

The Kaukalaikiki Girl

by Olive Wilson

When she was a girl, Pusi Urale was often told she was kaukalaikiki. The word is informal Samoan and means cheeky or naughty. Mostly it's used to describe girls who don't quite behave the way society expects them to. But Pusi doesn't see being kaukalaikiki as a bad thing. She says it's a way to think for yourself, to make sense of the world; girls who are kaukalaikiki learn to ask questions. It was this part of Pusi – the curious, fearless part – that helped her become an artist.



▲ Nu'u Filēmū

The coconut trees

When she was growing up in Sāmoa, Pusi was often told not to do things. She especially remembers being told that girls weren't to climb coconut trees. Pusi noticed that boys were allowed. By the time she was eleven, she'd become frustrated by the double standard. "Why?" she asked. "Why can't I climb the coconut trees?" It was explained that when girls climbed trees, it ruined the meat of the coconuts. Pusi didn't believe this, so when no one was looking, she ran to a tree and scrambled all the way to the top. Pusi remembers she got in a lot of trouble.

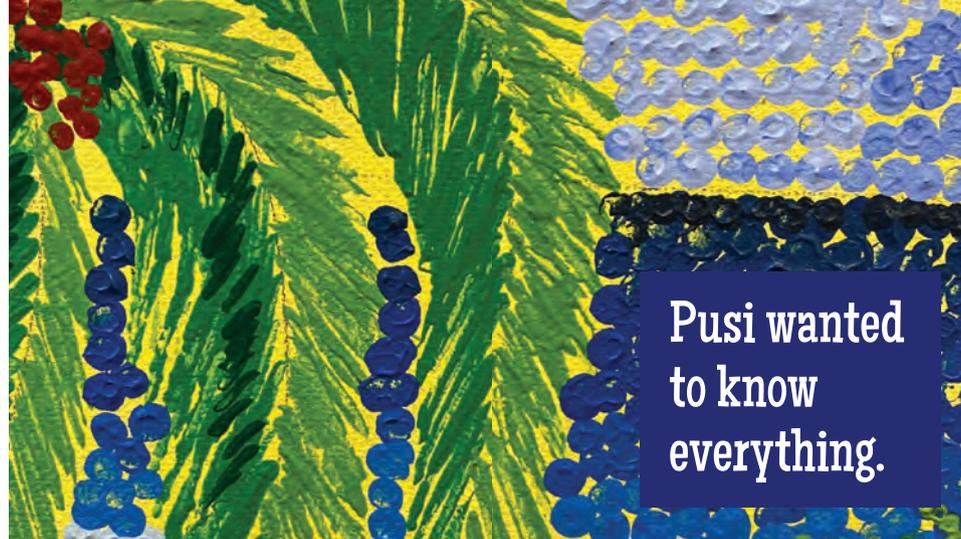
Pusi didn't set out to be kaukalaikiki, yet she often heard a little voice in her head. This voice questioned things other kids just accepted – but to Pusi, these things seemed unfair or unreasonable. The more she was told "Don't do that" or "Wrong!" or "Just do what I say!", the more she wanted to ask questions.

The girl who made dye

Pusi is eighty-three now ... and still exploring and asking questions. She says that as an artist, being curious is very important to her work. Having an open mind means a person will be more open to possibilities. And Pusi says inspiration can come from anything, anywhere. Her curious nature also means she's always trying new ways to make art.

Pusi didn't paint when she lived in Sāmoa. The closest she got was helping her mother make dye for siapo (tapa). She fondly recalls stripping bark from the blood tree to make 'o'a (a brown dye) and getting the fire ready to burn candlenuts. Pusi would help mix the soot from the candlenuts with the 'o'a to make a black dye called lama.

Girls were allowed to help make the dye, but only the older women did the actual painting. Pusi always stuck around to watch. She was curious to see what designs her mother and the other women would choose. She still remembers all the talking. "Put a gogo there," the women would tell one another, "like that." It was very collaborative. Although Pusi didn't realise it at the time, helping to make the dyes meant she *was* part of the creative process – and by sitting and watching the women paint, she became familiar with the motifs and patterns that are painted on tapa.



