



TEUANE TIBBO

ANI O'NEILL

SALOME TANUVASA

STARS START FALLING
Govett-Brewster
22 May – 15 August

STARS START FALLING

It was a dream that the stars were falling that prompted Teuane Tibbo to begin painting in the 1960s, subsequently quickly rising to prominence in Auckland's art scene. She worked prolifically through the 1960s and '70s, painting scenes of her youth in Sāmoa from photographs and memories, and still lifes of flowers plucked from her garden.

Stars Start Falling puts Tibbo's paintings from the '60s and '70s into conversation with work made by Ani O'Neill in 1999 and new commissions by Salome Tanuvasa, stretching more than fifty years of artistic practice. The artists' shared sensitivity toward the conditions under which, and locations where, art is made gives a complex view of the shifting landscape of Pacific life in Aotearoa over the last half century.

A space to dream, a space to remember, a space to work, a space to make connections. *Stars Start Falling* brings together work that examines processes of memory, learning, and knowledge as responses to the artists' engagement with the everyday and the extraordinary. Made in the garden, around the kitchen table, in a moment stolen in the dark of night, or as the duties of domestic life continue to tick along in the background, the artworks in this exhibition examine the cultural, social, and political imaginations that shape our relationship to place.

Matou te fa'afetai Teuane

fa'afetai mo le meaalofo o lou

alofa ma lou fatu

i luga o nei puipui

E Faavavau i o Tatou Loto.

I was standing out in the night. My hair was long and black. The sky was blue and full of stars. I was standing there like this and the stars started falling all around me.¹

Teuane Tibbo's perspective is hers alone – striking in its clarity and directness. This sense of focus in her works, a product of the intensity and determination of Tibbo's creativity, seems to make each painting a world of its own.

TEUANE TIBBO

Born in Vaimea, Sāmoa in 1895, Tibbo's early life was marked by the rapid change and unrest that faced Sāmoan society in the early twentieth century. As a young woman, she witnessed the turbulent occupation of Sāmoa by New Zealand's military forces and the establishment of the non-violent Mau movement for Sāmoan independence from colonial powers. She spent time living in Fiji before moving to Auckland with her husband, Edward Tibbo, and their children in 1945.

Tibbo began to make art in her seventies, prompted by a vivid dream that the stars were falling and a subsequent visit to her daughter Audie, who was working on paintings at the time. Tibbo worked uninterrupted for the next decade, experimenting with technique, form and subject matter.



The paintings included in *Stars Start Falling* span the length of Tibbo's practice. They demonstrate its breadth, as well as the themes and interests that preoccupied her. Throughout this time, she worked in two key styles: landscapes and flower paintings. Both can be immersive and disorienting for their use of flattened compositions, bright colours and skewed perspective.

Tibbo painted her scenes of Pacific life from memory as well as photographs, and at times a mixture of the two. The changing nature of modern life in Sāmoa – both before and after her departure for New Zealand, as she did return over the years – is described. The flag flying in *Untitled* (1974) and *Satele Spili Meeting House* (date unknown) was adopted in 1948, during New Zealand's administration of Western Sāmoa – a symbol of Sāmoa's move toward independence from the colonial powers, which had wrested for its control over the early twentieth-century.

[1] "Her gift from God." *New Zealand Herald*, December 12, 1973.

Stars Start Falling is interested in the wonder, unreliability and persistence of memory – in how it is recorded, shared and made new. The artworks by Teuane Tibbo, Ani O'Neill and Salome Tanuvasa in this exhibition are an opportunity to consider not only the artists' engagement with memory over sixty years of practice, but also how our personal and collective memories, as viewers, shape an encounter with their work.

