



'Edith Amituanai, 2007' by Marti Friedlander

direct to print

Twenty-eight-year-old Edith Amituanai is one of four finalists for the lucrative Walters Prize, announced this week. She talks to **Rose Hoare**

On her wedding day in 2004, Edith Sagapolu took some of her own photographs. She shot her bridesmaids, standing in pink satin before a mirror. She shot her parents, her mother beaming; her father, his head on an owlish back-tilt, in powder blue. Later, she would shoot her 16-year-old new sister-in-law standing in their living room, a heart-shaped wedding portrait on the mantelpiece behind her. The groom's father had died a month before. The groom's mother died 14 years earlier. Edith didn't demur at accepting the honour of becoming 'Mrs Amituanai', the name she gave to this series of pictures.

In the essay that appeared in *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*, an art book published the following year, which includes these and other Amituanai pictures, Anna Sanderson noted that Amituanai imposed "an anthropological eye" on her subjects, and quoted the angle she had offered in a Creative New Zealand funding application: "I photograph my surroundings and people I know as if they are unfamiliar, although what I want to show is an intimate and particular view."

Amituanai was born and raised in Te Atatu in West Auckland. Her parents came to New Zealand from Samoa in the 1960s and 70s and met in Christchurch. Since she began studying photography, she has photographed

what's under her nose – members of her parish at the Ranui Pacific Island Presbyterian Church; her extended family in Christchurch and Alaska; her in-laws; friends living in France and Italy to play professional rugby; her daughter Shiloh, now six years old.

Her pictures often show events in her own life, or compressed social dramas happening around her. 'Faitala' (Gossip) shows a girl hearing her status as a pregnant, unmarried woman discussed loudly in church by two other girls – an autobiographical scenario for Amituanai. A pair of photographs – 'Girl Shame' and 'Boy Shame' – invoke Samoan shame around the 2002 murders of pizza worker Marcus Doig and bank teller John Vaughan by Ese Junior Faleali'i, but they also question the differences between how young Samoan men and women are disciplined. Among her favourite pictures are 'loka' and 'loka's Fa'alii'i', which variously show her sister-in-law loka ferrying cups of tea to elders, and withdrawn to her bedroom to sulk about it.

She is an assiduous photographer of living rooms, which she often shoots empty of inhabitants, and with a reverential, square-on formality, as though their couches and mantelpieces were monuments. She says she could never shoot on a



'Fipe', 2003

crazy angle or use tricks like multiple exposures. "Those are the rules I set myself."

Inasmuch as she documents a world she's familiar with, Amituanai could be called a documentary photographer, but her pictures are staged, and they often purposefully *look* stagey. Her subjects are usually posed as stiffly as those in altarpiece predellas. She frequently uses harsh lighting to underscore her camera's presence in the room. She doesn't want to affect a fly-on-the-wall point of view. She doesn't want her audience to forget that her pictures are artfully composed, not candid snapshots.

Documentary photography, she says, provides answers, whereas her pictures pose questions. Making them is itself a mode of inquiry for Amituanai. Through her work, she asks questions that are personal, but particular to her generation. Her focus on interiors, for instance, reflects her feeling, as a first home buyer and as the child of migrants, that "the first decisions about culture are made in the home." "How do you make homes when you've moved so far away from the parent culture? What do you decide to take on from the culture you live in? What objects do I decide to display in my home to signify who I am? And you decide to hold on to what you know. So, it's like a study through photography, so I can hopefully answer questions for myself."

Assessing Amituanai's work, Sanderson concluded, "She has hit her head against something very hard here. It seems that culture, like religion, has the same kind of mystery as a great mountain. Why is it there and why is it formed that way? The photograph answers like a mountain in a way. The questions keep reverberating around the work."

Amituanai's ascent from student to exhibiting artist has been rapid. She had her first solo show at Auckland's Anna Miles Gallery and was first published in 2005, the same year she graduated with a bachelor's degree from UNITEC.

Now 28 years old and working part-time towards a masters degree from the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts, she is one of four finalists for the biennial Walters Prize, one of the country's richest art awards (finalists get \$5000, the winner \$50,000), which is announced at a gala dinner on Friday.

Amituanai is poised and quietly spoken, but in her tone there is a self-confidence, a sense of purpose. She carries a Chanel bag and wears a Dolce & Gabbana bracelet, and ploughs torpidly through a burger at her local bar. Anna Miles recalls contacting Amituanai when she wanted to buy one of her works. "She was a pretty cool customer. She didn't give away much. It was quite cut and dried, which I suppose I responded to."

