

ISLAND LIFE

17 May - 2 July 2022, Salisbury Arts Centre

Gayle Chong Kwan

Martha Atienza

June Mills

Clifton Powell

Chris Charteris and the Brisbane, UK & Ireland Kiribati
community associations



Image Courtesy of Artist. Gayle Chong Kwan. *Waste Archipelago*. 2020.

Island Life brings together artists addressing the political, social or economic conditions of island living, or who use the idea of islands to explore activist concerns.

The island as a concept has held open a particular idealised space for the European imagination, utopian or dystopian. Pivotal works such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-1611), Jules Verne's *Deux Ans de Vacances* (Two Years' Vacation) (1888) or William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) amongst others, determine a Eurocentric view of what an island means to someone from the 'civilised world'. The island within the context of Western culture permits normal society and the social contract to be reconfigured, often towards a Romantic idealism on the one hand or a brutish lawlessness on the other. Both extremes are projections of a European imaginary.

However, through the work of contemporary islander artists, the Island Life exhibition seeks to question and expand the perception of 'island' beyond these European optics. It aims to present a counterpoint by foregrounding perspectives from artists who live on and whose work is about islands and archipelagos. In particular, the show includes artists who explore concerns of the Global South. Among other themes the artists investigate issues around climate change, activism, artistic solidarity, friendship, survival, colonisation and the struggle for identity in relation to island life and living.

Events:

26 May 2022, 6pm. Private View and live performance by the Kiribati Tungaru Association of UK and Ireland.

31 May 2022, 7pm. Online panel discussion with the exhibition artists and curators.

Introduction

The Island Life exhibition is curated by artist Dr Jack Ky Tan and Wiltshire Creative's Head of Visual Arts, Mirka Golden-Hann. It forms part of the Salisbury International Arts Festival whose theme this year is 'islands'. From the start, this project presented Mirka with an interesting challenge. As a person originating from a landlocked central European country, Mirka decided to invite Jack to co-curate the exhibition. Whilst two curatorial perspectives inform this project, the aim of the exhibition is to present current realities of island-based artists.

Jack grew up in 70s and 80s Singapore, a small Maritime Southeast Asian island between Indonesia and Malaysia. His family originated from Hainan, a tropical island off the south coast of China. Although Jack now lives in Galloway, Southwest Scotland, he has always carried a sensibility of the tropical island with him. However, this is not a 'Singapore Sling' sensibility or that of Caliban's 'Sounds, and sweet airs', but one that holds coconut trees, white sands and joyful swimming together with cargo ships, economic survival, war and pollution. It is this complex sense of island that Mirka and Jack hope to bring to Salisbury with the help of the artists in this exhibition.

Island Life presents five works of art, a series of island artefacts, a live dance performance, and an online panel discussion. The artists in the exhibition currently live in island nations, have islander heritage, and/or make work about islands. Their work is informed by strong personal concerns and observations of what is happening to and around them as islander artists.

Martha Atienza, for example, is a Filipino-Dutch artist based in Bantayan Island in the Visayan Sea of the Philippines. This island is often depicted as a tropical paradise, with pristine beaches and clear turquoise waters. Bantayan Island is indeed this beautiful, so

much so that it was designated a protected 'Wilderness Area' in 1981. However, Martha's work adds a layer of insight to this image of paradise. Her video installation *Gilubong ang Akong Pusod sa Dagat* (My Navel is Buried in the Sea) is a fond but serious meditation on the economic circumstances that the fisherfolk of Bantayan currently find themselves in. Fish populations have severely declined due to a combination of climate change and commercial bottom-trawling fishing methods by large vessels. As such, the livelihoods of fishing communities have been put under enormous strain and island fisherfolk have had to find work as cargo ship seafarers.

Gayle Chong Kwan who is of Mauritian heritage offers another layer of understanding about island life through an exploration of how waste and pollution impact islands. Her photographic series *Oil Spill Islands* illustrates the pollutive consequences of shipping accidents but, through the lens of landscape art, the images also suggest that the ubiquity of human waste now forms the very nature of 'island'. Viewed alongside headpieces that make up her sculptural work *Food Waste*, Gayle connects seemingly distant occurrences of shipping accident waste to our very own bodies by proposing the opportunity to wear waste or to parade in waste as headdress. This suggests both our nearness to or complicity in a global system of waste, and also that the idea of waste is now part of our ontology as contemporary humans.

