

**Christopher Ulutupu** (Aotearoa NZ)

**Emerita Baik** (Aotearoa NZ)

**Shireen Seno** (Philippines)

**Sione Tuívailala Monū** (Australia/Aotearoa NZ)

**Yuki Iiyama** (Japan)

# The Inner Lives of Islands

*The Inner Lives of Islands* brings together five artists who explore storytelling instincts from the vantage point of the Pacific Ocean. These artists play on well-worn narrative conventions of character, setting and plot development as a means of making sense of the unlikely realities they face as Asian and Pacific peoples in the world. Shying away from the coherency of the beginning-middle-end format, the artworks presented here instead embrace a complexity and plurality of voice, logic and linearity.

Though we might understand that the stories we tell ourselves and others are revealing in terms of our experiences and perspectives, in this instance the extension of this truth to the lands we inhabit draws on Epeli Hau'ofa's idea that the oceans between our islands act as a vast network of connections rather than separating them into disparate locales.<sup>1</sup> The initial prompt for this exhibition came out of a very specific cultural exchange between island nations—the popularity of Filipino soap operas in Samoa. Although we've often seen the border-crossing potential of entertainment media (think of the transportability of reality TV, from the *Idol* format to the increasingly persistent *RuPaul's Drag Race*),

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1 Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, Volume 6, Number 1, Spring 1994, pp. 147–61.

it's interesting to consider the particularity of the exchanges (think of the popularity of Australia's *Home and Away* in the United Kingdom, which is a markedly different kind of exchange to the popularity among some of *Coronation Street* here in Aotearoa).

I was initially interested in what shared cultural values might exist between the Philippines and Samoa that allow for such an exchange to occur. Both countries are deeply religious and both have co-existing and conflicting colonial and militaristic histories with the United States as well as their more immediate neighbours. Anecdotally, I had heard that Filipino shows such as *Tayong Dalawa* and *Sa Piling Mo* were shown on Samoan TV without subtitles. If so, what is gleaned by the audience must be almost solely visual—the body language of the actors, the filmic conventions of lighting, framing and editing. What sense can be made, let alone empathy for the characters and stories created, when such a language barrier exists?

Insisting on the role of language here, however, is the kind of coherency-seeking that limits our potential for garnering a rich and complex understanding of the role of storytelling. No story is a discrete whole. We are equipped as people to obtain critical information through a wide array of methods. We interpret non-verbal cues, we analyse context, and we read between the lines. Expanding the voices and perspectives out from that initial interrogation of the Samoa–Philippines relationship, this exhibition looks at the interplay between diasporic identities and nationhood, and the insufficiency of language to describe such experiences.

*What's the worst you could do?* is a newly commissioned two-channel video work by Christopher Ulutupu, a Te Whanganui-a-Tara-based artist of Samoan/Niuean/German descent. In this work Ulutupu revisits a script he wrote in 2012 when he worked in the film and theatre industry. Ulutupu's

practice has had an ongoing concern with historic representations of Samoan and Pacific bodies and their contemporary implications. *The Romantic Picturesque: The Postcard Trilogy* (2016–18) saw Ulutupu navigating indigeneity and colonial relations alongside popular culture references, high-fashion visuals and a penchant for karaoke performance. This new work maintains some of the hallmarks of Ulutupu’s working methodologies—scenic natural landscapes, dramatic musical numbers and a cast of family and friends—but it also veers into darker territory than previously explored.

The original script told the story of a struggling, recently solo mother of two mischievous boys who finds opportunity in a talent show held at a local RSA, but which ultimately results in an altercation with her ex-husband. However, *What’s the worst you could do?* sees dialogue removed altogether. The characters remain—the protagonist solo-mum, the antagonist ex-husband, and the cheeky boys—but their intentions and motivations are murkier. In a particularly haunting scene, the original scripted altercation is reimagined as a group assault on an empty car; the initially lone woman soon joined by six other figures armed with sticks and cricket bats. As in Ulutupu’s previous work, the series of scenes may be connected as closely as the viewer perceives them to be, but what’s not said leaves greater room for interpretation and, perhaps more revealingly, assumption.

Also working in video is Shireen Seno (Philippines) and Yuki Iiyama (Japan). Seno, a Tokyo-born Filipino artist and filmmaker, explores ideas of nostalgia, family and the subtle violences experienced in childhood. Seno’s 2014 short film *Shotgun Tuding* is a Filipino Spaghetti Western or, as described by the artist, a “Pancit Western”—*pancit* being Tagalog for noodles. The film tells the story of Tuding’s search for the man who got her younger sister pregnant, encountering a group of bandits along the way. Shot

on 16mm film, the treatment and colouring adhere to the genre tropes of the Western, as do the costumes and props. However, the film is entirely in Tagalog (save one exchange where the titular character boasts of her knowledge of American guns) and is very much set in the Philippines. There is an ad hoc adherence to the genre, with horses trekking through tall grass fields and rice fields, and beyond them coconut trees and bamboo houses with thatched roofs.