While lecturing at UNITEC, Miles had seen 'Fipe', the portrait (above). Like a lot of people who respond to the picture, she has a tough time explaining exactly what she likes about it. Photographing people in private spaces is always fraught with danger. There are taboos in lots of cultures around taking pictures of people eating – Miles jokingly points out that Catherine Zeta-Jones made a lot of money by suing a paparazzo who took pictures of her eating at her own wedding.

Depictions of domestic life are deceptively difficult to pull off – they must negotiate twin dangers of intrusive and cynical voyeurism on one side and mawkishness on the other. Miles appreciated that Amituanai had managed to look at the everyday and the ordinary in such a direct way. She feels that Amituanai is part of a generation that's moving beyond the identity politics that have become institutionalised thinking in art schools. "Art which makes a meal of issues of ethnicity and gendered identity, informed by feminism and post-colonialism and all that kind of thing – it's got a bit stultified.

"If people perceive you as having a particular ethnic identity – like, you go to art school as a young Samoan New Zealander – there's an expectation >>



'Monsieur Philemon Toleafoa' from *Dejeuner*, 2007



'loka' from *Ioka*, 2004

that your work might refer to identity which, probably, if you turn up as a Pakeha, you're not going to be lumbered with to the same extent. On the other hand, the other tendency at art school is to encourage you to flee what you know and try to do something that's less subjective."

'Fipe', Miles observes, features some floral prints, "but they don't have the effect of being animated. They're not profuse or gorgeous. For a long time, Edith made work which seemed to be really low-colour and I wondered if she was resisting the notion of bright effusive Polynesian colour."

But Amituanai says Fipe just doesn't live in a home with busy, bright prints. "Nor did my mother. I don't know if I resisted, or if I was more just playing to what was around me.

"I have no interest in myths and legends from Samoa and making work about these legends, because that's so far removed from my upbringing in New Zealand in a home that was creamy and beige. What colours were in my house? It was kind of Scandinavian – it was quite neutral."

At first Miles simply bought 'Fipe' for herself, but then she felt that just buying it was an inadequate response. She liked it so much she decided she ought to exhibit Amituanai's work in her gallery.

"I just thought that work didn't correspond with notions of identity art that I was at that time familiar with. It seemed to go in some other direction. She was looking at the world in a way that I'm not really familiar with and I was really excited about that. She's got courage."

Miles prefers artists who approach the politics of identity in "more oblique and more nuanced and intriguing and personal ways."

"I'm really disinterested in artists that are looking over their shoulders all the time, trying to be fashionable or trying to keep up. I mean, one thing you get from art is that insight into the point of view of another individual. I really don't want artists who are market researchers."

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The Walters Prize is awarded to an exhibition that has made an outstanding contribution to contemporary art. For two years, four secret jurors survey exhibitions in New Zealand and overseas, and then together produce the shortlist.

Amituanai was nominated for *Dejeuner*, a show of just five pictures. In December 2006, with \$10,000 from Creative New Zealand, she had travelled to France and Italy to photograph friends and cousins, first- and second-generation New Zealand Samoans, who were playing professional rugby for Montpellier and Gran Parma. The stand-out work is a portrait titled 'Monsieur Philemon Toleafoa', which shows the 1.92m prop in his club's stadium at twilight.

Amituanai says Philemon was her "muse" for the series. "He would stand out in Auckland, but in France he looks like he just dropped out of a spaceship or something." These men are used to being stared at, used to driving two hours for KFC and in some cases not being accepted by their team mates for a long time. Amituanai thinks she might have photographed them with their legs amputated to show that they're not completely rooted in their European homes.

The Walters Prize jury wrote that the resulting pictures constituted "a layered, insightful commentary on transpositions of a 'third culture' that investigates new global labour and economic exchange systems, enmeshed with the legacy of generations of displacement and migration", and praised her pictures as "modest and generous".

This, presumably, is *Dejeuner's* outstanding contribution to contemporary art, but its making was very nearly a disaster.

On arrival, Amituanai hadn't found homes that were as distinctively European as she had expected. She returned with only two visually successful images, but solved the problem by photographing the homes that the players had left behind. She now says that five images, although not ideal, is "enough to >>

talk about something." "But I was nauseous: you come back and you only have two images that are good enough?"

