

A painter's painter

Christina Pataialii in 'Soft Water  
Hard Stone'

by Clare Gemima

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Christina Pataialii, *Footsteps in the Dark*, 2021. Acrylic and house paint on drop cloth canvas. 101 1/2 x 82 1/4 in (257.8 x 208.9 cm). Courtesy the artist and McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. *2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



Christina Pataialii, *Night Drills*, 2021. Acrylic and house paint on drop cloth canvas. 77 1/4 x 77 1/4 in (196.2 x 196.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. *2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



The New Museum in New York, designed by Tokyo-based architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa/SANAA. Courtesy New Museum.



Christina Pataialii. Photo: Russell Kleyn. Courtesy of McLeavey Gallery.



*2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.

*Dedicated to showcasing emerging artists from around the world, the fifth New Museum Triennial speaks to ideas of resilience and perseverance, and the impact that an insistent yet discrete gesture can have in time. In Soft Water Hard Stone, curators Margot Norton and Jamillah James bring together 40 artists whose work re-envision traditional models, materials, and techniques beyond established paradigms.*

*New York-based writer Clare Gemima visited the Triennial and met with its curators to consider the work of Aotearoa-based artist*

*Christina Pataialii, whose works feature in the exhibition. Challenging our expectations of contemporary painting and questioning the established ‘rules’ of colour, composition and material, Pataialii blurs the line between her place as an emerging contemporary painter, celebrated in the Aotearoa and international art world, and her father’s work as a house painter in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, pointing to complex questions about the gaps in the cultural spaces we inhabit.*

For the New Museum's fifth Triennial, *Soft Water Hard Stone*, Margot Norton, Curator at the New Museum and Jamillah James, Senior Curator at The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, have collaborated to present the work of forty artists, showcasing cultural diversity from almost every corner of the globe. Curated during a global pandemic and at a time of great social unrest, this exhibition tests the permanence of established structures and reveals what can happen when instability becomes widespread. The title of the exhibition, borrowed from the Brazilian proverb *Água mole em pedra dura, tanto bate até que fura* (Soft water on hard stone hits until it bores a hole), evokes notions of persistently small and discrete gestures creating substantial impact over time. Many of the works exhibited critique traditional approaches to art making, challenge art’s paradigms and question its current discourses—including those by New Zealand based painter Christina Pataialii, whose 2021 works *Night Drills* and *Footsteps in the Dark* feature prominently.



Curators of *2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*: (on left) Margot Norton. Photo: Scott Rudd; (on right) Jamillah James. Photo: Paul Mpagi Sepuya. Courtesy New Museum.



*2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



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After graduating with a Master of Fine Arts from Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design in Auckland in 2018, Pataialii quickly gained both local and international attention for her work. By the end of the following year she had not only won the first ever Rydal Art Prize—Tauranga Art Gallery’s contemporary painting award, but was also granted a residency at the visual arts organisation Gasworks in London, UK. It was here that Norton and James came across her paintings during an extensive research period leading up to the Triennial. Impressed by the artist’s alternative approach to material and how its results expanded the possibilities of painting, the curatorial duo discussed the underlying conceptual and historical framework behind Pataialii’s practice, eventually inviting her to participate in the Triennial.

The reality of seeing Pataialii’s paintings at the New Museum hasn’t quite sunk in for me yet. Having relocated to New York from New Zealand in 2018, my relationship with her work, up until this point, had been limited to the studio walls of Whitecliffe (where I

also graduated from, a few years after Pataialii). By her final BFA year, Pataialii's studio was a permanent fixture on the faculty's radar. Younger students, like myself, were instructed to "walk to the back of the building and see what's going on", whenever our creative impediments reared their ugly heads. Now, four years and 14,000 km away from our student studios, I am back in front of Pataialii's work—seeing what's going on.

Both of Pataialii's paintings are much smaller in comparison to the last body of work I experienced. Pataialii's 2016 *Dream Team* series, exhibited both at Whitecliffe and the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi in 2017, consisted of five floor-to-ceiling canvases, the scale of the works matching the series' larger-than-life celebrity subjects, a study in fame and idolatry.<sup>[01]</sup>

Deliberately engulfing the viewer through its extreme proximity and scale, *Dream Team* drew on Pataialii's childhood influences, recalling tribute drawings five-year-old Pataialii would make as she sat in front of her TV, armed with a pack of Cascade felt tip pens and a pad of paper. Pataialii's more recent works at the New Museum similarly invoke childhood memories and early influences—but in this case, Pataialii reaches back to far more intimate origins than celebrities on television, an intimacy emphasised by the much smaller scale of these works (each work spanning about 2 metres in height and width) and complicated through the artist's move towards more abstracted forms, rather than her earlier figurative work.





Christina Pataialii, *Dream Team* paintings: (L-R) *My Cousin – Dwayne Johnson*, 2016; *Black or White – Michael Jackson*, 2016; *Bite Fight – Mike Tyson*, 2016, acrylic, house paint and spray paint on canvas. On view at Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



Christina Pataialii, *Dream Team* paintings: (on left) *Islands in the Stream – Kenny Rogers*, 2016; (on right) *California Love – 2Pac*, 2016, acrylic, house paint and spray paint on canvas. On view at Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland, 2017. Courtesy Artsdiary.



