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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Radical Stitch

MacKenzie Art Gallery (20 April–25 September 2022)
Art Gallery of Hamilton (11 February–27 August 2023)
Thunder Bay Art Gallery (13 October–3 March 2024)
National Gallery of Canada (17 May–20 October 2024)
Beaverbrook Art Gallery (30 November–2 March 2025)
Eiteljorg Museum (14 April–3 August 2025)

Beading is one of the most defining mediums of contemporary Indigenous art on this continent, and this landmark exhibition brings much-needed critical attention to the breadth and impact of this practice.

—Exhibition text

Beading is political, whether it's simply the personal contribution to an age-old continuum or consciously reworking loaded imagery. I really do see beading as an act of silent resistance.

—Nadia Myre, Algonquin artist, 2002

In 2022, the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, organized and launched the ground-breaking exhibition *Radical Stitch*, North America's largest ever beadwork exhibition to feature contemporary First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Native American artists. The exhibition, which has been awarded the 2024 Canadian Museums Association/Association des Musées Canadiens Award of Outstanding Achievement, is curated by an esteemed Indigenous curatorial team comprising Sherry Farrell Racette (University of Regina), Cathy Mattes (University of Winnipeg), and Michelle LaVallee (National Gallery of Canada) and joined a series of smaller exhibitions emerging in recent years that underscore the widespread and growing practices of beaders. Spanning two large gallery spaces, the exhibition brought together over 100 works by 48 artists from coast to coast to coast and from both sides of the imposed International Boundary dividing Canada and the United States.

The exhibition's title, *Radical Stitch*, speaks to the transformative power of beads in the hands of artists. The carefully curated exhibition shines a much-deserved spotlight on this often overlooked artistic tradition that has only recently begun to receive the recognition it deserves. Beadwork is one of the most widely recognized and defining Indigenous mediums of visual expression. It has been practiced by Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island (North America) using carved bone, ivory, stone, porcupine quills, and shells for thousands of years. This tradition predates the colonization of these lands and has grown to include a wide range of materials, from trade beads to computer pixels. The exhibition makes an essential contribution to Indigenous art histories, and the diversity of artistry exhibited is an excellent assertion that the first arts of these lands are Indigenous.





Figure 1. Installation view, *Radical Stitch*, Mackenzie Art Gallery, 2022.
Photograph by Don Hall, courtesy of the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

Historically, beadwork has been perceived as women's art and craft and ignored mainly by patriarchal exhibiting institutions. The exhibition celebrates the radical shift from museum storage vaults to community-based reclamation and resurgence to contemporary art galleries. This shift is significant, as with this increased access, there is an opportunity to foster Indigenous cultural practices through these collections, learn from them, honor them, and activate them through exhibitions and presentations that bring communities together in the spirit of knowledge sharing, celebration, and community building.

Beading is an enduring practice, and contemporary artists continue these traditions to create new works with glass beads, video, and digital media. *Radical Stitch* is a compelling intergenerational and inclusive exhibition featuring a mix of Elder, established, and emerging contemporary artists working in various art-making practices honoring this continuity and celebrating beadwork in a contemporary context; honoring the solemn, the political, the practical, and the humorous. The exhibition has not been conceived as a survey exhibition, instead, the curatorial team sought representational balance in geography, diversity, and regional styles. The result is a show filled with artists working with the customary and the contemporary, bringing together art that dazzles, educates, pushes boundaries, and resists classification (figure 1).

The curatorial team has assembled artwork demonstrating significant emergent trends by innovative artists across Turtle Island exemplifying technical excellence. Some of the thematic strands woven throughout the exhibition include wearable art, portraiture, food sovereignty, complicated histories, and complex identities, political and critical issues, youth appeal/popular culture, knowledge reclamation, familial relations, and intergenerational practices, and Indigenous futurisms through digital beadwork, new media, and video work (figure 2).

Three revered First Nations beadwork artists—Ruth Cuthand, Bev Koski, and Jean Marshall—were commissioned to create new work for *Radical Stitch*. The exhibition has been well received by Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences and earned the first spot in *First American Art Magazine's* Top Ten list of Native art events for 2023.