MEMORY

The exhibition's commitment to memory at times involves the past erupting into the present, and at others the present breaking into the artists' ruminations on the past. The artworks respond to the transformation of the people and subjects they describe in order to seize on the changing of ideas, beliefs and sensibilities around them. These memories don't always fit nicely, and details in each of their narratives may differ from one another, but do so with the knowledge that to understand the relationships between our pasts and present we must *"define and construct [these histories] in our own ways"*.²

Many of Teuane Tibbo's paintings come from recollections of her childhood in Samoa, though they are not confined to that temporal or physical space. They are memories, constructed in the present, which is to say that they are inevitably coloured by everything that has come since the events which anchor them. This is where her Pacific scenes and flower paintings meet, for both approach the question of what it is to know, or to be in, place. The flower paintings, which are less explicitly autobiographical, record Tibbo's engagement with the environment that surrounded her in Aotearoa. In their own way, her vases of flowers plucked from her gardens point to the reinscription of ecological and human histories in – and over – the landscape of Aotearoa.

monoPoly [1999] and *Counter Productive* [1999/2021] by Ani O'Neill hold tightly to the place and the process of their making. Abstracted into the circular crochet forms O'Neill is well known for, the city's physical or topographical likeness is effectively rendered unrecognisable: it is the memory of that place that anchors the two works. O'Neill represents a place that ostensibly still exists, but effectively does not. *monoPoly* and *Counter Productive* describe the inner-city Auckland O'Neill knew, a place where communities were made, knowledge shared, skills and resources distributed through networks formal and informal. Taught by her grandmother to sew and crochet, O'Neill was given the skills to remember through the process of making.

Salome Tanuvasa records her responses to the environment that surrounds her, most often the family home. Like O'Neill, she leans toward abstraction, finding the language for what she is looking to describe in close attention to gesture and colour. In a text written last year, Tanuvasa described sitting with her mother at the kitchen table.

*"making ribbon leis for my eldest son who graduated from his intermediate school in December 2019. I asked my mum what their leis were made out of in Tonga when she was growing up. And she replied, they were made out of the flowers of Tonga. This took me back to when I was visiting Tonga for the first time. I remembered arriving in Vava'u as a teenager and being greeted by my aunties with real flower leis, made from flowers grown on the Island. It smelt beautiful."*³



It's this kind of close attention to the presence of memory in everyday life – the way memory can inform and construct experiences both personal and collective – which allows Tanuvasa's work to reach beyond the moment in which it is made.

[2] Epeli Hau'ofa, "Pasts to Remember," in *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts*, ed. Robert Borofsky (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 454.

[3] Salome Tanuvasa, "New Landscapes," Enjoy, <https://enjoy.org.nz/blog/2020/04/new-landscapes-salome-tanuvasa-reflects-on-matavai>

Teuane Tibbo, *Flowers II*, 1975. Collection of Malcolm McNeill. Image courtesy of Cheska Brown and Enjoy.



Ani O'Neill and Judy Darragh.
A Floral Extravaganza, installation
view in *Vibes: Pacific Patterns*,
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1997.

Ani O'Neill. *Sweet Rap*, installation
view in *The Nervous System*,
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery,
9 September – 23 October 1995.

Ani O'Neill made *monoPoly* and *Counter Productive* in 1999 for display at Mori Gallery in Sydney. The exhibition, also called *monoPoly*, was her first in a commercial gallery. Working with the crochet circular forms she first began making during her residency at Rita Angus Cottage in Wellington in 1997, O'Neill began to think through how her practice might be read in the context of the art market.

monoPoly and *Counter Productive* reflect on the changing face of Auckland's inner-city suburbs at the turn of the twenty-first century. They were made at O'Neill's grandmother's home in Ponsonby, where she was raised and where she learnt many of the Cook Islands craft practices she continues to work with.

ANI O'NEILL

Crochet and sewing practices were first introduced to the Cook Islands by missionary wives, who understood communal craft activities to be a key environment for the sharing of information. In *tivaevae* – Cook Island quilting, which employs sewing, crochet and embroidery – Cook Island women made these practices entirely their own, reflective of their unique landscapes, culture and knowledge.

Tivaevae perform a process of mapping, describing in their stitches the transmission of knowledge across generations. They are key objects of trade, passed between people, families, and locations for their cultural, social and financial value. *monoPoly* and *Counter Productive* complicate this relationship between process, place and value by bringing the craft traditions O'Neill's grandmother taught her into conversation with the rising pressures of Auckland's housing market and its effect on Pacific communities.

