

'Oceania: Imagining the Pacific' takes us into a region defined by the elemental presence of sea and sky, endless horizons and a sense of universality and timelessness. It also takes us into the realm of the Pacific of the imagination, long associated with this great region of discovery and enlightenment. Yet the works in this survey also register the darkneses of the mythical and historical past and the complex, harsher realities of the present.

The subtitle of this project, 'Imagining the Pacific' is derived from Bernard Smith's important study of Captain Cook's three voyages and their aftermath. Bringing that narrative of journeying and discovery into the context of the present, 'Oceania: Imagining the Pacific' asserts the significance of the Pacific not only as a place of great navigators and seafarers but also of imaginative artists—voyagers of a rather different kind.

Paula Savage
Director, City Gallery Wellington

EAST GALLERY

Black Phoenix 1984–88

Ralph Hotere
Themes of migration and voyaging are at the heart of Hotere's masterpiece, *Black Phoenix*—a central work in the story of Oceanic art. *Black Phoenix* was constructed from the wreckage of a fishing boat which caught fire in Otago Harbour, not far from the artist's home, one night in 1984. It is a retelling of the story of the phoenix, the mythical bird which catches fire and is then reborn from its own ashes.

The work is a statement about cultural rebirth and awakening, as well as a meditation on cycles of nature and human life. The work also stridently states the artist's opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific, to the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior, and to the environmental damage done to the Pacific region through over-fishing, waste-dumping and exploitation of natural resources. A whakatauki, or proverb, is carved into the planks at the front of the work: 'Ka hinga atu he tētē kura, ara mai he tētē kura'—'When one frond dies, another takes its place.'

HANCOCK GALLERY

O le Povi Pusa Ma'ataua 2004

Michel Tuffery

Constructed from hundreds of corned beef cans, Tuffery's sculpture introduces us to the Pacific of trade and exchange, while playfully suggesting the imposition of colonial eating habits onto island populations. To underline this point, the artist has installed a usable barbeque inside the tin casing. The work embodies the diverse and surprising character of Oceania today—a place of endless adaptation and invention. The title means 'jewel box of bulls'.

Portrait of a life-cast of Koe, Timor

Portrait of a life-cast of Pitani, Solomon Islands

Portrait of a life-cast of Tou Taloa, Samoa

Portrait of a life-cast of Matua Tawai, Aotearoa/New Zealand

all 2010

Fiona Pardington

Pardington's photographic series is a meditation on ancestry, cultural property and the human condition. While the size and formality of these images place them within a tradition of historical portraiture, the photographs are also remarkable for their melancholy and introspection. The photographs are of life-busts made from plaster and clay by Pierre-Marie Dumoutier, a French phrenologist/scientist who was present on Jules Dumont d'Urville's 1840 visit to New Zealand. The purpose of these busts—which are held in the Laboratoire d'Anthropology at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris—was to provide a three-dimensional record of Pacific Island peoples, more accurate than any drawings. Considered a major advancement in the ethnographic field, the life-busts were used as the basis for lithographic reproductions.

Taunga Waka 1971

Paratene Matchitt

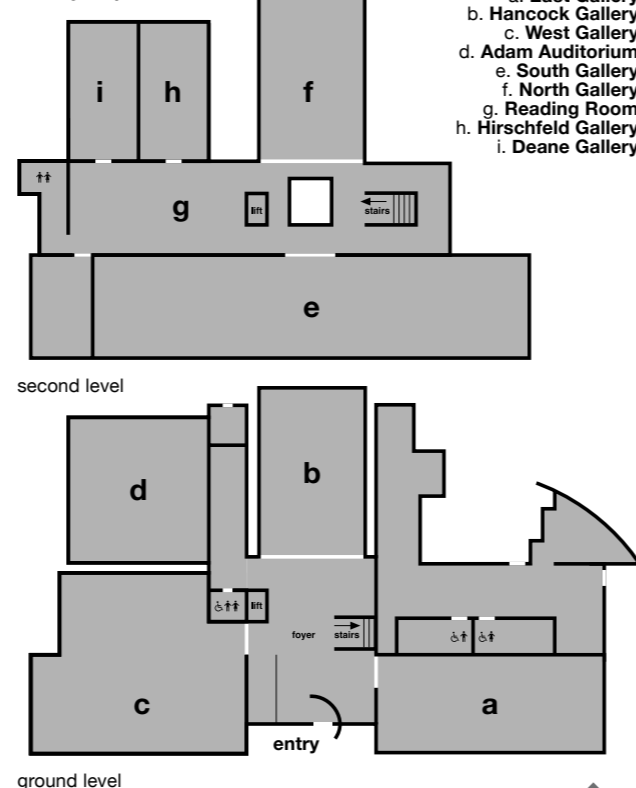
Stylised human forms, life-sized, stand like a hikoi or group of warriors in *Taunga Waka*. The work's title means 'a resting place for a waka'—a reminder that Māori genealogy leads inevitably back to the migratory canoes of centuries earlier, an oceanic point of origin. Forms familiar from customary Māori carving and wall panelling are reconciled here with shapes from the contemporary world—including electrical circuits and piston engines. The work also draws on Matchitt's innate design sense and deep understanding of European modernism.



