



## Telling truths

*Christina Pataialii has had a whirlwind year. She speaks to Lucy Jackson about house paint, pop culture and how to make things that don't go together, go together.*

Christina Pataialii is interested in truth. When I sit down with the artist at her house in Mt Victoria, Wellington, in February, she is fun and frank to talk to. Her studio floor is lined with moving boxes and we sit among cans of house paint, paintings and books. The tradies outside are noisy, occasionally interrupting our conversation – “Keep it down, chaps!” Pataialii says, but not so they can hear. The artist laughs a lot, and our chat dips into politics as well as into art and pop culture; the artist is comfortable in many modes. It feels like an honest conversation, and Pataialii is honest with her painting – “if nothing else”.

Pataialii has only recently moved to Wellington. Last year was a busy one for the artist – she had seven exhibitions and graduated with an MFA from Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design. The day after the graduation, her major exhibition *Solid Gold* opened at Te Tuhi. Then

Pataialii packed up her life and left Auckland. “Every time I went to Wellington I didn’t want to leave,” she tells me. “The people and the exhibitions made me think it was a place I’d like to be based.” So when Pataialii was offered a private residency in Wellington for a year, she accepted.

Within a week of arriving, the artist’s studio was up and running. Her next exhibition was seven weeks away. “I didn’t have the time to overthink it.” Pataialii intends to scale back this year, but she knows that a whirlwind pace is typical for the art world. “You can have months of dormancy and then three exhibitions in the space of three months.” Once Pataialii accepted this organised chaos, she realised that she had to use the slow periods better. Plus, she admits that her practice lends itself to this structure. “I do a big burst of work and then I edit it down. I might have an eight-hour creative burst in the studio and then leave it for two days. Burst, dormant, burst, dormant.”

All artworks by Christina Pataialii

Opposite and below: installation views of *Solid Gold*, Te Tuhi, Auckland, 2018–19. Courtesy of Te Tuhi. Photos: Sam Hartnett

Right: *Heavy Weight*, 2018, acrylic, house paint, spray paint on drop cloth, 1500 x 1500mm, in *Solid Gold*, Te Tuhi, Auckland, 2018–19. Courtesy of Te Tuhi. Photo: Sam Hartnett

Pataialii's studio is a former living room, facing the street. Zadie Smith and *Game of Thrones* novels line her mantelpiece, mixed in with art books. *Picasso and Truth* by TJ Clark and Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* jump out at me. On the walls are paintings destined for *On the Lam* at Tim Melville Gallery, which was to open several weeks later, in March. Among other things, the show explores movement and migration – both her own move to Wellington and stories from the past century. “The history of the movement of people, trajectories, and where things meet up and link together is fascinating to me,” Pataialii says.

*On the Lam* consists of 13 ‘medium’ canvases, most of them 76.5 centimetres square. The artist says the word medium with hesitation – this is small for her. “It’s as small as I would go using acrylic and house paint.” For Pataialii, the capabilities of her materials help determine the shape of the art. Her father was a house painter, so her first relationship to paint was in this form. In her fourth year of study Pataialii integrated house paint into her practice, revisiting this material she had a particular intimacy with. “I know house paint really well, it feels honest to me.”

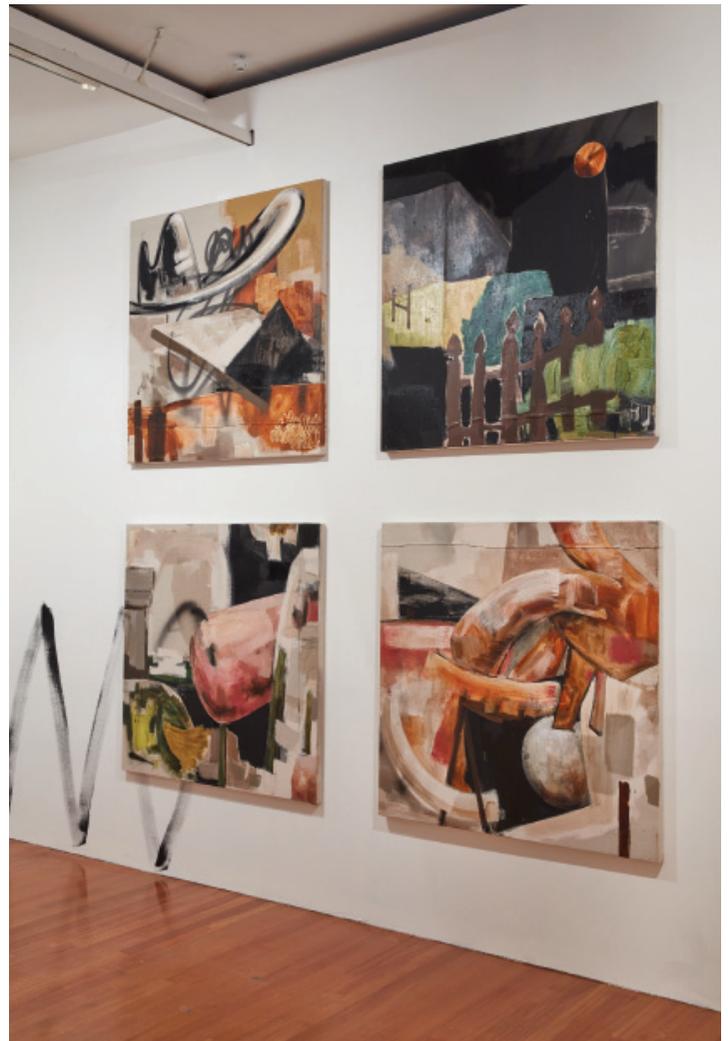
There's that word again – honest. Pataialii likes house paint's ‘lowly’ or utilitarian status. The more funny looks she receives for using it, the more attractive it becomes. “I think it is interesting and destabilising to use house paint on drop cloth, wrap it around artist canvas and then put it in a gallery space and say, ‘This is painting.’ I’m not taking the piss, I’m asking to be taken seriously.” Pataialii is interested in the paint's materiality, not just wanting to make a political statement. She experiments with it, testing to see if it can perform in untypical ways.