Figure 2. Nico Williams, *Aaniin*, 2002. Glass beads. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Don Hall, courtesy of the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

The Mackenzie Art Gallery has organized and circulated a popular touring program, first at the Art Gallery of Hamilton in southern Ontario and then at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery (TBAG) in northern Ontario. The exhibition differs slightly in each venue, making space to engage and highlight local Indigenous communities. In Hamilton, the exhibition included a gathering space where local artists gave workshops, and the gallery worked with the Woodland Cultural Centre on programming and a fashion show. Thunder Bay is a regional hub in northern Ontario with a thriving community of bead workers and the Thunder Bay Art Gallery is a leader in promoting the art of Indigenous artists locally and nationally. Several Thunder Bay and First William First Nation artists were featured in the exhibition.

Radical Stitch is bringing people together to share, learn, honor, and enjoy each other's company through beadwork. Opportunities for our communities to come together, collaborate and share are significant, given the long history of colonial attempts through legislation and pass and permit systems to control our movement and our ability to come together. The supporting community-led programming assists in transcending traditional museum practices and fosters community, inclusion, and reconciliation. The *Beading Together: Radical Stitch Symposium* was held on 25 June 2022, at the Mackenzie Art Gallery and the Shushkitew Collective, a Métis arts group working to advance "Métis self-determination and flourishing in the arts through forms of gathering, knowledge sharing, research and advocacy." In Thunder Bay, the art gallery organized the *Aanikoobijiganag: Thunder Bay Beading Symposium*, a three-day gathering 8–10 February 2024, coordinated with artist Jean Marshall and the Anemki Art Collective, to coincide with the exhibition. It was the first beading symposium to be held in a region known for some of the most creative beadworkers.

The exhibition is due to tour to further venues in the next couple of years, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, and in 2025, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, United States, and will be accompanied by a catalog co-published by the MacKenzie Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Canada, featuring contributions from multiple

authors. Together, the wide range of venues and this catalog will bring the dazzling works of the artists involved to a much wider audience.

Linda Grussani

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Positionality

As an Indigenous cultural practitioner who has worked in cultural institutions and recently began my beading journey, I have been fortunate to have visited the exhibition in three venues: the inaugural showing at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, on Treaty 4 territory, and then as part of the touring program in Thunder Bay, Ontario, on Fort William First Nation territory, and at the National Gallery of Canada on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinàbeg Nation. On all three occasions, I attended the exhibitions along with beading symposia and programming aimed at bringing bead workers and the general audience together with local Indigenous communities. Although I wrote this review before the exhibition was installed at the National Gallery of Canada in May 2024, as a member of the Kitigàn Zìbì Anishinàbeg First Nation, I was thrilled that an iteration of Radical Stitch also visited the territory of my maternal Anishinàbeg Algonquin ancestors in Ottawa, Canada.

Rising Tide: Art and Environment in Oceania

National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (12 August 2023–14 April 2024)

This small but well-crafted exhibition assembles artworks and artifacts from across the southwest Pacific to highlight the ongoing impacts of climate change and plastic pollution in Oceania. The exhibition is put together in a resourceful and creative way. The curators have made the most of the limited space and chosen sustainable materials for labels and mounts to minimize single-use plastics, and lessen environmental impact.

The visitor enters an oceanscape: the sound of waves lapping, and walls painted in light and deep blue hues. A 12-minute rolling video installation viscerally puts across the threat to Tuvalu from rising sea levels. It features artist Angela Tiatia (Sāmoa/Aotearoa) lying on a concrete structure that juts into the sea as the waves roll over. Gradually, as the waves get higher, it becomes more uncomfortable to observe as she struggles to maintain her hold.

Close by hang photographs from the Pacific-based, youth-led activist network 350 Pacific, also created to highlight the predicaments arising with the sea level. The photographs depict the Pacific Climate Warriors at the ocean's edge, dressed in traditional bark cloth (Fijian, *masi*) and mats and raising canoe paddles: symbols of strength and an enduring relationship to the ocean, reiterated in their slogan, "We are not drowning; we are fighting."

Barkcloth is also the central material in *Samoa no uta* (Japanese, A song about Sāmoa–Vasa [Ocean]) by Yuki Kihara, of Sāmoan and Japanese descent. This spectacular artwork is composed of five overlapping kimonos made of bark cloth (Sāmoan: *siapo*) representing Kihara's Trans-Pacific identity and the Sāmoan concept of *vā*; meaning "the space that connects." Together they depict a tsunami looming over a Sāmoan beach, in a style evoking Japanese artist Hokusai's *The Great Wave of Kanagawa*, presented from a cross-sectional view of the sky and sea, which are patterned with Japanese and Sāmoan motifs. The more you look, the more details emerge: a sea turtle swims unnervingly close to a submerged plastic bag; a human skull sits on a dying coral reef; and sprouting green coconuts (conveying new life) contrast with an empty Coke can.