"That's the hard thing about photography: because you *can* make so much work, you can choose a lot. But the work takes a direction from the images I select. I can't show a weak image just to talk about my idea. It doesn't do a great idea any justice if you're showing a crappy image."

Amituanai was feeling becalmed, in 2007, when she was contacted by Marti Friedlander. The pre-eminent photographer and her husband, Gerrard, had decided to inaugurate a \$25,000 biennial award, and Amituanai was to be its first recipient.

Friedlander had encountered Amituanai's work at a launch exhibition for *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers* two years prior. "I went up to her afterwards and introduced myself and she was very shy," she recalls. "Anyway, I decided then that she was going to receive our award, I decided just like that. Because I just loved her work. And I'm glad we did, because when I actually rang Edith and told her, we both burst into tears.

"I cried, because it was such a pleasure to be able to tell someone that, and Edith, because she was at a hiatus. She was at that stage where she wanted to go forward but – all artists have that – you go to a stage and you don't know what you're going to concentrate on. It was a lovely conversation."

Amituanai's first thought, on taking Friedlander's call, was "I'm going to Alaska!" Her mother's sister migrated to Anchorage from San Francisco in the 1980s and her 17-year-old cousin, Marcus, had died in a drive-by shooting when Amituanai was 16. ("It was a mistaken identity, apparently. Another Samoan came by in a car and shot at a few guys.") She had visited in 2001, found the place extremely strange, and had determined to return to investigate further.

Amituanai told Friedlander that her family couldn't understand why anyone would want photographs of them on their wall. "But," Friedlander argues, "she takes it out of that personal context. Somehow by photographing a family, by making an image, you applaud family, but it somehow is every man's family. That's what she does so brilliantly. That's the cleverness of it, really. I've done that too, I've photographed my family, but you take it out of the context of that total intimacy and you put it out there and it becomes universal. I have always loved universality. I don't want parochialism."

A man goaded her about making pictures for white, middle-class bourgeois galleries. "I didn't understand what he meant. It doesn't matter where the work is shown"

That universality is something Amituanai works at. She relates being grilled by a man who goaded her about making pictures for white, middle-class, bourgeois galleries. "I didn't understand what he meant. It doesn't matter where the work is shown. It has to be transportable.

"I used to make work for my peers, because I felt the pictures I wanted to see weren't around. But just to make pictures for people who understand the questions that you're asking – my Samoan buddies who know what it's like to ask questions about, 'Why do we have to do lotu [Sunday worship]?', 'Why do we have to serve you guys?' – that would close the dialogue right down. If I can only have a conversation between my own people, that's not enough for me. So who do I make my images for? It has to be for me, and all of these exhibitions are peripheral."

This is perhaps why, although her pictures are serenely formal, there's still



'The Sagato Residence', 2008

emotion in them. They're not dry or dispassionate. "No," she says, "but they're not sentimental Pasifika photographs. I was quite turned off by the kind of documentary that's sentimental, that pleads with the viewer to love me. I can't deal with that.

"How do you deal with something that's very close, that you're very tied to, but so that others can then approach it, who have no interest in the background of what something might be about? How can I remove myself from that but still have some kind of soul in the work?"

Anna Miles thinks the transportability of Amituanai's work comes from how genuinely personal it is. "It's an old-fashioned idea, that the more specific you are, the more particular you are, then the more what you do has resonance for other people. It's because you're an expert. You haven't fled your expertise.

"Edith has access to a particular world and she takes photos of that but when you look at those photos, you can only respond to it in terms of what you know, can't you? I like looking at Fipe eating toast in the kitchen. It makes me reflect on... what it's like to eat toast in your kitchen."

Lately, Amituanai has decided to move outside of working with the Samoan culture. In preparation for new works, she has been volunteering at a refugee centre. A Ministry of Education DVD series about migration, she says, broadened her horizons.

"The things I've been looking at can be found in many cultures throughout New Zealand: Italians that had moved to Island Bay after the war, or Croatians that settled in West Auckland, or Somalis in Mount Albert..."

She's not sure where her career will take her, but when she goes to bed at night, her dreams of a starry future aren't set in art galleries.

"I'd just like to have a house," she says. "Simple: I'd like to have a house in West Auckland and live comfortably enough so I can pay the mortgage. Or even – let's dream big – be mortgage-free." ■