

frigate

Home

Search

Reviews/Critique

Essays/Features

About Us

Contact Us

Archives

Shop



Sia Figiel's art has an intensity and a radical innocence that unveils the self equivalently in writing and painting. The writing is known and widely acclaimed. The painting is not as well known yet. And we think it should be.

— The Editors

## A Conversation with Sia Figiel

### Barbara Flug Colin

**Barbara Flug Colin:** In your writing there is an intensity and a spontaneity as if the words can't wait to get out. Yet you say you rewrite a lot. What is your painting process?

**Sia Figiel:** Thank you for the question. I paint the same way that I write. The difference is that once I start a new painting I cannot stop unless it is finished. That might of course take days, a week, but I will not sleep unless it is done.

**Colin:** Tradition permeates your writing: the oral tradition, allegory, myths, legends, and folktales. In your books the ancient is couched in terms of contemporary problems. Can you describe how tradition impacts on your paintings?

**Figiel:** There is the tradition of line in some of my work. The line is very important, connecting one line to another, the way they do it with *siapo* painting. Also, when I first started painting I was using only earth colors, deep reds, browns, black, but the more I experiment the more I leap onto striking colors and just go wild, abandoning all lines...so it is quite a leap in that sense, this complete abandonment of line in my later work so that I don't use it at all. It is a bit chaotic, but that is the only way to revolutionize tradition.

**Colin:** In the interview at the end of your book *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, you said: "I basically had to unlearn everything I was taught in school... recapture for myself the value of cyclical logic as opposed to a lineal one...." The circle is important to Samoan architecture, social structure, calendar, poetic and musical compositions." And to the structure of your writing. How does it apply to your paintings?

**Figiel:** My paintings, at least the later ones, are a revolution of tradition. However, one does recognize the circle in them — circle somehow means closure for me, and I have a series that is almost a whirlpool of circular motions in the paintings; if you look at them, they are images in never-ending motion. The painting in that case is never completed, never finished; it is eternally undone, and that's a different kind of energy. They are very intense; these are the paintings that take me weeks to work on. It is when my emotion or passion is exhausted that I stop, but the painting is never finished. Perhaps it is the person who views it that gives it closure.

**Colin:** In that same interview you said: "...even though time continues,



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**Fa'anoanoa (Melancholy)**

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["Sia Figiel: A Voice for Samoa"](#) [Chat with Joan Chen, *Jade Magazine*]

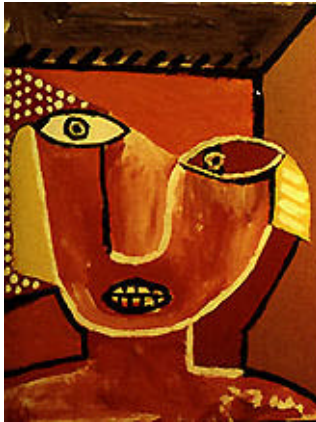
Salon [Audio: Figiel Reads](#) from *They Who Do Not Grieve*

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and language changes along with it, the experience remains the same...I did not want to be confined to the conventionalities of formal language...dull. Nothing new comes of it...." How does this apply to your painting? Did you have formal training in painting? Is it a benefit or a curse?



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**Fa'anoanoa II**

**Figiel:** No, I did not have any formal training in anything I do. It is mostly absorbed from my childhood. I had a very animated childhood to say the least. I was surrounded with song, dance, poetry. It is all just naturally a part of my life. My writing was a curse. After completing my first book I was basically terrified of the public's reaction to it. I thought I was definitely cursed. I don't have that feeling with painting... painting gives me a freedom that is less heavy than my writing. I lose myself in painting; it is not so easy to have the same feeling with writing...one might say painting for me is very therapeutic...very soothing...with its own chaos...but the chaos is personal. It is my internal chaos...and in there somewhere there is

beauty...and that's why I paint...in continuous search of that beauty...that peace.