'Oceania: Imagining the Pacific' is accompanied by a profusely illustrated 80 page publication, hardbound, which features essays by Paula Savage, Gregory O'Brien, Nicholas Thomas, Abby Cunnane and Reuben Friend. The publication is available for \$30 from City Gallery Wellington and the Te Papa Store.

Sofia Tekela-Smith. *Savage Island Man with Pure*, 2003, colour photograph, 1700 x 1300mm
Courtesy of FHE Galleries, Auckland

Gallery Map



City Gallery Wellington
Civic Square
Tel: +64 04 801 3021
www.citygallery.org.nz

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OCEANIA: IMAGINING THE PACIFIC

WEST GALLERY

This gallery explores the connection between Pacific peoples and the land, sea and sky which define them. Spanning the 19th to the 21st century, examples of traditional tapa and tivaevae are shown alongside contemporary art. These works embody the multitudinous life forms and the verdant, lush physicality of the islands that make up the Pacific, while also encapsulating narratives of settlement, habitation and cultivation.

Savage Island Man with Pure 2003 Sofia Tekela-Smith

In Tekela-Smith’s portrait of the artist/ writer John Pule, she acknowledges Pule’s birthplace, Niue—which Captain Cook named Savage Island, after landing there in 1774. The ‘pure’ or shell embodies the songs the poet sings; the attached cord forms a koru, a third eye or infinity sign on her subject’s forehead, hinting at wisdom, eternity and the life-force. Here, the Pacific artist is presented as a dreamer of dreams, a conduit for forces larger than himself, someone who imagines Oceania into being.

Suka Siti (‘Sugar City’) 2009–10

Robin White, Leba Toki, Bale Jione

Over three months White, Toki and Jione lived and worked together on this masi (tapa) in Lautoka, Fiji. Each day the design was developed collectively, with White making drawings from their working environment. The subjects, which included taro, insects, offerings of food from neighbours, and religious motifs, were then worked into stencils, and printed onto cloth. The sugar mill at the geographical and economical heart of Lautoka city (known as ‘sugar city’) features centrally in this design. A film screening upstairs in the reading room, *Robin White in Fiji, the Collaboration: A New Garden*, documents the production of this work.

Ina and the Shark c.1990

Group of Mamas: Maria Teokotai, Iva Cecil, Agnes Winchester, Noo Ngatuakana, Mata Andrew, Nga Ponini, Aue Brown, Suzanne Moo, Ake Mateariki

This tivaee is based on a Rarotongan legend about a young girl who is banished from home by her parents and, after various nautical adventures, is taken on the back of a shark to be reunited with her beloved, Tinirau, on his island. Tivaevae—the traditional quilting of Rarotonga—dates back to the 19th century when the craft was introduced by missionaries. It has adapted since then to incorporate Pacific forms, energies and, in this case, an indigenous legend.

Whakapiri atu te Whenua 1993

Shane Cotton

Taking its cues from Christianity as from Māori tikanga, *Whakapiri atu te Whenua* features a number of urns containing fence posts and flags, deployed around a central Tree of Life. The title, inscribed near the top left hand corner, means ‘remain close to the land’. In the early 1990s, Cotton was inspired by Māori figurative painting of the late 19th century—in a similar fashion, he melded elements from European art with Māori forms, colours and concepts.

Nga Morehu 1988

Shona Rapira Davies

The title of the work means ‘the survivors’, alluding to colonial history and the struggles, in particular, of Māori women. The figures are inscribed with words from ancient waiata as well as lines of contemporary poetry and some aggressive statements. These words wrap around the figures like another layer of clothing. Megan Tamati-Quennell writes: ‘The work depicts the karanga, a call of welcome undertaken on ceremonial occasions. The women are grouped on an unfinished whāriki or woven mat...Facing them is a female child, who symbolises the future.’