Through the mid-twentieth century, Auckland's growing Pacific communities were concentrated around Freeman's Bay, Grey Lynn and Ponsonby, where homes, churches and community groups were established and maintained by generations of whānau. The Ponsonby O'Neill knew as a child in the '70s and '80s, though not the Pacific stronghold it had once been, still retained much of that identity.

O'Neill describes her crochet works as paintings, pushing up against perceived distinctions between "art" and "craft" – and the value assigned to each in the context of the art gallery. *monoPoly* and *Counter Productive* are landscapes, both toying with the genre's particular "way of seeing fashioned by capitalism" and its product, imperialism.⁴ They abstract the gentrification of Auckland's inner city into crochet cityscapes.

monoPoly takes its shape from the board game. The crochet forms are arranged into two halves of a *Monopoly* board: colours delineate suburbs, their size a reflection of the monetary value the "property" has been assigned. It's a developer's view of the city, one defined by ideals of investment and opportunity: it's a game we can't play. The "productivity" of the market is the focus of *Counter Productive*, in which crochet circles in varying shades of brown are arranged in a tightly defined rectangle: at once a landscape and a neat slice of earth.

[4] Ann Birmingham quoted in W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 8.

PLACE

In a 2019 panel with the Pacific Sisters at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, O'Neill was asked how to approach the problems of representation and acknowledgment that Māori and Pacific artists continue to face. "Go home," she said, smiling through her tears.

"I grew up in Auckland with my Cook Island grandparents, so I had a very old-school Cook Island upbringing in Ponsonby. For me, knowing my homeland... I feel safe and empowered by that... Do everything that you can to get there."⁵

Ani O'Neill's page works [*Portrait of a hula girl by the young artist and Portrait of the artist as a young hula girl*] were first published in Midwest issue 6, in 1994. The two hula girls wear pāreu kiri'au: one flanked by a smiling sun and waving palm, the other by her school mates. "My name is Ani O'Neill Nia Elena" is written in the corner of the drawing. The young artist is a hula girl: the young hula girl is an artist: the young girl is in two places at once.

The idea of places remembered and invented, processes which allow us to encounter one landscape or scene from the vantage point of another, runs through the artworks in this exhibition. In O'Neill's *monoPoly*, it is through her engagement with the "place" of the Pacific in Auckland – her own memories filtered through the various ways in which Pacific communities sought to recall the islands from which they had come in making their lives here – and an attention to the constant negotiations that particular placemaking involves.

Seen from a distance, Salome Tanuvasa's paintings might be landscapes, gardens or seascapes. Her quick, confident brushstrokes gather close, alluding to recognisable forms, before moving away from one another again, towards abstraction. We move with them – along, around; step closer and further away – and the view continues to change. The relationship Tanuvasa's body has with place, and being in place, is their subject: they represent a negotiation that we, in turn, navigate through the work.



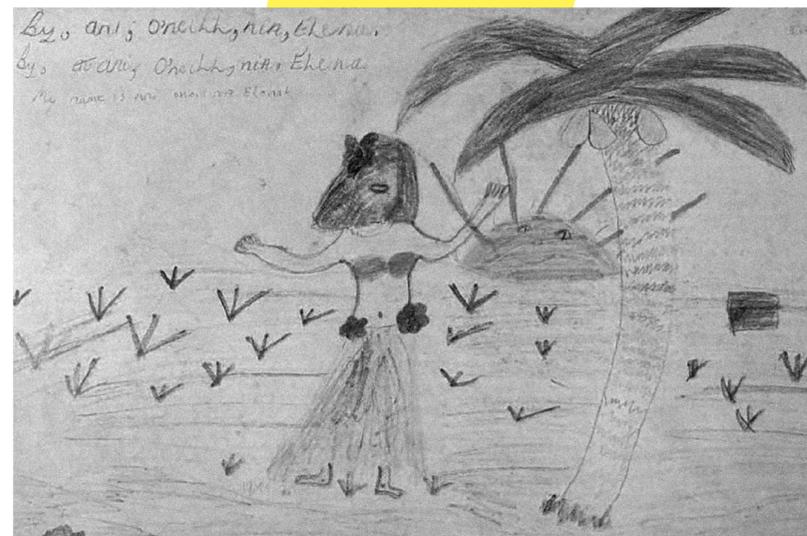
Teuane Tibbo, *Samoan Village Scene*, date unknown. University of Auckland art collection.