**Colin:** What past and contemporary art are you most attracted to?

**Figiel:** My first images as a child were *siapo* painting...then of course as I grew older and with travel I have come to appreciate western art...the impressionists, EVEN Gauguin. I am especially attracted to abstract expressionism...admire the work of Helen Frankenthaler, Georgia O'Keefe, and of course the German expressionists — these are the images that I am attracted to. I am answering this interview from Medellin, Colombia...went to the Botero Museum here and it is just amazing...a very gifted sculptor and painter. I admire his work very much.

**Colin:** The face in "Fa'anoanoa" becomes more fantastic in "Fa'anoanoa II" where a piece of the forehead is missing, revealing a room shape, as if a ceiling were stitched to a wall. The comparison between the two reminded me of the line in your first book, *Where We Once Belonged* (p. 17): "People see surfaces only, and that's all. They don't care to look under...." Metaphorically, as we see into the mind, what we see on the surface is transformed. Do you feel that your art is increasingly getting below the surface? Is your progression toward or away from abstraction, toward or away from indigenous art?

**Figiel:** I cannot really interpret my painting. I feel that doing so kills it. But I definitely work towards a merging of the physical and the metaphysical to create a more spiritual space with my art. That is what I strive for in my paintings. Beauty and peace and chaos. I am a painter of the twenty-first century — a walking contradiction. We sit cross-legged at home and pray on the floor and wear Nike shoes and watch CNN immediately afterwards! Art allows you to create spaces for yourself that otherwise do not exist. If that means a progression towards abstraction or toward or away from indigenous art, then perhaps it is both. But ultimately, people see my paintings, and their interpretation is really what it's all about as well.



**Portrait of Mother and Child in Complete Harmony**



**Portrait**

**Colin:** "Portrait of Mother and child in Complete Harmony" and "Mother and Child: An Intimate Portrait" are related in subject yet different in medium. Does one medium allow you to be more improvisational? Does painting allow you to be more improvisational than writing?

**Figiel:** Painting does allow for more improvisation. It's not like writing where I go back and rewrite and rewrite. There are different aesthetics in both. I began by using pencil, then acrylics, then oil, then pastels; it doesn't necessarily mean a progression, that oil is somehow better than acrylics or pencil, NO! Different works are created with different mediums depending on your mood.

**Colin:** You once said you were "interested in experimenting with the idea of the *ula* or lei or flower necklace as a working metaphor for the composition.... the weaving of many different songs to make one long song..." Do you think there is a relationship between how you structure your books and how "An Orange Embrace" evolved?



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**An Orange Embrace**

**Figiel:** Perhaps. Sometimes when you think too much about relations and connections you just lose it! I go with the flow. I just go with the flow.... connections are always there... subconsciously ...it's not something that happens consciously....it just happens.

**Colin:** In your books, juxtapositions of the real and the mythical, Samoan and English, conventional and unconventional punctuation, feel authentic to your being, your process. Unlike some writers, you are not talking

*about* how a Samoan talks or thinks or feels, your narrator is being the Samoan, taking us into the process. Is "An Orange Embrace" an externalization of your internal process?

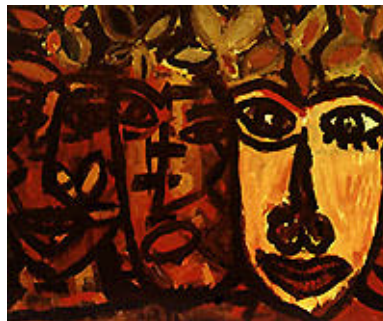
**Figiel:** Is it? I wouldn't know. Like I said, I try not to think about it too much. Most of my existing paintings were done while I was halfway through my first book; that is almost eight years ago.

language — oral and written, Samoan and English — is painting easier than writing?

**Figiel:** I wouldn't say easier. I don't like the word *easy*. It implies laziness for me. It is the conflict, the contradictions, the struggle itself that attracts me to create. Painting is what I do when I am not writing, and writing is what I do when I am not painting. Separate entities in their own time and space.

**Colin:** In that interview you talked about "...painting and writing done after I've thought about...doing it. I don't have to think...The image should be there already... for painting or prose...(then) you can ...explore as much as you can...that base to rely on." Can you talk about the three images of the face in "Three faces of Paradise"? As they recede (to the left) into darkness, they seem to get more primitive. Can you talk about this painting and the pull toward or away from the so-called primitive in your art?

