Renewed Relevance: Contemporary Samoan Art

Continuing the rich artistic legacy of her mother (Marylyn Pritchard Walker) and her grandmother (Mary Pritchard), Tupito Gadalla has chosen to work in the traditional Samoan art form of siapo (decorated bark cloth). While Pito follows many of the artistic conventions that define siapo, she also allows a certain degree of innovation to be incorporated into her creations. To be considered in this paper is the crucial and delicate balance between tradition and innovation, between maintenance and growth, as it applies to the art of Pito Gadalla. Pito respects what the core of siapo is, and realizes if she changes the basic structure too radically, it becomes unrecognisable and thus looses its cultural significance, meaning and impact. For traditional art to retain its authority, it must remain firmly tethered to its historical roots, yet for it to maintain a continued relevance, it must be revitalized by allowing a certain measure of elasticity. As artists like Pito test and redefine traditional boundaries, they both challenge and reaffirm the adaptive capacity of tradition. The most vital (yet overlooked) aspect of traditional art is its built-in mechanism for change. Traditional art does not simply withstand change; it is change itself that provides strength, resiliency and relevance. The contemporary relevance of siapo, however, is especially challenged in the Samoan Diaspora, as Samoans living abroad struggle to maintain their artistic heritage in the face of monolithic foreign cultures. This struggle is not new, especially for colonized peoples, but diasporic issues add further stress as Samoan artists seek support for their work. For Pito, living and working in San Diego, the lack of interest from the relatively large but fragmented Samoan community in Southern California is disappointing. As each successive generation of Samoans born in the United States becomes further removed from their cultural heritage, Pito feels an even greater urgency to ensure siapo remains a vibrant and effective form of artistic expression, while providing cultural cohesion in the diasporic community. Only through creative innovation will siapo remain a vital Samoan tradition.

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