[5] Just Remember Don't Forget: Closing Address with the Pacific Sister and Nina Tonga. *You Tube* livestream. July 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a50T9x8CE>

[6] Peter Shand, "In a Midnight Hour," published by Tim Melville Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition *Salome Tanuvasa: In a Midnight Hour*, September 18 – October 13, 2018. <https://www.timmelville.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ST-Text-18.pdf>

Peter Shand describes the place where Tanuvasa works from as the "midnight hour": a time "in which a warm, full darkness allows for thoughts, feelings, actions, considerations or possibilities that might otherwise shrink away from our capacity to experience them". It's a space that is her own, found within – not outside of – the rhythms of everyday life.

While Teuane Tibbo's scenes of Pacific life describe a relationship with place filtered through a temporal and physical distance, the flower paintings represent a more immediate encounter with her surroundings. Inspired by bouquets plucked from her garden, they give a view of life in Aotearoa guided by her experience of making a home here. *Fathers' Day Flowers* (1965), in which two bunches of flowers sit inside matching vases with kiwi printed on them, is an example of how the small, domestic details of this place for her place, here] permeates the paintings.



Ani O'Neill, page work (photo: Glenn Jowitt; text: Victor Roger), first printed in Midwest 6 (1994).



Tony was living in Gunson St in Freeman's Bay and this was 1977. I used to come down from Northland and stay with him sometimes and I was taking photos on these trips. We would wander round the neighbourhood and Tony decided to visit Mrs Tibbo in the old ladies home that was in a villa in one of those streets that runs down off Great North Rd and crosses Crummer Rd and Williamson Ave. It was just a friendly artists visiting an artist sort of visit and somehow it got around to the idea of me, since I was carrying my Nikon camera, taking a photo of Mrs Tibbo. She made Tony sit down with her, sort of half on her lap, and Tony didn't want to be photographed but was made to, which is why he looks so bashful. That's what happened, all those years ago. The bashful Tony and Mrs Tibbo portrait. We loved her paintings.

– MARK ADAMS

Salome Tanuvasa made the six paintings on display at her home in Auckland in 2021. The scale of the works – they are 2 metres in height and between 2.1 and 3.3 metres wide – required that she hang them, one by one, in her bedroom, where they took up most of one wall and part of another. Tanuvasa painted on the unstretched canvases quickly, making the full series over the course of a week, in moments found around the demands of other, competing schedules.

Tanuvasa is interested in how the environments that surround the production of her work might influence its outcomes – in finding space where she may. She often works using everyday, accessible materials in domestic spaces: the lounge, the garden, the bedroom. This practice carries its own particular conditions. Rain disturbs the painting drying on the washing line; a school project takes over precious space on the dining table.

The determined nature of Tanuvasa's mark-making is a response to the parameters of her process. Quick lines and steady streaks of colour carry this negotiation between the solitary and the shared in to the public space of the gallery, where they continue to hold tightly to their own private logic.

Na'aku tavalivali ebe api o Matavai mo Quisbille is the only one of Tanuvasa's paintings with a title. Translated from Tongan, it means, "I am [the] painting made at the home of Matavai [Tanulangau] and Quisbille [Charan]". Tanuvasa made this work in the back yard at Tanulangau and Charan's house; the colours and gestures chosen to represent her relationship with her two friends. This process is recorded in the film, made by Tanulangau, playing in the gallery's mezzanine.