**Figiel:** Actually, that painting, if I am to explain my feelings at the time I did it, is the face of the Pacific woman. Outsiders see only her smile, her laugh, but they will never be able to see her in solitude, in her moments of darkness...that is what I wanted to say...almost the uncovering of the surface metaphor that you asked about in a previous question....



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#### Three Faces of Paradise

**Colin:** In your poem "The blue fish" in "*To a Young Artist in Contemplation*" —

The blue fish  
cries  
silently behind the stone  
in the glass bowl

Spectators look  
stare  
blinded by water  
by glass-deaf...

Is it easier to make "the blue fish" visible in words than in paintings?

**Figiel:** Not really. I would have painted the blue fish red or brown or green, and I write and say *blue* ...the blue is sadness, as you might know, and sadness has many different interpretations in color...usually the darker colors...once more, that word, *easy* .... It is very misleading and I rarely use it...at least now.

**Colin:** You said "I had to unlearn what I was taught in school..." You spoke of the value of "non-formal education in...societies...overinfluenced by outside forces..." Is there an ideal in your teaching that you think you transmit through non-formal means? How do you teach? What ages do you teach?

**Figiel:** I learn more from people than I teach.... people of all ages teach me things and that is very personal, very intimate, and it is almost like the heavens have parted when it happens. Learning is a spiritual journey for me...with no beginning, no middle, no end....

**Colin:** Are these faces self-portraits?

**Figiel:** Perhaps.

**Colin:** Painters such as Kandinsky and Miro have prose poems that "match" their particular painting or woodcuts, as if each is a translation of each. In a way, the cover of your book, *The Girl in the Moon Circle* is a visual counterpart to the work. Do you find that your writing "matches" your painting? What is similar? What is different?

**Figiel:** The cover of *The Girl in the Moon Circle* was so chaotic! It was done with such urgency. I needed to do it quickly as the publisher was haunting me about it. So fifteen minutes before I went to the post-office to mail it, I scribbled with my right hand...as a ten-year-old would (I am a lefty!) and that was the result! Sometimes I do remember something that I have written or even tried to write but couldn't, and so I paint it. But most of the time my paintings are their own inspiration...separate from the writing.

**Colin:** Do you see yourself as Samoan or international in your art? How do you see the future? Can the myths and the storytelling, the richness of the Samoan culture, be lost to TV?

**Figiel:** I am answering this in Colombia. I had done a lot of traveling before I wrote my first book. My peers are international in that sense. I am Samoan because of my mother and my ancestral ties to Samoa and the Pacific. I am Polish-American because of my father and my ancestral ties to Poland and to America. I am not one or the other. I am and I am and I am...The myths and storytelling are indeed an art form that is slowly fading, unfortunately...but we, the young generation, have our own medium of expression, be it in painting or writing or filming or dancing, and that is just as exciting. We need to look at ways of preserving, and of continuity...though our own medium might be separate from that of generations before us. It is exciting to be able to use our mediums and at the same time try not to forget the mediums of our ancestors before us...and all we could hope for is that our children do the same.

BY SIA FIGIEL

*The Girl in the Moon Circle*, Institute of Pacific Studies, 1996. Paperback, 134 pages.

*They Who Do Not Grieve*, New York: Kaya Production, forthcoming. Paperback, 246 pages.

*To a Young Artist in Contemplation*, Pacific Writing Forum, University of the South Pacific, 1998. [Available by special order.](#)

*Where We Once Belonged*, Kaya press edition. Kaya Production, January 2000. Paperback, 247 pages.

Born in Apia in 1967, Sia Figiel is the first contemporary woman novelist from Samoa. Her first book, *Where We Once Belonged*, won the 1997 Commonwealth Writer's Best First Book Prize for the Southeast Asia-South Pacific region and has been translated into several languages. She has had residencies at the University of Technology in Sydney, the East-West Center in Hawaii, the Pacific Writing Forum at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, and Logoipulotu College in Savaii.

She is also well known as a performance poet.