Figure 1. *Bottled Ocean 2123*. Photograph by Andy Catlin, National Museums of Scotland.

The remainder of the room is focused on the theme of Cultural Resilience, especially in two low-lying island groups, Marshall Islands and Kiribati, which are among the most vulnerable to sea level rise. An installation featuring a video of poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, of Marshall Island ancestry, shows how artifacts can act as “cultural ambassadors,” representing the vitality and value of Marshallese culture. Her poem “Tell Them” is a call to attention to how rising seas threaten livelihoods. A nearby case displays Kiribati *Te Tai* (headdresses) made from plastic drinking straws by i-Kiribati diasporic master weavers Louisa Humphry and Kaetaeta Watson, who make resourceful use of plastic waste in Aotearoa New Zealand, where Kiribati traditional materials are not readily available.

Materials such as the pandanus and paper mulberry trees used to make valued mats/baskets and bark cloth are also under threat from rising seas and climate change. However, the historical and contemporary objects on display attest to how peoples across Oceania are constantly adapting techniques and adopting new materials. The theme of creative reuse continues in the section that follows, Innovative Practice. Glass spearheads made by Aboriginal Australian men near Kimberley, Western Australia, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exemplify their creative recycling of glass bottles, and ceramic telegraph insulators (one of which is on display). Another case contains eye-catching baskets woven by Chamorro master fisherman Anthony C. Guerrero according to traditional techniques but using discarded plastic strapping as a durable substitute for strips of pandanus leaves. The case opposite appears like a tank for aquatic creatures. The Torres Strait Island Erub Arts Group remodel discarded “ghost nets” (plastic fishing nets)—death-traps for marine life—to make these lifelike sculptures.

Plastic waste is also creatively transformed into a vital oceanscape in *Bottled Ocean 2123*, the immersive art installation that forms the final section of the exhibition (figure 1). Artist George Nuku, of Māori, Scottish, and German descent, presents viewers with a postapocalyptic scene 100 years from now, in which the earth has been flooded, and plastic outlasts life as we know it. Atop a reef of plastic bottles rides a carved plexiglass *waka hourua* (double-hulled canoe), transporting the skull of a sea mammal. Poised overhead are ghost-like sea creatures, including manta rays, hammerhead sharks, and jellyfish, crafted from plexiglass, water drums, and bottles. Nuku is known for creating art from plastic, his preferred material. In the nearby Facing the Sea gallery, visitors can see an early *waka taua* (Māori war canoe) that Nuku restored and completed with a carved acrylic stern post. Nuku hopes to change people’s attitude to plastic—treating it as something to treasure (*taonga*). *Bottled Ocean 2123* is an apt way to conclude an exhibition that demonstrates a long history in Oceania of turning trash into treasure through creative repurposing. And, in centering perspectives from this region renowned for its cultural as well as ecological vitality and diversity, it highlights the urgency of action against climate change and environmental degradation.

Rachel E. Smith
University of Aberdeen

Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom (8 September 2023–7 January 2024)

This review was written by three PhD researchers currently studying in England, but originating from Brazil, France, and Nigeria—key countries in the Black Atlantic trade. It therefore expresses three perspectives on the exhibition, shaped by our specific experiences of the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and colonization. While unconventional, we hope that the interweaving of our voices can offer a unique and diverse outlook at the exhibition.

The grandeur of the Fitzwilliam Museum leaves a lasting impression on first-time visitors until the exhibition exposes its connection to the slave trade. *Black Atlantic* opens with two portraits: one depicts a Black man and the other a white¹ man. The former is probably Olaudah Equiano or Ignatius Sancho who commented on enslavement in the eighteenth century. The latter is Richard Fitzwilliam, whose collection and bequest helped found the museum. The suggestion of the identity of the person in the first painting sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition. *Black Atlantic* is built on stories of Black people, stories such as Equiano's, whose autobiography is presented and part of which is read in a video performance. The works of contemporary artists scattered throughout the show help to make past and present Black voices heard. These subjectivities frame the exhibition and contribute to telling another story of the slave trade and the colonization of the Americas, while rooting it in a more local history, that of Cambridge and the Fitzwilliam Museum.