This sense of interconnectedness of people, things and places is a theme that is also picked up in artist and Aboriginal elder June Mills's *Friendship Mural*. June painted it to express solidarity for the independence struggle in West Papua, a neighbouring island some 260 miles off the north coast of Larrakia territory in northern Australia. However, June's artwork was erased under diplomatic pressure allegedly. Acts of erasure and censorship hold particular resonances and severity for indigenous people because they become ways of writing particular world views out of history, or

controlling how society is to be imagined by the settler majority. For *Island Life*, June's mural has been recreated in the exhibition by Jamaican-born Wiltshire-based painter Clifton Powell as an act of unerasure and also one of connection, or 'island-hopping' if you will (a concept both artists discussed in the online panel discussion) between Jamaica, Salisbury, the Larrakia Nation (in greater Darwin) and West Papua. June's original work of visual empathy and its subsequent erasure exposes the precarity of internationalist friendship in the face of a politics of globalisation. Yet its recreation by Clifton in Salisbury shows the resilience of the hope that June initiated.

The experience of erasure, migration and survival as central features of contemporary island life becomes palpable in the plight of Kiribati, an archipelago nation in the central Pacific Ocean. Scientists posit that Kiribati could become uninhabitable by 2050 due to rising sea levels, leading to extensive loss of heritage, culture, homes and nationhood. On display in the gallery are I-Kiribati cultural artefacts and objects/costumes from the collection of Michael and Nei Rotee Walsh. Also included in the exhibition is a video of a dance performance by the I-Kiribati community in Brisbane that was part of New Zealand artist Chris Charteris's *Tungaru: The Kiribati Project*. Diasporas of people and of things embody a sense of displacement but also a continued connection to the home left behind. If scientific predictions are correct, the I-Kiribati diaspora may be all that world culture has left of this kind of island life.

Jack Ky Tan and Mirka Golden-Hann



Oil Spill Islands (2017-2020). Photographic collage, print on aluminium
Food Waste (2021). Headpieces, wooden stands, c-type photographic print.

Waste Archipelago is a body of photographic, installation and event-based work by Gayle Chong Kwan, a British artist of Scottish and Chinese-Mauritian heritage. It explores waste through the prism and metaphor of the archipelago. The work invites us to appreciate the interconnectedness of how we conceive of, create and manage waste through our actions, beliefs and bodies. After receiving the 2019 Sustainable Art Prize by Art Verona and the Ca' Foscari University in Venice, Gayle worked with university students and academics in workshops to explore theories, perspectives and our lived experience of waste. Waste Archipelago was a result of these workshops.

Originally presented at Galleria Alberta Pane in Venice in 2021, Waste Archipelago included photographic collage, sculpture and performances. The body of work visualised oil spills as islands, created headwear out of foodstuffs, imagined dinner plates serving food waste, illustrated a herbarium out of waste paper, and displayed an embroidered tablecloth with anecdotal text on waste. From this rich series, the Island Life exhibition presents two sets of work: Oil Spill Islands and Food Waste.

Oil Spill Islands comprises 8 photographic collages made from documentary images of recent oil spills in the world's waters. Taken together they create an archipelago of waste. The photographic collages have been preserved in sea salt. Gayle developed the series as a response to the ecological consequences of a major oil spill off the coast of Mauritius in 2020, the island of her father's birth, and from her research into recent major oil spills throughout the world.

Presented on wooden stands are three out of the original six headaddresses from Food Waste. The headpieces are made out of c-type photographic print images related to food waste. They were worn by students from Ca' Foscari University who participated in the project, on processional walks through Venice in 2021 as a performance.



Martha Atienza, *Gilubong ang Akong Pusod sa Dagat (My Navel is Buried in the Sea)*

Three screen HD video, 31 mins

Gilubong ang Akong Pusod sa Dagat (My Navel is Buried in the Sea) is an experimental video project that explores the physical and emotional impact of the ocean on the lives of seafarers, fishermen and their families in Madridejos, a municipal area in the north of Bantayan Island in the Philippines. Presented in a three screen format, Martha has filmed fisherfolk and seafarers at home and at work in and on the sea.

