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JUDY DARRAGH ANI O'NEILL
A FLORAL EXTRAVAGANZA

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Judy Darragh and Ani O'Neill in conversation with William McAloon, 8 December 1995, the day after the opening of the exhibition *Patterns of Paradise: Cook Islands Tivaevae*.

William McAloon *What kinds of floral memories do you have from your childhoods?*

Ani O'Neill I remember arriving in the Cook Islands for the first time when I was four and my grandmother putting me and my sister in matching frilly frocks, and getting of the plane and just being garlanded with twenty or thirty leis of frangipani. The smell of Cook Island flowers is totally intoxicating. Every time you get off a plane in the Cook Islands you can just smell them, it's so welcoming.

Judy Darragh Matching floral frocks, me and my sister. And Mum had matching mother and daughter outfits. My parents were keen gardeners – Mum tending the garden and getting irate when Dad would run over the flowers with the lawn mower. Christchurch was a very floral city. Going to the botanical gardens was a Sunday event – dressed up in our matching outfits, photographed standing amongst the blossoms. And floral competitions at primary school – flower saucers and egg cup posies.

AO We both remember how women would bring flowers from their gardens to our churches and decorate them for Sundays.

JD You'd be confronted with these extravagant, gorgeous, over-the-top flower arrangements trying to out-do the environment they were in – the churches were overpowering, so the flowers had to be more so.

WM *Were you endeavouring to reach a specifically female audience?*



Above: Ani and Siobhan O'Neill, Cook Islands 1975

Below: *Fun with Foam*, Judy Darragh collection

JD We talked about the work as celebrating women's arts. The materials – raffia, plastic, cane – are generally associated with women, and the whole idea of re-using things, of making do with what's around is something that women have always had to do. My mother was recycling plastic bags long before it was a green thing, and I think I've inherited that.

WM *How quickly did the idea of A Floral Extravaganza form?*

AO Pretty quickly. With the Tivaevae influence, the flowers were just instant. Judy and I discovered that we were both...

JD Frustrated florists!

AO I had photographs of some plastic flower arrangements that I'd seen in churches in the outer islands of the Cook Islands.

JD And you had those photos of your Mum at home at your Nan's, with the big doilies and the artificial flowers. So we talked about artificial flowers...

AO And we got onto the whole craft thing, how Tivaevae is a craft and these other crafts that could relate to it.

JD I can remember making crepe paper roses as a kid. The process was the same: twist and turn and knot and cut. It was very simple.

AO Judy had a great book called *Fun with Foam*.

JD We didn't actually see each other's stuff until we bought it in. We knew that what ever the other would do it would be fine – it was no problem. And then the basket, that was interesting, tracking down the basket lady. That was a little jaunt out to Drury. We bought flowers on the way.

AO She and her husband run a cut flower business.

JD She used to make a living out of baskets, doing craft

shows in the seventies, and then the import market put her and a lot of people out of business. All that skill lost.

WM *It's interesting that we consider the types of skills that you're drawing on to be vernacular, commonplace. In fact, they are to some extent disappearing.*

JD Right. My mother taught me things like crochet and knitting and embroidery, but I don't do them anymore. All those homely skills are going to become rarefied. But then you look at something like Tivaevae...

AO I know that in the Cook Islands, young people aren't really interested anymore, but slowly that's changing. It's moving towards the commercial arena, with tourism, and that makes it seem more worthwhile to do. At the same time, there's still a full-on traditional prestige that goes with having a Tivaevae. If you don't have one, then who are you?

JD Because those skills are being lost, I suddenly felt really very responsible as an artist. Even though we are subverting them, we are in a way maintaining those craft traditions. Funny word that, "craft".

WM *You're both working with craft in a fine art context, and presumably that alters its meaning and value.*

JD Absolutely. In terms of selling the work, because we're using materials that are non-archival, fragile and will fall apart. ...What we're doing is taking that craft base and pushing it. I began by reacting against this incredible Bauhaus ethic that I had at Polytech – form is function – so I came out and made everything formless and functionless!

WM *What was art school like for you, Ani?*

AO My grandmother taught me how to do things, how to make things – I made my first Tivaevae cushion when I was seven years old. So, it seemed totally natural to use those skills at art school. ...They were forever ques-

tioning me – ‘Why don’t you just make a Tivaevae, then?’ – that sort of thing. So I was forced into being quite conceptual about it, which was good. I was forever trying to prove a point about my identity at art school, and the weight was on my shoulders to educate my educators about who I was. But I suppose that’s all part of being an artist.

