

ani oneill



cottage
industry

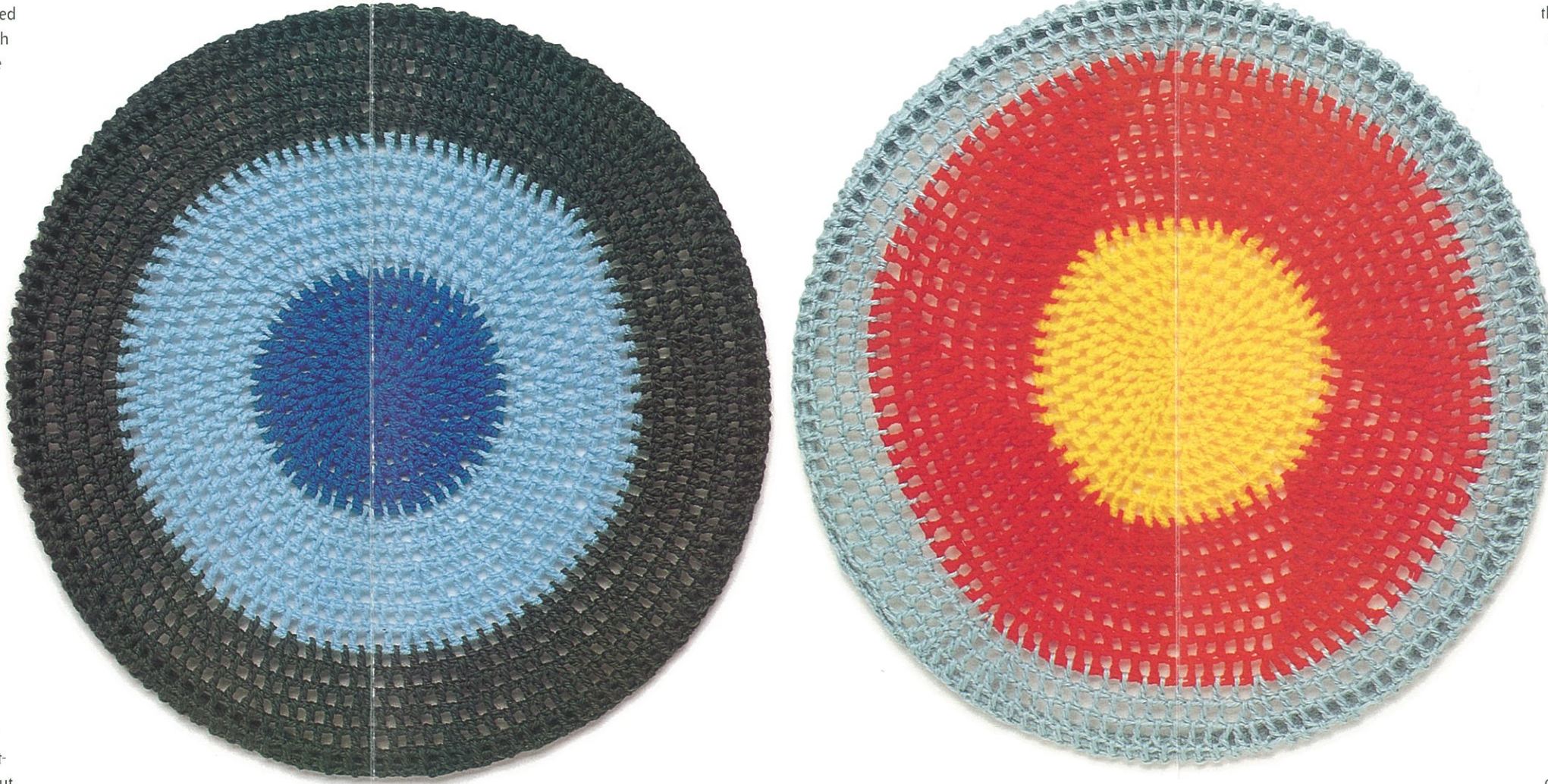
ANI O'NEILL:
REPICTURING PARADISE

Recycling is a practice much undertaken in the Pacific, not in a specific regime of eco-consciousness but in the re-appropriating of 'trash' from the West into our own icons of treasure. Whether it be the remnants of imported packaging, the sanitised mu'u mu'u of colonial legacy, vogueing dance forms or the ideological junk of Western soap operas and beauty pageants; the practice of taking, remaking and infusing these things with a specific Polynesian flavour has a distinctive history.