Siapo, Wallis and Futuna Islands

c.1960s, artist unknown

This siapo was made in the French Overseas Territory of Uvéa (Wallis) and Futuna. It is remarkable in its merging of traditional siapo design with elements of European art, in particular book illustration. This siapo entered the Museum of New Zealand collection earlier this year after it surfaced at an open day filmed in England for the television series, *Antiques Roadshow*. When the episode was broadcast in New Zealand, one of the Museum’s curatorial staff recognised the piece as being of such importance that the Museum arranged, through the makers of the programme, to acquire it.

Biting the Doctor’s Arm 1990

Mathias Kauage

The most internationally recognised Papua New Guinean artist to date, Kauage painted scenes derived from contemporary events, seen from a Highlands perspective. Nicholas Thomas writes: ‘The figures in Kauage’s paintings are brightly dressed and bear ceremonial headdresses, even when those depicted are Europeans, or Melanesians who were not in contexts where they would have been adorned in this way.’ This painting, which depicts an Australian medical team—in Chimbu costume—encountering a group of Highland children, hints at the problems of colonialism, the struggle for independence and other complex political and social realities.

SOUTH GALLERY

The gallery focuses on the inner and outer life of Pacific people—body, mind and soul. The works deal with human experience, identity and also with dreams and imaginings. While some works engage with the everyday life of people in New Zealand and the Pacific, ancestral and mythical figures are also to the fore. The work of jewellers adds another chapter in this ongoing narrative of self-presentation and cultural identity. These artists tell us who we are as ‘Oceanians’—to use writer Epli Hau’ofa’s definition—inhabitants of the Pacific.

The Ponsonby Madonna 1982–83

Tony Fomison

The mural-sized *The Ponsonby Madonna* is a heartfelt statement of the dignity and strength of Pacific Island peoples. Originally painted for St Paul’s College—an Auckland secondary school with a largely Polynesian roll—the painting recasts the Virgin Mary and Christ Child as Polynesians. At the same time, Fomison looks beyond barriers of race and geography, to present a timeless icon of universal values. As is also the case with the two other works by Fomison in the exhibition, the painting asserts the importance of identity, family relations, and of the spiritual power that resides within the human form.

My Marae, my Methven 1994

Peter Robinson

The aeroplane is the waka of the present era, Robinson says, and this work alludes to the many kinds of migration and journeying that occur in the contemporary world. The work was inspired in part by the founder of the Ratana religion, Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana, who believed that the aeroplane symbolised spiritual aspiration. The patchwork, using Māori customary colours, suggests a piecing together of individual and cultural identities. The work’s title refers to Robinson’s home marae, the inland Canterbury town of Methven.

Shark, Bird, Angel, Ladder 2008

John Pule

Shark, Bird, Angel, Ladder is an encyclopedic work that encompasses the Pacific of both indigenous and Western cultures. References to Christianity as well as to indigenous belief systems proliferate in the spaces between the ambiguous cloud-forms (which also resemble islands, flowers, nuclear explosions, brain-matter). Finely drawn scenes from history and mythology add further layers of meaning. Pule’s painting is an assertion of mutability, complexity and the deeply nuanced nature of Oceanic reality.

Ground Zero Bikini 1996

Brett Graham

The surface of *Ground Zero Bikini* is etched with meanings from the Pacific region. The patterning echoes moko and historical wood-carving. At the same time it suggests scientific modelling and the markings on a military target. The work’s title references Bikini Atoll, in the Marshall Islands, where the Americans conducted some 20 nuclear tests between 1946 and 1958. Shaped like a sand-dwelling shellfish—with associations of shelter and protection—*Ground Zero Bikini* is a distilled yet persuasive act of protest.

Polynesian Connection 1926–27

Len Lye

Working in the tradition of painted batik—a widespread practice in Indonesia and Malaysia—Lye’s *Polynesian Connection* uses the colouration and forms of Māori and Pacific art, while also being shaped by his knowledge of Brancusi and modernist sculpture. The work belongs equally to the machine age and to the distant past. The latent energy and spring-like compression of the forms prefigure the kineticism of Lye’s well-known film and sculptural works. The earthy eroticism brings together Western and Oceanic traditions, as well as male and female, human and non-human elements.

‘Nga Hau e Wha’ series 2010

Lisa Reihana

Bringing together Māori and European traditions, Reihana’s evocation of the Four Winds draws on Greek and Roman myths, in which the Winds are personified as female gods. Here they are recast as young Māori women and placed in the context of the contemporary world, with its glossy advertisements, slick backdrops and manicured stylings. Pointedly, however, the young women are photographed wearing traditional cloaks, masterfully woven, which suggest older, more profound realities.