Hanging down from the ceiling, the experience of viewing Tanuvasa's paintings is not unlike that she had making them. Up close, the clarity of her mark-making becomes clear. In their drape and gesture, the paintings carry with them the memory of their making.

SALOME TANUVASA



Asked about her painting process, Teuane Tibbo replied:

*"I have never loved anything so much as painting. I paint every day. Sometimes I tell my husband I am going to do the washing. But then I peep into my studio, and immediately the washing is forgotten, and I don't emerge again until I am hungry. And sometimes I get up at midnight to finish a painting."*⁷

For her, it was an entirely immersive activity, one that opened up ways of connecting with landscapes near and far. She found inspiration in the environment that surrounded her and flowers plucked from her garden, as well as the scenes of life in the Pacific she accessed through memories and photographs.



[7] At 72. Her World is Centred on Paint." *Auckland Star*, 5 October 1965

Salome Tanuvasa. *Naiaku tavalivali ebe api o Matawai mo Quisile*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Tim Melville Gallery.

At moments, Tibbo's work recalls other Pacific art traditions. *Garden Flowers I* (1976), *Orange Flowers* (c. 1960) and *Opium Poppies* (c. 1965–1968) share the bright colours and clear floral forms of tivaivai. The dense patterning of *Samoan Village Scene* (1965), *Untitled* (unknown) and *Untitled* (1973) gestures to the texture of siapo. At the same time, the paintings are entirely of themselves: small windows into the many experiences and histories Tibbo brought to the canvas.

Pacific communities in Aotearoa have carried their artistic practices here with them, developing and adapting their techniques in response to the particular conditions of this place. Ani O'Neill was taught many of the Cook Islands art forms – including tivaevae, crochet and sewing – and narratives she works with by her grandmother as a child in Ponsonby.

CONDITIONS

O'Neill is interested in the histories these practices carry in their making. They are traditionally domestic, often worked on communally; they represent an opportunity for women to come together, work and talk. Each stitch belongs to a chain, stretching backward and forward in time, creating connections between people and process. By bringing these forms of inherited knowledge into the gallery, O'Neill gestures to the systems in which contemporary art operates and at the same time pushes beyond them: toward a practice of making which is collaborative, which belongs to a history, which is at once routed through and rooted in place.

Salome Tanuvasa makes her work at home, surrounded by the obligations, pleasures and challenges of domestic life. Her family share their opinions on her paintings in progress, negotiate their movements around the large swathes of canvas hung around the house. These are the parameters that Tanuvasa's work is responding to – the conditions under which it is made.

At home, Tanuvasa's gestural compositions work in concert with their immediate surroundings. In the gallery, they invite us to engage in her unique dialogue with the mental and physical spaces that generated them, invariably (re)contextualised by their placement alongside and across from one another. Each canvas is a new part of Tanuvasa's far-reaching visual language, a network of compositions that visually and physically display the abstracted story of their creation.

For each Tibbo, O'Neill and Tanuvasa, it is relationships – at times established by genealogy, at others found in place: maintained at great distance, or negotiated in close proximity – which anchor their work, forming complicated and delicate webs. This shared attention to connection characterises the artworks gathered in *Stars Start Falling*: a commitment to representing and remembering the everyday experience and restless character, the "nothing special and the extraordinary brutality", of life lived in community.⁸

[8] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), 348.

TEUANE TIBBO

Samoan Village Scene, 1965
oil on canvas on board
On loan from the University of
Auckland art collection

*Satele Sipiili Meeting
House*, date unknown
oil on board
Collection of Mary-Anne Thomson

Father's Day Flowers, 1965
oil on hardboard
On long-term loan to the Sarjeant
Gallery Te Whare o Rehua
Whanganui. Collection of the
Allen Maddox Estate, 2000

Panga Island Fiji, 1976
oil on canvas board
Collection of Gerry Hetet

Kava Ceremony Fiji, 1967
oil on canvas board
Collection of Anne Tattersfield

Garden Flowers I, 1976
oil on canvas
Collection of Anne Tattersfield

Orange Flowers, c.1960
oil on board
Collection of Auckland War Memorial
Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira

Untitled, date unknown
oil on board
Collection of Penny Vernon

Untitled, 1973
oil on board
Collection of Penny Vernon

Untitled, 1974
oil on board
Collection of Pauline Sweetman

Untitled, 1974
acrylic on hardboard
Collection of Joyce Sweetman

Teuane Tibbo was born in Sāmoa in 1895. In 1926 she moved to Fiji with her husband, Edward Tibbo, and in 1945 they settled in Auckland with their children. Tibbo began painting in the 1960s and quickly became a prominent figure in Auckland's art scene. She was exhibited in galleries around Aotearoa and her work acquired into a number of public collections. Tibbo died in 1984, aged 91. Since her death, she has been included in a number of significant surveys of Pacific art and in 2001, was the subject of the retrospective *Keep It in the Heart: The Paintings of Teuane Tibbo* at Lopdell House, Auckland.

Sheaf of Flowers, date unknown
oil on canvas board
Private collection

Landscape with River, date unknown
oil on board
Collection of Katie and Darryl Ward

Talolo [Greeting Party], 1965
acrylic on board
Collection of Katie and Darryl Ward

Flowers II [Angel Flowers], 1975
acrylic on board
Collection of Malcolm McNeill

*Untitled [Monkey See, Monkey
Do]*, date unknown
acrylic on board
Collection of Malcolm McNeill

Untitled, date unknown
acrylic on board
Collection of Nina Leach

Opium Poppies, c.1965–1968
oil on cardboard
Given by Colin McCahon, Auckland,
1968. Hocken Collections Uare Taoka
o Hākena, University of Otago

Untitled, date unknown
acrylic on board
Private collection

Butterfly Flowers, c.1965
acrylic on board
Collection of John Perry

SALOME TANUVASA

*Na'aku tavalivali ebe api o
Matavai mo Quishile*, 2021
acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and
Tim Melville Gallery

Untitled, 2021
acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and
Tim Melville Gallery

Untitled, 2021
acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and
Tim Melville Gallery

Untitled, 2021
acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and
Tim Melville Gallery

Untitled, 2021
acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and
Tim Melville Gallery

Untitled, 2021
acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and
Tim Melville Gallery

Salome Tanuvasa is a Sāmoan-Tongan artist based in Auckland. She completed her Masters in Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts in 2014, followed by a Diploma in Secondary Teaching. Her work crosses a variety of mediums including moving image, drawing, photography and sculpture. Her practice engages her immediate surroundings and often reflects the environments she is in at that time, drawing attention to wider issues among New Zealand-based Pacific people.

ANI O'NEILL

monoPoly, 1999
crocheted wool, steel
Courtesy the artist

Counter Productive, 1999/2021
crocheted wool, steel
Courtesy the artist

Ani O'Neill was born in Auckland in 1971. She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts in 1994 and has exhibited widely in Aotearoa and internationally since. O'Neill's work often references skills and techniques passed down from her Cook Island grandmother, drawing on the unique histories and forms of knowledge that are central to art forms like tivaevae, embroidery, sewing and crochet. Her practice spans installation, object making and performance, both as a solo practice and in collaboration. O'Neill is a member of the Pacific Sisters collective. For the last decade she has lived and worked between Auckland and Rarotonga.

This guide is published by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition *Stars Start Falling*, 22 May – 15 August 2021.

Stars Start Falling was developed by Hanahiva Rose from the exhibition *This is a library* shown at Enjoy, Wellington from 13 March – 18 April 2020.

Teuane Tibbo, Ani O'Neill, Salome Tanuvasa
Curated by Hanahiva Rose
Design by Extended Whānau

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On view in the Govett-Brewster's mezzanine are *Review: Teuane Tibbo, 29 September, 1974*, courtesy TVNZ, *Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision*, Getty Images; and artist portraits of Ani O'Neill and Salome Tanuvasa, filmed in 2021 by Matavai Taulangau.

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