While honest in her work and practice, Pataialii likes a bit of trickery. “House paint is extremely opaque – it flattens and deadens,” she says. “So can I find a way to make house paint do the opposite? Will it always be house paint or can it trick people?”

“And what's the answer?”

“I think it can.”

Pataialii seems to be trying to construct a debate within the painting. “Flattening is usually the opposite of what painters are trying to do. But there is something in the way house paint versus acrylic artist paint causes a war and negotiation within the painting. I like the play of that.” She also uses house paint as a concealer – using a ‘roller-up’ approach that you might see on fences to cover graffiti – to “crack open the space” and give her another





*On the Level*, 2019, acrylic and house paint on canvas drop cloth, 765 x 765mm. Courtesy of the artist and Tim Melville Gallery.  
Photo: Kallan MacLeod

Below, from right: *Lonesome Lover* and *Happy to be Here*, both 2019, acrylic and house paint on canvas drop cloth, 765 x 765mm, in *On the Lam*, Tim Melville Gallery, Auckland, March–April 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Tim Melville Gallery.  
Photo: Kallan MacLeod

Opposite: Christina Pataialii’s studio, 2019. Courtesy of the artist

plane to paint on. The politics of this graffiti-cover-up connection also appeal.

Halfway through the interview, the artist confesses that she never usually lets people into the studio, “because the works are half-cooked, unfinished, and they could look completely different in two weeks’ time”. She works across multiple paintings at a time: “If I just worked on one it would be over-cooked.” Pataialii tries not to plan her paintings – sometimes the material or colour dictates the composition, and generally each approach is different. For *On the Lam*, Pataialii has been drawing on the pastel hues of 1950s and 1960s state housing from the suburbs she grew up in. “I have been exploring nostalgia in recent paintings. Reintroducing these colours is something I find exciting. I’m trying to make things that don’t work together work together.”

I search for subjects in the work, wondering what I am meant to see. “Are those candles, or a picket fence?” I ask, looking at some long shapes in a painting called *On the Level* (2019).

Pataialii enjoys this. “They’re rough fences that stand in as candles. I like that they are open for interpretation. In a way, I’m playing with a language of imagery.” Pataialii says she is stuck somewhere between abstraction and representation. “I like it there – the two modes undermine each other.” The canvases also host drop-cloth creases, which Pataialii says break the space up and challenge her to either fight against or lean into it. Once you look across a few paintings, you begin to understand her language.

Pataialii – of both Sāmoan and Pākehā descent – is honest about why her paintings are full of oppositions. “If I psychoanalyse myself I know why I do this – it’s part of growing up as a biracial kid. You’re on both sides of an argument, colonised and coloniser. You’re in the middle of really heavy, political debates, and in a way that forms your identity; but equally you don’t belong in any camp. You live and negotiate different spaces.”





In seeking to bend materials and to sit between camps, I try to confirm, you create a space where there are both sides but also none?

“That’s what I mean about honesty, I think it’s more interesting to cut the bullshit.” In a range of debates – from issues of identity to questions such as ‘is painting dead?’ – Pataialii is interested in facing things directly, then destabilising things to find the answers.

Growing up in multicultural immigrant communities, Pataialii’s identity was heavily shaped by pop culture, most often American. “It’s often excluded from the conversation about who we are, personally and collectively. And this spans more than only our generation.”

She tells me about her father growing up in Savai’i, Western Sāmoa. Home was a fale with no running water or electricity, so one of his only windows to a wider world was the village cinema. The local theatre was a fale with tarpaulin walls, where Spaghetti Western movies were projected. Pataialii’s father and his friends would cut small holes in the tarpaulin from the outside. With one friend on lookout, they would take turns watching. For some little kids on a small island in the largest ocean in the world, pop culture was a lens to a different world.

“They knew Spaghetti Westerns and John Wayne, but didn’t know English. Dad would sing The Beatles, but he didn’t know what he was singing.” Pataialii says that this is not unusual, that the coded language of pop culture has a way of transcending cultures, histories and geographies.

Connections like this that few people recognise are what interests Pataialii. “I want to bring these obscure stories out in my work. I didn’t see the complexities of cultural identity represented in the art scene. These stories are known within families, but I wanted to paint them. Hopefully once I’ve mashed it all together you might see the connection, even if you are not necessarily part of the story.” The references of pop culture thus offer a language that is accessible and democratising, the artist says. “It is *our* history, it is *our* encyclopedia and what *we* are going to remember.”

Recently, Pataialii has been interested in British painter Rose Wylie, octogenarian and “cool bird”. Wylie’s work from the 1980s references both pop culture and history, like Pataialii’s own paintings do. “I love that she is pulling from the archives of her memory rather than archives she finds online. This is how she references historical moments such as the Blitz.”

Though Pataialii is trying to have a scaled-back year, this busy artist has another solo exhibition coming up, at the McLeavey Gallery in August. She plans to work off and respond to the architecture and heritage of the building and gallery. “I don’t really know what that means just yet,” she admits, “but when I get an opportunity, that is my usual approach.”

Truthfully, I think it will be a knockout.

*Christina Pataialii’s New Paintings is at the McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, from 7 to 31 August.*