Christina Pataialii, *Proximity and Distance* (Rydal Prize Winner 2019), Tauranga Art Gallery, 13 March - 6 June 2021. Photo: Sam Hartnett. Courtesy of the artist.



Christina Pataialii's work as part of her 2019 residency at Gasworks Studio, London. Courtesy of the artist.

In these new works, completely matte and opaque colour blocking is adorned with chalky strokes. Applied paint is scratched away, creating muddled translucent foregrounds and backgrounds. Overlapping shadow-play and under-painting techniques frolic across numerous organic shapes. In *Night Drills*, stiff and crusted seams run horizontally across flesh-toned backgrounds. Two conic shapes sit on top of each other with marks and scuffs at each of their bases, creating an uncertainty between representational and non-representational forms—a work that tests our comfortable categories of the abstract and the figurative. In *Footsteps in the Dark*, heavily applied house and acrylic paint has been scratched away in some parts of the composition, leaving smudged stroke patterns and muddled remnants. Ambiguous forms that look similar to the likes of construction boots kick into the canvas, leaving the impression that the composition has been cropped from a larger work. The legs that these supposed feet belong to convolute themselves into construction cones. Almost cubist, these triangular forms are fractured by spherical circles that

dance around the construction site, creating a frenzied, dynamic moment balanced by the work's careful composition. In an attempt to strip bare the meaning of her 'in-between' spaces, Pataialii paints the role of the body in search of belonging. A viewer can decipher some of these ideas by looking at the limbs and feet in *Footsteps in the Dark*, but even in the more abstract *Night Drills*, a fleshy tone governs the canvas, suggesting the painting's organic motifs lend themselves to a different type of corporeality.



Christina Pataialii, *Footsteps in the Dark*, 2021. Acrylic and house paint on drop cloth canvas. 101 1/2x 82 1/4in (257.8 x 208.9 cm). Courtesy the artist and McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. *2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



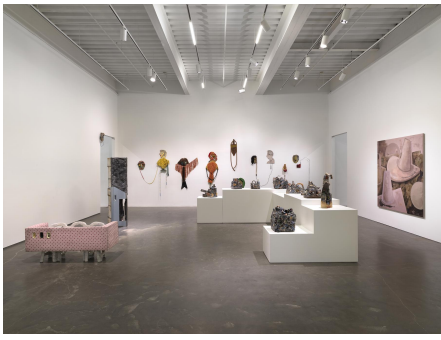
Christina Pataialii, *Night Drills*, 2021. Acrylic and house paint on drop cloth canvas. 77 1/4x 77 1/4in (196.2 x 196.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and McLeavey Gallery, Wellington. *2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.

In both works, the artist's choice of muted browns, pinks and greens feels unusual for a painterly palette. As Norton observes, "to use the colour brown so predominantly in a painting is totally not allowed...and I love that."<sup>[02]</sup> But Pataialii's choice of colours and her use of heavily applied house paint goes beyond a mere subversion of contemporary painting's "rules". As the accompanying wall text at the Triennial explains, the colour palette draws on colours used to paint public housing in New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s, with Pataialii's work paying homage to a childhood spent watching her father at work as a house painter. Her curiosity as a young observer was constant as her father jumped from one house to another around Tāmaki Makaurau, painting everything from Herne Bay mansions to state homes, factories and even a KFC building. "I became acutely aware of the cultural gaps in New Zealand quite early on", she tells me,

“and remember thinking how unnecessary they were. How similar we were.”<sup>[03]</sup>

“I think I’ve always been interested in collapsing the gaps that interrupt the flow of meaning and understanding”, Pataialii tells me.<sup>[04]</sup> “I’m in pursuit of understanding. In understanding the world you reach for your touchstones and the spaces that cultivated your perspectives—this one is mine.”<sup>[05]</sup> These touchstones are profoundly evident in Pataialii’s pictorial language, her relationship to painting materials, the shifting, intermediary space in her paintings—neither deep nor shallow—and her overall approach to art making. As well as drawing on the same colour palette used by painters such as her father on state houses, Pataialii also repurposes drop cloths to perform the function of a canvas—elevating a wrinkled floor protector onto a pristine museum wall, subverting the functionality of the material itself.





2021 Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



Blair Saxon-Hill, *Emergency Contact*, 2021. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Nino Meier, Los Angeles. 2021 Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



Blair Saxon-Hill, *Emergency Contact* (detail), 2021. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Nino Meier, Los Angeles. 2021 Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



Blair Saxon-Hill, *Emergency Contact* (detail), 2021. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Nino Meier, Los Angeles. 2021 Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



Kahlil Robert Irving, *Untitled* (detail), 2021. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Special thanks to Avo Samuelian and Hector Manuel Gonzalez, and John and Alison Ferring. 2021 Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



Kahlil Robert Irving, *Untitled* (detail), 2021. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist. Special thanks to Avo Samuelian and Hector Manuel Gonzalez, and John and Alison Ferring. 2021 Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.