Black Hammerhead Shark Eastern Island Dari Warrior Headdress 2009

Ken Thaiday Snr

Thaiday’s works often take the form of masks or headdresses and are designed so they can be used in performances and cultural ceremonies. The people of the Torres Strait Islands, located between Australia and Papua New Guinea, are famous for their elaborate turtle shell masks and the dramatic design of their costumes and ornaments. Thaiday and his extended family continue to wear pieces such as these in dances and ceremonies. The performance aspect is intrinsic and, importantly, doesn’t cease when the works enter public collections such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, where this one is held.

NORTH GALLERY

Here we encounter the Pacific of navigators, travelling through time as well as across space. While some artists seek connection with the ancient past by returning to age-old motifs such as koru and pou (marker stone), others gather disparate images or objects into archipelagos or constellations of meaning, suggesting new ways of thinking about Oceania. In their different ways, these artists explore the question posed by Paul Gauguin’s famous painting, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? (1897–88)*.

Pacific Icon L20 1966

Pat Hanly

Painted four years after a lengthy stay in England and Europe, Hanly’s ‘Pacific Icons’ were an attempt to convey the timeless essence of New Zealand and the surrounding Pacific Ocean. While using the vocabulary of abstract painting, *Pacific Icon L20* also alludes to the standing stones—or pou—of Māori and other Polynesian traditions. It is an image of calm and equilibrium, of order restored, in stark contrast to Hanly’s English paintings of the early 1960s, which were crammed with drama and incident, reflecting his anxiety about the nuclear arms race.

Spacific Plastics 2001

Bill Culbert

As well as echoing Pacific decorative traditions such as tivaevae and the knitted plastic or cloth necklaces known as lei, Culbert’s *Spacific Plastics* references the continent-sized accumulation of plastic refuse which has formed in recent years in the northern Pacific and is referred to as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Here plastic objects are recast as coloured island-forms, traversed by neon tubes which are suggestive of journeys, the navigation of canoes between islands.

Manu 1970–75

Colin McCahon

Working in his studio overlooking the Tasman Sea at Muriwai, McCahon pondered humanity’s reliance on the natural world; he also studied the migratory gannets on the cliff-top colony, feeding and teaching their young to fly. ‘Manu’ is the word for bird in Māori, Fijian, Hawaiian and other Pacific languages; McCahon’s use of the word here acknowledges the linguistic connections between Pacific peoples. In the 1970s, some years after he visited Fiji, a motif resembling lei or Polynesian beads began appearing in his art—as is the case here and in *Rosegarden V*.

READING ROOM

Film of **From Scratch performing Pacific 3, 2, 1, Zero, part one** 1994 directed by Gregor Nicholas in collaboration with **From Scratch**

The musical performance piece *Pacific 3, 2, 1, Zero, part one* was devised specifically for the 1982 Paris Biennale as a protest against nuclear testing in French Polynesia and elsewhere in the Pacific. Dadson wrote: ‘*Pacific 3, 2, 1, Zero* has a simple structure based on an image of isolated islands of activity connected by common waters, waters whose currents now innocently carry nuclear contamination.’ The spirit of Oceania is reflected in sung and chanted syllables taken from the names of islands in Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.

HIRSCHFELD GALLERY

The Hirschfeld Gallery hosts a series of works by Robin White, focused around the 17 years she spent living on Kiribati, a tiny atoll in the Pacific.

‘Beginner’s Guide to Gilbertese’ series 1983 Robin White

Built around her experience of learning the local language, each of these prints shows a different element of White’s life on the island. Operating like pages in a picture book, they use a number of different registers—thumbnail marginal drawings, labelling words and a framed central image—to trace the encounter with a different place through its language. The woodblock medium was new for White, a shift she made in response to the change of environment, where the oil paints and heavy printing press she had used previously were no longer suitable.

DEANE GALLERY

‘The Battle of the Noble Savage’ series 2007 Greg Semu

As an Auckland-born artist of Samoan descent (who has also lived in France and now Sydney), Semu responds to international perceptions of and attitudes towards Pacific Island people and culture. ‘The Battle of the Noble Savage’ was inspired by a poster for the New Zealand All Blacks, commemorating their 2006 tour of France. The poster, entitled ‘Bonded by Blood’, depicted the All Blacks performing their signature ceremonial haka ‘ka mate, ka mate’, meaning ‘to die, to die’. Semu’s response is a satirical commentary on the ‘noble savage’ at once celebrating the warrior spirit of Māori while alluding to the objectionable overtones of such stereotypes.