Iiyama uses archival material and personal interviews to explore various social stigmas. *Moomin Family goes on a picnic to see Kannon* (2014) sees the artist's sister detailing her hallucinations of the Moomins, the Swedish-speaking characters from the Finnish books and comic strip, followed by documentation of her family dressed as the comic's characters visiting a shrine to the Japanese Buddhist goddess Kannon. The Moomins— white chubby creatures with large snouts, vaguely resembling hippopotamuses—are extremely popular in Japan, resonating with the country's anime culture. Both Iiyama and Seno look to offshore narrative conventions to tell particular local stories. While Seno's *Shotgun Tuding* nods to the pervasive American influence still present in the Philippines, Iiyama's work uses a nationally beloved international cartoon to explore some of the darker aspects of Japan's attitudes towards mental health.

Two artists working in sculpture are also included in the exhibition, Emerita Baik (Te Whanganui-a-Tara based, of South Korean descent) and Sione Tuivailala Monū (living between Australia and Aotearoa, of Tongan descent). Many of Baik's interests lie in the indescribable migrant experience of living between two cultures, specifically those of Korea and Aotearoa. Informed largely by her mother's experience of moving to Aotearoa, Baik's work combines traditional and contemporary techniques that explore the histories and stories that

objects are imbued with. In Baik's three works *Nose of a pig*, *Head of a camel* and *Eyes of a rabbit* (all 2021), for instance, the circular sculptures reference the Korean tradition of bottari, a method of bundling possessions with cloth to store, protect, gift and move them from one place to another.

Similarly referencing traditional practices is Monū's *'Ao kakala* (2021). Monū, who works across photography, video, adornment and performance, explores identity, family and Pacific-diasporic queer experiences. The sculptural clouds of *'Ao kakala* are part of the artist's ongoing work with nimamea'a tuikakala, the Tongan fine art of flower designing. Like Baik, Monū traces back generational and cultural practices using contemporary methods. Utilising plastic flowers and beads, often from the South Auckland variety stores whose products come from giant Chinese online retailers, Monū plays on the associations we have with certain materials, all the while maintaining a lightness and whimsy.

All the artists in *The Inner Lives of Islands* tell stories about identities that have traversed oceans. In varying ways, they look to genealogies that connect them to their homes, wherever those homes might be. Resisting the coherence of total and singular narratives, they employ layered storylines and perspectives to piece together and make sense of their places in the world. The artworks here are dreamlike, telling of worlds rooted in reality as well as hoping for something more.

– Robbie Handcock



Christopher Ulutupu, *What's the worst you could do?*, 2021 (still). Two-channel HD video, sound. 10 mins 48 secs. Cinematography by Haz Forrester. Sound & camera assist by Kane Laing. Commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

## About Robbie Handcock

Robbie Handcock is a Filipino/Pākehā artist and curator based in Tāmaki Makaurau. He was a facilitator with artist-run gallery *play\_station* in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington from 2019 to 2020 and currently works as Public Programmes Officer for Gus Fisher Gallery. He also hosts the podcast *Popular Glory: Contemporary Queerness and the Moving Image* with CIRCUIT.

# About the artists

## Christopher Ulutupu (Aotearoa NZ)

Christopher Ulutupu (b.1987) is an artist of Samoan, Niuean and German descent currently based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. His video practice and performance work explores ideas around landscape, photography and the construction of colonial narratives. Ulutupu has held exhibitions and screenings at Cement Fondu, Sydney; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū; Dunedin Public Art Gallery; Jhana Millers, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington; the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Germany; Enjoy, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington; and SCAPE Public Art, Ōtautahi Christchurch.

## Emerita Baik (Aotearoa NZ)

Emerita Baik (b.1994) is an artist based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Massey University. Her sculptural works explore the relationship between language, abstraction and materiality, as informed by the experience of living in between the cultures of Korea and Aotearoa. Recent exhibitions include *The fairy and the woodcutter*, Robert Heald Gallery, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2020);  $\frac{\pi}{2}$ , Enjoy, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2020); *I love more than two loves*, RM, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2019); and *EOMma*, Toi Pōneke Arts Centre, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2019).