WM Often when “identity” is discussed by Pakeha, it’s discussed in terms of others, be it Maori identity, Asian-New Zealand identity, Pacific Island New Zealand identity. Pakeha identity doesn’t seem to be talked about. Do you think your work talks about Pakeha identity, Judy?

JD I think the whole good taste / bad taste aspect of it is certainly part of that, a very proper Protestant mentality of what’s “not nice.”

WM In the work, and in much of what we’ve talked about, there’s a sense of nostalgia operating.

JD For me its quite an innocent piece, and I think that’s what people respond to. For me it’s like proving how easy it is – art is easy.



Above: Ani O’ Neill *They Grow On Me* 1993
mixed media installation, Auckland Central Telephone Exchange

Below: Judy Darragh *Polynesian piece* 1990
mixed media, 350 x 500mm
Private collection

Back cover: *A Floral Extravaganza* installation view
foam, raffia, plastic, cane, wire, paint, fabric, felt, crepe paper, bamboo,
polystyrene, tape, ribbon, fake fur, pipe cleaners
Height 3500mm (approx)

Front cover: *A Floral Extravaganza* detail



JUDY DARRAGH

Judy Darragh was born in Christchurch in 1957. She graduated from Wellington Polytechnic with a Diploma of Visual Communication in 1978 and trained as a secondary teacher at the Auckland College of Education. She currently lives in Auckland and teaches at Manukau Institute of Technology. She was a board member of Auckland's Artspace (1989-95) and a co-founder of the artist-run Teststrip Gallery (1993). She has held artist-residencies at Queen's College, Melbourne (1995) and the University of Canterbury, Christchurch (1993).

Darragh designed sets for Auckland's Hero Festival parties (1994, 1995) and was writer / director / co-producer of the Television New Zealand documentary *Hair*, a gold medal winner at the 1995 New York TV and Video Awards. Recent solo exhibitions include the *Floral Sculptures* installation (Artspace letting space project, 1995) and *Landscape Scope*, an interactive children's exhibit at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (1993). Her work has been included in a number of important museum exhibitions, including *Hangover* at the Waikato Museum of Art and History (1995) and *Surface Tension* at the Auckland Art Gallery (1992).

Selected Bibliography

- Christina Barton *Surface Tension: Ten artists in the 90s*
Auckland City Art Gallery 1992
- Trish Clark and Wytan Curnow (ed) *Pleasures and Dangers: Artists of the Nineties* Moët & Chandon New Zealand Art Foundation / Longman Paul 1991
- Shirley Horrocks (dir) *Pleasures and Dangers: Artists of the Nineties* Moët & Chandon New Zealand Art Foundation / Television New Zealand 1991
- Robert Leonard and Lara Strongman *Hangover* Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin / Govett-Brewster Art Gallery / Waikato Museum of Art and History 1995.
- Mary-Louise Browne and Ruth Watson (ed) *Amending the Vulgar* The Vulgate Project 1992

ANI O'NEILL

Ani O'Neill was born in Auckland in 1971 of Cook Island Maori and European descent. She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Auckland in 1993.

O'Neill's exhibitions include *Tivaevae*, a window installation at the Auckland Art Gallery (1994), *WOW* (with Yuk King Tan) at Teststrip Gallery (1995) and *Eight Leis and Three Mamas* as part of 'Four Artists' at CBD Gallery, Sydney (1994). Her work appeared in *Tu Fa'atasi*, part of the 1994 Wellington Festival of the Arts, and also in *Bottled Ocean*, a major national touring exhibition of Pacific Island / New Zealand art (1994-95). In 1995 she undertook a residency at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery as part of *Takitahi*, an exhibition of Maori and Pacific Island weaving. Other museum exhibitions featuring O'Neill's work include *The Nervous System* at the Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (1995) and *H₂O* at the Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt (1995).

In 1995 O'Neill contributed costume design and installations to a fashion event as part of Auckland's *Pasifika* Festival. In 1996 she will participate as a member of *Pacific Sisters* in the South Pacific Arts Festival at Apia, Samoa, and is one of several artists representing New Zealand at the Second Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

Selected Bibliography

- Graeme Lay *Pacific New Zealand* David Ling 1996
- Mere Naigulevu 'Beyond Proud One Culture' *Planet 16* 1995
- Priscilla Pitts and Allan Smith (ed) *The Nervous System: Artists explore images and identities in crisis* Govett Brewster Art Gallery and City Gallery 1995
- Nicholas Thomas 'Pacific Dualities: Bottled Ocean in Wellington and Auckland' *Art New Zealand* 74 1995

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