The stitchery teachings of the missionaries' wives is a particular practice that has provided much material for 're-materialisation'. Stitchery was introduced to the Pacific as an 'appropriate' colonial past-time for Pacific women, under the new biblical doctrines of passivity and the need to hide all that flesh beneath tent-like Victorian frocks. The flamboyant bursts of colour with their retina-blinding brightness that form tivaevae, and the latent version of the white stitched missionary linen, are testament to the ways in which these introduced features were re-adjusted to the intrinsic cultural values and sensibilities of Pacific culture.Cottage Industry references these practices through the double entendre of its title. The inherent paradox of juxtaposing notions of 'cottage' and its low-brow craft connotations, with the manmade world of industry in its widest generic sense, pretty much encompasses the ways Ani O'Neill has woven the strands of her visual world. The tivaevae form learnt in her early childhood through the Mamas' sewing circle of her Cook Island grandmother gives gleanings of the impetus behind the forms of Cottage Industry. This work harks back to the crocheting Ani also learned from her grandmother in her 'cottage' in Auckland, which she has transposed to imbue her Rita Angus cottage residency with some of the colours of her tropical home climes. This sense of transporting pieces of 'home' has often characterised Ani's work, be it in the nylon net curtaining she uses to mark the watchful presence of the Cook Island Mamas, or by using leftover wallpaper from her Mamas' lounge to discuss aspects of her identity. The wool that forms the circular 'doily-like' works is indicative of Ani's particular penchant for transforming existing objects and materials that are loaded with easily digested domestic associations.

The perceptions of what 'Pacific' is supposed to be has long plagued Ani's work, from her early 'tourist-stand' installations 'tropaks' of plastic hula dolls, coconut trees and fruit; to her elevation of the humble mu'u mu'u to high art status. She takes and turns inside out the symbols of paradise once so beguilingly beckoning from tourist brochures.

The signs for the Pacific are many, largely tied up in their signification of a luring paradise. The dusky maiden, the swaying palm tree, the happy hibiscus, are all island icons enveloping layers of preconnotative meaning that are reworked laboriously through the tourist strategies that have choreographed our colonial past and present. As bell hooks writes: "Within Western constructs ethnicity becomes spice, the seasoning that enlivens the dull dish that is white mainstream culture."¹ Ani's refusal to adhere to the constraints of the 'traditional' or aesthetically pleasing but sometimes soulless renditions of 'Pacific' have distinguished her as an artist who has used the notion of Pacific exotica, colour and 'spice', and rather than reject it, has renegotiated the terms of its usage.



The notion of spectacle plays an important role here, as much of the focus of Ani's work is in subverting the spectacle that has been made of 'Pacific' by producing works that point to its construction. By accepting the relationship between power and visual pleasure which has been historically determined and by recognising its mutable terms, Ani's work redirects the visual power of these images by radically altering their context. Power then is activated in much of Ani's work not by 'looking' (in the Mulvian sense of the gaze²) but by being seen. By fashioning a spectacle of these conventional clichés of Polynesia, many of her installations are bound in a web of visual power from the meanings and signifiers of the original sources and seek to enact these by altering their terms. Hence Ani's lolly-lei works; her white Sunday wear on display; her cuddly Tangaroas; reference a deliberate Polynesian kitsch as well as reveal the exciting world of the discount store scavenger.

A custom (and indeed a growing trend for older Pacific women) is to use the 'trash' forms of the West: the flotsam and jetsam that comes in on the import and tourist tides are transformed into garden or graveyard decoration of spectacular variety. The lush island flora and fauna of the Western imagination in the Pacific is likely to be decorated with Vailima beer bottle edgings, cultivated to grow in white painted tyres, or bordered with blue and white Fosters cans or the ubiquitous corned beef tin.

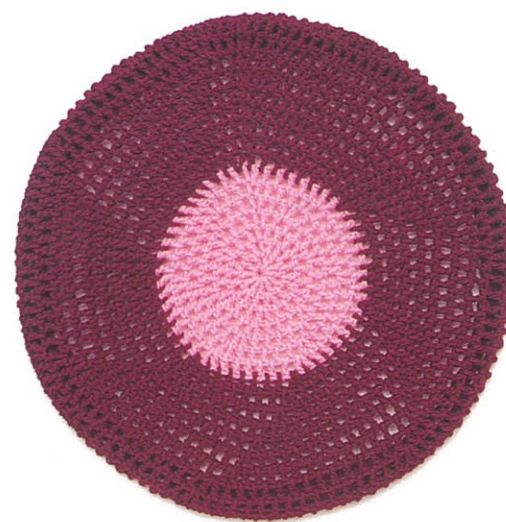
These are things that speak to a specific viewer acclimatised to their connotative meaning, thus engaging in a discourse that allows for an enriched cultural signification for the Polynesian viewer — particularly through the language of parody. They contain specific messages for the viewer 'in-the-know' to decode, in much the same way that colonial depictions from the turn of the century employed a specific collusive relationship between the makers and prime consumers of these images; here the maker/viewer is given signifiers of specific meaning and cultural context. In her show Eight leis and three mamas at Sydney's CBD (1994), the traditional lei as one of the most predominant signs of the welcoming and ever-accommodating Pacific, is made from tourist brochures of Sydney and other local ephemera, again turning the gaze as it were back on the viewer. Notions of cultural exchange were highlighted by the gifting of eight lei to eight people related to the gallery or who had had some positive impact on Ani during her stay.