Swirling patterns

Over the years, the tapa cloths stayed with Pusi, swirling in her head. Sometimes the motifs and patterns flowed out, filling whatever piece of paper was in front of her. Pusi became a teacher, and she'd find herself doodling while her students worked. They were always the same designs. Pusi began to talk about these designs with her students, and that's when she decided to learn more about art and go to art classes.

Pusi wanted to know everything: how to use acrylic paints, how to use watercolours, how to make stained glass, how to carve, and how to frame a picture. She studied different ways of making art and different kinds of art. She was especially interested in art that was new to her. She wanted to see things she'd never seen in Sāmoa.

Pusi says one of the best things she learnt was to trust her creativity. "I wasn't taught to paint, I was taught to be free." In the art class she liked best, they played loud music of all kinds: country, hip-hop, rock, pop. They talked about where inspiration came from. Once again, Pusi's connection to tapa came bubbling out, but this time, she decided to teach others about making tapa. She used the money she earned doing this to help pay for her own lessons.

◀ 'O le Faga (middle) and details of 'O le Faga (top and bottom)



Kaukalaikiki

Just go!

Taking art classes empowered Pusi. Finally she was encouraged to try new things. “It was a beautiful feeling,” she says, “because I grew up being told the opposite. No, no, no. Now my teachers were saying ‘Don’t be scared, just go!’” Pusi had found a way to explore all aspects of herself – even her kaukalaikiki-ness.

Pusi couldn’t wait to unleash her creativity in whatever form it took. She felt a push to experiment with colour, materials, shapes. Her desire to make art was unstoppable. Pusi remembers coming home one afternoon and going straight to her painting. She completely lost track of time. Her husband came to check on her. “It’s eleven o’clock,” he said ... and later still, “Pusi, it’s two in the morning!” “Suddenly,” Pusi says, “it was 5 a.m. I was so inspired I couldn’t sleep.”



Because Pusi’s art is her freedom, she doesn’t follow any rules. Some of her work uses pointillism, a way of making an image using countless tiny dots. It’s probably no surprise that Pusi doesn’t always use a paintbrush. She likes to experiment. Sometimes, she paints with spoons – and shaved chopsticks work well when she’s using pointillism.

The subjects of Pusi’s paintings are also unique. She likes to paint Samoan women, showing them “big”, as Pusi puts it, “like the way we look”. Pusi says it’s important that her women look real, including the malu on their legs.

Family

Pusi began making art later in life. When she first went to an art class, she was the mother of six children. She says she still has things she needs to do: write a book about her life, make a film. Two of Pusi's daughters are film-makers, and she sometimes helps them with Samoan translation. One of her sons is the hip-hop musician King Kapisi. Another daughter is a digital artist. Pusi is proud to have raised creative children. When she was growing up, Samoan children weren't encouraged to think of art as a career. "It wasn't seen as 'bread and butter'," she says.

Pusi is also very proud of her grandchildren. She lives with one of her daughters and two granddaughters and says it's a real privilege to be able to spend so much time together. Pusi teaches her grandchildren all the things she knows, including Samoan values and knowledge. In return, they teach Pusi what they've learnt – and are still learning. Plus they get to make art together!



“It’s an honour to still be able to do what I do.”

▲ Pusi with her granddaughters Manamea (left) and Anivanuanua

In a hurry

Unlike her children and grandchildren, Pusi says she's "in a hurry". She doesn't feel old, but her body is growing old. She has lost the sight in one eye. Pusi wants to paint, creating as much as she can, before her other eye goes too.

These days, Pusi paints from the minute she gets up in the morning. "It's an honour," she says, "to still be able to do what I do." She has a message for other older people, but it's really a message for everyone. "You don't just have to sit there and wait until you die. Do something fun!"

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