The work attempts to convey the relationship between the ocean and those who derive their living from it by immersing viewers into the realities experienced by the fishermen and seafarers. Through an interweaving of audio-visual fragments, the film follows the lives of seafarers who work on international cargo vessels for up to 9 months at a time, as well as the lives of fishermen who labour to survive ever declining fish stocks using risky compressor (hosepipe) diving techniques.

The sounds, moving images, seascapes and recorded dialogue capture the sense of physical hardship and risks of working at sea, the isolation from family and home, and the waiting for loved ones to return. But they also record the humour, camaraderie, resilience and the will to survive and adapt in Bantayan Island life.

These entanglements between the Madridejos people and the sea (their navels metaphorically sited or buried in the sea, as the title of this work suggests) are also revealed in community 'town hall' discussions that form part of Martha's project. These discussions open up a space for communities to voice and reflect on the issues facing them as a historic fishing community, giving us insight into the impact that a changing ocean economy is having on their lives and relationships. Two of these community discussions can be viewed via the QR codes below.



International Seafarers, 16m 25s



Local Fishermen. 14m 55s



June Mills and Clifton Powell,
Friendship Mural
Painting on Altar Stage wall



Scan the QR code to view
images of June's original
mural.

This large painting is a recreation by Wiltshire artist Clifton Powell of an even larger mural by Aboriginal artist June Mills. June is an Elder of the Larrakia Nation which broadly covers the greater Darwin area of Australia's Northern Territory. June's work is one manifestation of a rounded practice that moves fluidly between painting, music, advocacy, public education, ritual, celebration and resistance.

In 2015, together with local artists and members of the West Papuan community living in Australia, June painted a Friendship Mural during a week of action in Darwin, in support of the West Papuan independence movement. It was an expression of solidarity between Aboriginal people, particularly those in Larrakia, and their indigenous West Papuan neighbours to the north across the Arafura Sea. In 2017, the mural was erased amid allegations of undue pressure by the Indonesian Consulate. The mural featured hands extending towards each other from the Aboriginal flag and the West Papuan 'Morning Star' flag. The raising of the Morning Star flag is currently banned in Indonesia and is considered an act of treason. Activists have been sentenced to jail terms up to 15 years for flying the flag and criminal charges have been brought against West Papuan protesters as recently as Dec 2021.

June's erased mural is recreated for this exhibition in Salisbury as a large-scale painting by a resident islander artist, Clifton Powell. Clifton is a Jamaican-born artist who paints landscapes, wildlife, still life and scenes of political unrest in the world. His work uses rich colour and strong contrast, and his recreation of June's mural draws from this. Clifton trained at the Jamaica School of Art and moved to London in the late 80s, showing alongside other preeminent Black artists of that time, before settling in Wiltshire to continue his practice.

Clifton's work of recreating the original mural in Salisbury mirrors the empathetic, visual and political translation June had to perform in showing support for the people of West Papua while in Australia. Working from photographs and in conversation with June, Clifton's painting undertakes a similar task of translation for the UK.



The movements in the traditional dance forms of Kiribati—the head, feet, hands and body posture—imitate the movement of the frigate bird and the Pacific golden plover bird as they walk and fly. As such, the dance positions include jerking head movements and outstretched arms. There are eight traditional dance styles: Te Buki (female dance emphasising hip movement), Te Ruoia (dancing in time with a chorus of singers), Te Kabuti (female dance to the rhythm of claps/stomping), Te Tirere (stick dance), Te Kaimatoa (a set pattern dance of endurance), Te Bino (sitting dance).

This video presents a number of dances by the Kiribati Associations of Australia and Brisbane at the Queensland Art Gallery as part of Tungaru: The Kiribati Project. This was a collaborative project that arose from New Zealand artist Chris Charteris' discovery of his Kiribati heritage. Chris went to Kiribati to meet his now extended family which resulted in a project that showcased I-Kiribati culture, encompassing contemporary sculpture, traditional crafts and artefacts, dance and music. The wider project also explored I-Kiribati contemporary concerns like climate change, rising sea levels, and the threat of loss or erasure of their land, homes and culture.

The dance in particular shows the closeness, entanglement and interdependence between islanders in Kiribati with animals (birds in particular) and the materiality of the island environment. Similarly, we too in larger nations are entangled with Kiribati. Their experience of sea incursion/flooding and threat of submersion as a low lying island nation demonstrates our impact on them through the systems of trade and consumption that contribute to global warming.