Ani's work speaks similarly of the changing circumstances for Pacific Island women. The 'Industry' of her title refers to the ways in which materials like the wool she uses, are recycled from 'industry' and re-employed. The Western crossover for Pacific Islanders in New Zealand has often meant that what was organic and readily available in the islands is now substituted for what comes off the factory floor, the working class arenas of urban environments.

Much of Ani's work has a distinct 'camp' reading, in employing the politics and power of the spectacle. The specifically constructed alternative view subverts clichéd convention and points to the nature of the construction in itself. In her play on tourist-stand kitsch campness and the language of artifice allows for the representation of a constant doubleness of meaning in this way — nothing is what it seems, as Susan Sontag puts it: "Everything is seen in quotation marks."³ For the group exhibition Pilot error (1995), Ani appeared as a contemporary industrial dusky maiden replete with urban disco spangles with a glittery "discobiscus" behind her ear, giving out hibiscus in the form of "high-biscuits". The "discobiscus" remained after the opening event as the artwork, a silk flower under layers of silver spray paint and glitter, forever staying alive.

In most of Ani's work there is constantly the sense of a dual story being told. From her mu'u mu'u Mamas — the salient silent presences that are elevated to high art status, the ominously cuddly Tangaroas, the art gallery made into a tourist-stand for Pacific souvenirs — nothing is what it seems.

O'Neill's 'crocheted paintings' in Cottage Industry stem from a huge 'tam' rasta hat (accommodating of the biggest 'fro') she made earlier this year, citing the urban street culture of Polynesia as much as the Pop Art tradition of Claes Oldenberg or Jasper Johns in their target-like composition. Rather than fulfilling the conventional expectations of what 'Pacific' should be, Cottage Industry brings the urban street environment that is the adopted home to much of the Pacific Island population in New Zealand, into the gallery. It is this new urban Polynesian who is the target for O'Neill's new work. In O'Neill's words: "Those who may have more access to the 'net



than to acquiring the knowledge to knot one to fish with ... those who leave their hands idle whilst blobbing in front of the TV ... those who may be inspired by nightclub lights like me."

James Clifford speaks of this strategy in his discourse on 'Of Others': "A significant provocation for these changes of orientation has clearly been the emergence of non-western and feminist subjects whose works and discourses are different, strong and complex but clearly not 'authentic' in conventional ways."⁴

Cottage Industry sees a paring down of the broad concepts and subversive narratives that have defined Ani's work over the years: a condensing of these notions into singular forms within the broader context implied by the titling of the work. Ani's work thus reminds us of our geographical identity — New Zealand is after all a large Pacific Island; she insists, however, that our very concept of what a Pacific Island is, is in itself a mirage.

Lisa Taouma, July 1997

1 bell hooks.

Black Looks: Race and Representation. Boston: South End Press. 1992. p.75.

2 Laura Mulvey. 'Visual Pleasure and 'Narrative Cinema', in Feminism and Film, ed. Constance Penley. New York: Rutledge BFI. 1988. p.68.

3 Susan Sontag. 'Notes On Camp' in Against Interpretation. London: Vintage. 1994. p.89.

4 James Clifford. 'Of Others' in Discussions in Contemporary Culture, ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press. 1987. p.203.

WRITER'S NOTES

Lisa Taouma is currently completing her thesis in Art History at the University of Auckland. Her topic is the ways in which images of Pacific Island women have been constructed, and how Pacific people are working to take control of their own image-making. Lisa has made two short films, Brown Sugar and Tala o le Taulaga, and is working on a half-hour drama for television as part of the new Tala series. She is a reporter for Tagata Pasifika, looking at issues of interest to the Pacific Island community.

ARTIST'S NOTES

Born in Auckland in 1971, Ani O'Neill's work reflects her dual Rarotongan and New Zealand cultural heritage. Ani was brought up by her Cook Island grandparents in Ponsonby, and learned traditional Pacific Island artforms from her Grandmother and Aunties. These domestic arts, including tivaevae, lei making, hat and mat weaving, sewing, and crochet, appear in many of Ani's works. Making contemporary art using these skills allows Ani to continue the traditions her grandmother brought with her from the Cook Islands, while bridging the two sides of her cultural background.

Ani O'Neill graduated from the University of Auckland in 1994 with a BFA degree in sculpture. She has exhibited throughout New Zealand, most notably in the touring exhibition of contemporary Pacific Island artists, Bottled Ocean (1994), and in The Nervous System (1995) which was shown at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and the City Gallery, Wellington. O'Neill's work has also been exhibited in Australia and Western Samoa (1997), where she attended the Seventh Festival of Pacific Arts with the Pacific Sisters, with their collaborative work Motu Tagata. Last year she represented New Zealand as part of the 'waka collective' in the Asia-Pacific Triennale at the Queensland Art Gallery. Ani O'Neill is the 1997 Rita Angus Fellow.

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