## Shireen Seno (Philippines)

Shireen Seno (b.1983) is an artist and filmmaker



whose work addresses memory, history, and image-making, often in relation to the idea of home. Her work has been exhibited in shows at Manila Contemporary, Green Papaya Art Projects, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore and Portikus in Frankfurt, Germany. Her feature films have screened as part of programmes associated with the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern and the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

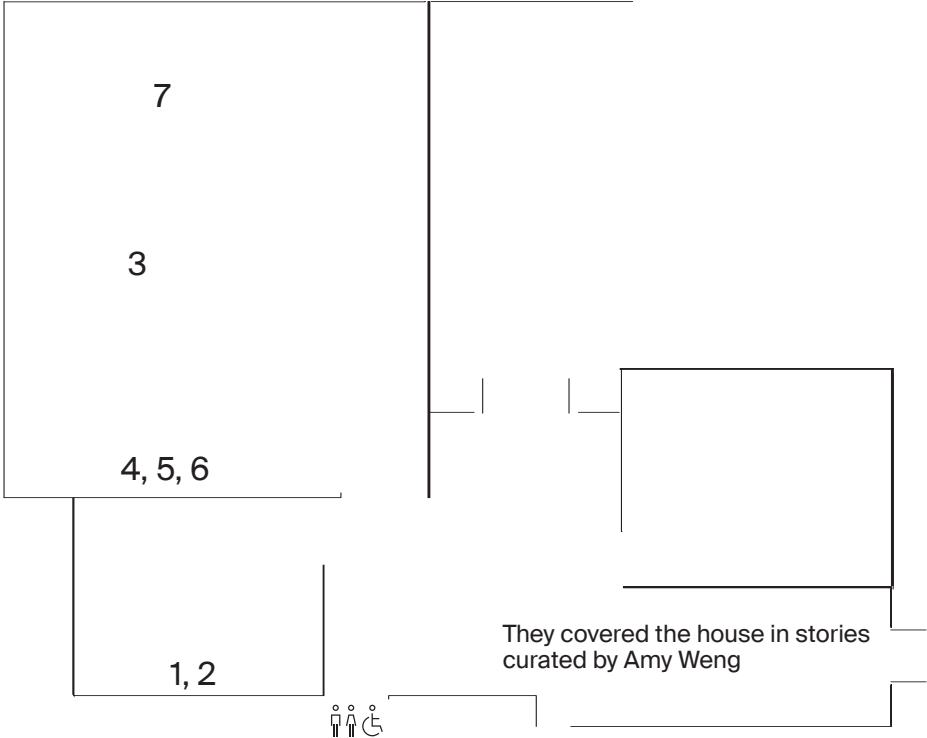
### Sione Tuívailala Monū (Australia/Aotearoa NZ)

Sione Tuívailala Monū (b.1993) is an artist of Tongan descent who works across the mediums of photography, moving image, adornment, performance and drawing. His practice draws on ideas of identity, family and Pasifika diasporic and queer experiences. Monū was recently part of CIRCUIT Symposium 2020: *Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns*, Pātaka Art + Museum, Porirua (2020); *Spheres: An Online Video Project*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū (2020); *Kaoha Kakala*, Fresh Gallery Ōtara and Objectspace (2017); and *Statuesque Anarchy*, Enjoy, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2017).

### Yuki Iiyama (Japan)

Yuki Iiyama (b.1988) lives and works in Tokyo, Japan. Iiyama creates installations that consist of video works, recorded materials and objects such as hand-knitted tapestries. By using records of the past and interviews with people, she examines the relationships between individuals, society and history. She explores processes of social stigmatisation brought forth by the narratives and testimonies of her collaborators through their lived experiences. Iiyama was part of the Yokohama Triennale in 2020 and is represented by WAITINGROOM, Tokyo.

# List of works



1. Shireen Seno  
*Shotgun Tuding*, 2014  
single-channel video, sound  
15 mins 57 secs  
courtesy of the artist
2. Yuki Iiyama  
*Moomin Family goes on a picnic to see Kannon*, 2014  
single-channel video, sound  
21 mins 21 secs  
courtesy of the artist & WAITINGROOM, Japan
3. Sione Tuivailala Monū  
*'Ao kakala*, 2021  
plastic flowers, foam board, beads  
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
4. Emerita Baik  
*Eyes of a rabbit*, 2021  
polyurethane, metal powder, cotton, polystyrene, acrylic paint  
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
5. Emerita Baik  
*Head of a camel*, 2021  
polyurethane, metal powder, silk, polystyrene, acrylic paint  
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
6. Emerita Baik  
*Nose of a pig*, 2021  
polyurethane, metal powder, cotton, polystyrene, acrylic paint  
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
7. Christopher Ulutupu  
*What's the worst you could do?*, 2021  
two-channel HD video, sound  
10 mins 48 secs  
cinematography by Haz Forrester  
sound & camera assist by Kane Laing  
commissioned by Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

## Principal funders



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