Accompanying the video are dance costumes and artefacts from the collection of Michael and Nei Rotee Walsh who live in Wales.



From the start of the making of this exhibition, there was a real desire to include actual objects from Kiribati (pronounced "kiribas"). The Republic of Kiribati comprises 33 atolls and reef islands (21 inhabited) situated over a wide area of the Pacific Ocean - between The Philippines, Hawaii and Australia. The I-Kiribati people originally lived in seventeen of these islands which they called 'Tungaru', and the Europeans called the Gilbert Islands. The islands rise only 2 to 6 metres above sea level making Kiribati and other Pacific Island nations acutely vulnerable to sea level rises. Together with coastal erosion, sea incursion has caused flooding in towns and villages, water contamination, population displacement and land loss. Kiribati is at risk of disappearing altogether if the climate crisis continues, with two of the republic's islands having already disappeared underwater.

The Island Life exhibition showcases dance costumes and other artefacts from the personal collection of Michael and Nei Rotee Walsh. Michael, a historian of Kiribati, has been the Honorary Consul of Kiribati in the UK since 1996. Michael and Rotee married in Kiribati 1975, and Rotee is one of about fifty people born in Kiribati who are currently living in the UK. Mirka Golden-Hann paid a visit to Michael and Roti's home (and consulate) in Wales where they selected the artefacts for this exhibition together. Photos of Mirka's visit are also on display.

Below are descriptions of the artefacts on display derived from personal accounts of Mirka's visit and from Michael's book 'A History of Kiribati: From the Earliest Times To The 40th Anniversary of the Republic'.

A caveat from Michael:

'It is important to recognise that within I-Kiribati culture these physical artefacts are seen as inseparable from the rituals and magic spells needed to use them, and they are of no significance whatever in their own right. Their use entirely depended on the correct magic, and if some activity failed it was because that magic had been incorrectly used, not because of lack of skill or inappropriate technology. The 'intellectual property' of

magic was secret to families, and might form part of someone's inheritance more important than physical objects, or even precious land ownership. Magical knowledge, as well as land, could be inherited, used and owned by both men and women.'

1. Female dance Costume.

This is a modern age female costume with a black coconut leaf skirt, complete with headpiece and body and arm ornaments. The skirt is made of smoked coconut leaf and the ornaments are made of coconut palm and Pandanus leaves. The two ornamental belts are made of coconut shell buttons and seashells.

Nei Rotee told me that she still remembers the smell of the seashells, which have to be left in the sun to rot out and eventually they become white and clean and ready to be used. There is a beautiful satin sheen to the coconut shell belt obtained by the oil that the dancers would apply to their bodies prior to performances. The colour of the skirt comes from smoking the material. Rotee said she first performed in this skirt in London in 1975, and many times since.

2. Male Dance Costume.

The skirt, headpiece, body and arm ornaments in this modern age costume are woven from Pandanus leaves. The belt is made of plaited human hair, a material used in Kiribati for many purposes, e.g., woven together with sennit (coconut fibres) to make fishing line.

3. Coconut toddy shell.

Toddy is the sap extracted from the coconut tree by cutting off the top of a leaf which then drips into the shell. This collecting shell is replaced twice or three times per day; in effect people are 'milking' the tree. There are numerous schools of toddy cutting and nearly every family has its own set of techniques. A skilled cutter

will collect up to two pints of sap from a single spathe in 24 hours. Coconut in the Tungaru diet provides one of the major sources of dietary fats, iron, fibre and most importantly Vitamin C of which coconut toddy is a good source.

4. Seed of the Pandanus tree.

Very few crops grow in the poor and saline soil of Kiribati; only eight were traditionally cultivated. Often propagated from cuttings, rather than seed, its fruit is an important food (and particularly as a 'famine food' in droughts). Its leaves are used for clothing, container-making and roofing thatch. The wood of the tree is used for building material, particularly for the structure of houses.

5. Eel trap model.

This eel trap model was made by Nei Rotee's father. It is an exact but miniature replica of a traditional eel trap. Nei Rotee describes how her father would make these as toys and learning aids and give them to his children and grandchildren.

