma in Teaching (1991) and became one of our most highly respected arts educators in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Since the late 1980s Lily exhibited widely including *Te Moemoea no Iotefa*, Sarjeant Gallery, Whangahui, and tour (1990–91); *Bottled Ocean*, City Gallery, Wellington, and tour (1993–94), *Tu Fa’atasi International Festival of the Arts* (1994); *The Seventh South Pacific Festival of the Arts*, Western Sāmoa (1996); *ReDress* at Auckland Museum (1997); *Tu’u i ai ni vai* at Whitespace Gallery, Melbourne (2000); *VAhine* (2003) at the Lane Gallery; and *Samoa Contemporary*, Pātaka Museum of Arts and Cultures, Porirua (2007), and a major group exhibition at the Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui, Whanganui (2008). She was also a part of the VAhine collective alongside New Zealand-born Samoan artists Lonnie Hutchinson and Niki Hastings McFall, who were awarded the Creative New Zealand and National University of Samoa Artist in Residence in 2012.

Lily’s practice spanned over thirty years of art-making and teaching in New Zealand and the Pacific. Karen Stevenson defined Laita’s work and inquiry as:

. . . a visual language that reflects the complexity of the oral traditions of the past. As one would slowly build images in the mind’s eye, Laita creates images that reveal, but only after the viewer has truly looked. Language, people and images of cultural knowledge emerge from what appears to be an abstract canvas.¹

She went on to say that Laita was part of a groundbreaking generation of women artists who continued to transmit cultural traditions and ideas to new generations living in changing contemporary realities: “Laita utilises her art practice to comment on both the histories and modern realities of Pacific women. She feels that both knowing and understanding the past is important as a means of transferring knowledge. She is renegotiating tradition.”²

Laita was a painting lecturer at Wanganui Polytechnic in Whanganui and dedicated the majority of her teaching career at Western Springs College in Auckland, where she served as Head of the Art Department. Apart from her art practice, Laita also contributed to various creative trusts and boards, including

Creative New Zealand, Tautai Pacific Arts Trust, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, and many others.

Fa'afetai tele lava Lily mo lou tautua - moe mai ra, vahine toa.

On behalf of our Patron Fatu Feu'u and Tautai trust, manuia lou malaga.

A'anoali'i Rowena Fuluifaga is the director of the Tautai Pacific Arts Trust. Located in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa New Zealand, Tautai Pacific Arts is a charitable trust dedicated to championing Pacific arts and artists. Over almost forty years, Tautai has grown to become Aotearoa's premiere Pacific arts organisation with a multidisciplinary focus. The trust brings artists and the wider Tautai aiga together through a range of events and activities locally and globally. Its purpose is to grow a rich ecology of Pacific creative arts practice and provide leadership, support and unique opportunities for the Tagata Moana arts community.

Notes

¹ Karen Stevenson, *The Frangipani is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985–2000* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2008), 106.

² Stevenon, *The Frangipani is Dead*, 110.