*2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021. Exhibition view featuring (in foreground) Kahlil Robert Irving, *Untitled*, 2021, and (in background) Christina Pataialii, *Night Drills* and *Footsteps in the Dark*, both 2021: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.

Other artists in *Soft Water Hard Stone* also challenge the limitations of conventional materials, creating works that draw on the vernacular. Situated close to Pataialii's work, for example, is an installation by Blair Saxon-Hill titled *Emergency Contact* (2021). In this work, the artist toys with the hierarchies behind "things and matters", and assembles used objects and sentimental materials to create a body of sculpture. Rugs, leather straps, umbrellas, pantyhose, goggles, yoga mats and many more low-key household items have been repurposed in an effort to question their apparent banality and how we assign value to objects.<sup>[06]</sup> Similarly, *Untitled* (2021) by Kahlil Robert Irving presents a body of sculptural assemblages made from glazed and unglazed ceramics, enamel, image transfers, brick and gilded pyrometric cones. Irving mixes all of his materials together to create rudimentary and melted looking structural clusters that test what is recognisable and what is not to the viewer. In an interview, Irving states, "I'm constantly working in the realm of possibilities and making things that also set up other opportunities and gaps that I'm able to walk through. There's a whole other realm that can be explored there."<sup>[07]</sup>

When I met Norton in front of Pataialii's paintings, she explained how she saw Pataialii's work tied into several themes being considered for this Triennial—such as deception. Taking Pataialii's gesture of substituting the canvas for a drop cloth, a decision not apparent without closer inspection, suggests that in Pataialii's work, nothing is really what it seems. "Once you realise

this, it opens new avenues in thinking about the act of painting as just a tiny way that art can exist in the world”, Norton said excitedly, as I inspected the canvas’s subtle seams.



2021 Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, 2021.  
Exhibition view: New Museum, New York.  
Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy New Museum.

But Pataialii’s work expresses more than the playful deception of elevating the mundane, the readymade, into the context of a contemporary art gallery. Her homage to her father’s profession and the cultural, social and economic gaps encountered in childhood suggests an intimacy with her materials, evoking not just the everyday and the unexpected but questioning the value and hierarchy of painting as a profession, closing the gaps between the labour of her father’s house painting, and Pataialii’s work as a painter, increasingly celebrated in the contemporary art world. “The themes in *Soft Water, Hard Stone*...it’s the undercurrent of the migrant working class”, Pataialii explains. “You grow up on stories of the struggle, the sacrifices that were made and the constant examples of the resilience in actions of those around you. We grew up here in New Zealand with completely different sets of parameters from our parents, but the cultural ethos of resilience and its continuation resonates—and not only in the more obvious examples - more in the quieter, nuanced ways that it manifests. I find painting is better able to articulate this.”<sup>[08]</sup>

Much like Pataialii’s experience growing up in a culturally “in between” space, as she describes it<sup>[09]</sup>, her paintings operate between abstraction and representation; between painting as “artwork” and painting as “work”. Coming to life through confused dimensionality and skewed planes, the two paintings are packed

with deliberate intervention and referential nods, an evolution in her expression of formative influences from her childhood to convey the deeper intimacies and complexities of cultural coding that she encountered.

## Footnotes

01. *Dream Team* (2016) consisted of *Bite Fight* – Mike Tyson; *California Love* – 2Pac; *Black or White* – Michael Jackson; *My Cousin* – Dwayne Johnson; and *Islands in the Stream* – Kenny Rogers.

02. Margot Norton, interviewed by the author at the New Museum, December 2021.

03. Christina Pataialii, interviewed by the author, December 2021.

04. Ibid.

05. Ibid.

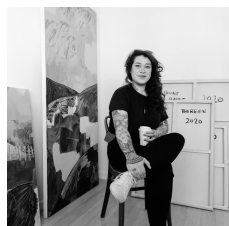
06. Margot Norton & Jamillah James. *Soft Water Hard Stone: 2021 New Museum Triennial*. Phaidon Press, Incorporated, 2021. Artist Interviews. (Blair Saxon-Hill & Summer Guthery)

07. Margot Norton & Jamillah James, Ibid. (Kahlil Robert Irving & Taylor Renee Aldridge)

08. Christina Pataialii, interviewed by the author, December 2021.

09. Ibid.

## Biographies



Christina Pataialii lives and works in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa. Recent solo exhibitions include: *New Paintings*, McLeavey Gallery, Wellington; *Proximity and Distance*, Tauranga Art Gallery, Tauranga (both 2021); *Solid Gold*, Te Tuhi, Auckland; *Debt*, RM Gallery, Auckland (all 2018). Recent group exhibitions include: *New Museum Triennial: Soft Water, Hard Stone*, NY, USA; *Asia Pacific Triennial: Hard Day's Night*, QAGOMA, Brisbane, QLD, AUS (both 2021); *A Place Apart*, City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, and *This is a Library*, Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, Wellington (both 2020).



Clare Gemima studied Fine Arts and graduated from Whitecliffe College of Arts in Design in 2017. She currently spends her time between making work in the studio and writing a weekly arts column in New York-based publication, *EVGrieve*.