Actual traps are some 12 feet long and up to four feet wide because Moray Eels reach up to 10 feet (3 m) in length and 66 lb (30 kg) in weight. They are ferocious, so using eel trapping is a very specialist skill. Eels were important sources of oil and fat. Spread onto strips of dried pandanus fruit pulp, eel was a 'famine food' in times of drought.

6. Fishing hooks.

Fish being a major source of food, the I-Tungaru people are expert fishermen using myriad traditional ways of catching fish: traps, nets, lures, and unbaited hooks for deep sea tuna fishing. There are no 'master' fishermen as in many other Pacific island cultures; rather, each family has its set of fishing methods which were regarded as 'secret' to family members. These two particular fish hooks are

made of mother of pearl and sennit (plaited dried grass) and were used for 'lure' fishing.

7. Whale Tooth Necklaces.

These are worn as body jewellery by both men and women. Whales were not hunted in Kiribati, but Rotee told me that when a dead whale washed ashore, it would be cut up and eaten, and the teeth extracted to use for jewellery. Rotee said that it was more common in Tungaru for the men to wear necklaces made out of human teeth—the teeth of their enemies—than whale teeth.

8. Shell sling stones.

Three shell sling stones. Seashell is a very dense material making surprisingly heavy sling ammunition. The slings were woven from sennit.

9. Shark tooth sword.

The Tungaru people were fierce warriors. Wars arose from feuds between families, wider conflicts within the atoll, or invasions of one island by another. Losers in wars became slaves of the victors, or were simply wiped out. Fights followed rituals and were fought at agreed places. Reading Michael's book I learned that young male warriors undertook rigorous battle training as part of becoming an adult. However, all family members of both sexes (with the exception of young girls and nursing mothers) also engaged in fighting. Women were situated in the front armed with short shark teeth swords, male fighters stood behind them with long lances, and behind the men adolescents and older men would throw shell sling shots.

Rotee informed me that this is a model sword, as actual swords were much larger (up to 10 feet long) and often tipped with stingray points. Still, even the model sword is razor sharp and capable

of inflicting a very deep laceration to the skin of the opponent. Fighters also wore elaborate coir armour woven from coconut shell fibres and helmets made from spikey puffer fish. Unfortunately the construction techniques have now largely been lost because the British banned armour-making during their rule. However many examples of armour exist in obscure corners of British museums.

10. Shell hand-axes.

Early human settlers had to find alternatives for their traditional stone tools as the islands have no stone, only coral. They replaced obsidian hand axes with axes made from Tridacna clam shells sharpened with pumice stone.

Rotee's family found in their land one of these axes which was about 700 years old. Such axes have been used by her ancestors for 2000 years. Axes were made for cutting trees and for preparing materials as late as the mid-twentieth century. When she was a child Rotee remembers her grandfather using this axe in his daily work.

11. Fire starting tool.

This is one section of a fire starting tool. Although this tool is from the Marshall Islands, the island group nearest to Kiribati and whose people are related to the I-Kiribati, Rotee remembers fires being started by similar methods in Kiribati when she was a child.

Resources:

For further links and resources about the artists and contributors, scan this QR code:



Thanks:

Michael Walsh and Nei Rotee Walsh

Visual Arts and Pottery Assistant: Connie Rudd

Technical Team: Dave Marsh, Barney Meats, Mike Scott, Tim Reed, Daniel Gent, John Titcombe

Front of House: Steve Ketley, Zoe Cupit, Juliet Coveney, Lynette Barnes, Callam Hoskins

Festival Producer: Lucy Babb

Artistic Director: Gareth Machin

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**Kiribati Tungaru
Association**
of the UK & The Republic of Ireland



**GALERIE
ALBERTA
PANE**

Map

- A** Gayle Chong Kwan
From the *Waste Archipelago* series:
Oil Spill Islands (photographic collage)
and *Food Waste* (headpieces, stands).
- B** Martha Atienza
*Gilubong ang Akong Pusod sa Dagat (My
Navel is Buried in the Sea)*. Three screen
HD video, 31 mins.
- C** June Mills and Clifton Powell
Friendship Mural. Painting on Altar Stage
wall. Videos of and about June Mills.
- D** Chris Charteris / Manokan Kiribati
Association (Brisbane)
Song and Dance performance for *Tungaru:
The Kiribati Project*. Video, 17:23 min
- E** I-Kiribati Artefacts and Costumes from the
collection of Michael and Nei Rotee
Walsh.