Figure 1. Vanishing Point 29 (Duyster) (2021), Barbara Walker, on the Fitzwilliam Museum façade, 25 October 2023 © Garance Nyssen.

Walking into the exhibition as a Black African researcher, with little knowledge of the transatlantic slave trade other than its impact on Africans in the diaspora, I could be likened to a blank page waiting to be written on. I felt an honesty in how these stories are told and was intrigued by the shift from trading with Black African merchants to enslaving Black people. Through this, I realized the different experiences of blackness: Black Africans who do not descend from slavery have a strong African heritage and identity, and Black people who descend from enslaved Africans in Europe and the Americas feel separated from their African heritage. I saw my privilege as a Black African who does not carry the trauma and stigma of slavery. Through Richard Waller's 1686 *Table of Coloures*, the exhibition shows the history of racist classification by Europeans to justify slavery. In the same section, Keith Piper's contemporary *Coloureds' Codex*, depicts how slave-owning societies based their discrimination of all people of Black heritage on invented skin-tones and how this racist ideology still impacts them today.

The products of the transatlantic slave trade (such as sugar, cocoa, and tobacco) are framed through the perspectives of the enslaved and their resistance. Toward the end of the exhibition, we discover *Ifá* by Alexis Peskine, whose self-portrait made in nails evokes the violence suffered by his ancestors on plantations. At the same time, by referring to the Ifá divination system, he celebrates the Iorubá heritage still widely worshipped in Candomblé ceremonies in Brazil today. Following the exhibition's narrative, Peskine's work is displayed where the curators seek to address "how the Black Atlantic presence runs deep in the blood of many still living today." Such a statement resonates deeply, while bordering on the obvious, especially for those like me who come from a country where millions of Africans were forcibly brought for over 300 years, and where racial segregation persists in various forms. This same section recalls (though timidly) the Maroons—*Quilombolas* in Brazil—self-liberated people and major symbols of resistance to slavery and the continuity of African cultural heritage across generations. Some objects produced by these people are presented as contributing to the creation of a "new Black Atlantic visual language."

In the frame of the debate concerning the (im)possibility of the decolonization of museums (Vergès 2023), we consider that *Black Atlantic* succeeds in directly addressing the legacy of the museum that hosts it, reflecting on people's positionalities on slavery, enslavement, colonialism and racism. However, it could have gone further, for example, in showcasing Black historical prowess predating the transatlantic slave trade. While briefly mentioning the story of the Ashanti, stories of other great West African civilizations, like Ife and Benin, remain untold. Bolder exhibitions on this topic have taken place in countries whose population is deeply tied to the slave trade—such as *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (Brazil, Museu de Arte de São Paulo, 2018). But it seems to us that this reveals less a failure on the curators' part but more the insufficiency of addressing this topic within the possibilities offered by European museums.

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NOTES

1. Following the curators' choice, we did not capitalize "white" in order to "call attention to historic and ongoing racialized inequalities."

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The Light of Day: Unearthing the Past

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia (2 February–19 May 2024)

From 1952 to 1963 a “willingness to help the Motherland” saw British atomic bombs tested on three Australian sites, the Montebello Islands (Western Australia), the Great Victorian Desert (Western Australia and South Australia), and—most extensively—in Maralinga (South Australia) (Tynan 2016). These locations were selected for their supposed “minimal disruption” to the Australian populace and urban life. This reasoning demonstrates a chilling devaluation of Indigenous lives, and a devastating failure to recognize environmental interdependence (a rudimentary truth observed for millennia within Indigenous knowledge systems). One of the seven bombs tested in Maralinga (in addition to at least 600 “minor trials”) was twice the size of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 (Romensky 2016). Over 70 years later, remaining survivors and their descendants are plagued by trauma and health effects, and landscapes—some still uninhabitable—will continue to be haunted by lingering radiation for thousands of years to come (Ladd 2020).

Yet this blatant humanitarian and environmental atrocity has largely been omitted from Australian history books and mainstream collective memory. Records, or even numerical statistics, of the displaced, deceased, or those otherwise impacted by the atomic testing appear not to exist. This phenomenon is not unrelated to the then colonial bureaucracy’s exclusion of First Nation’s People from census data—for someone whose life was never acknowledged on paper cannot be murdered on it either.

The Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) and 2024 Perth Festival blockbuster collaboration, Yhonnie Scarce’s *The Light of Day*, interrogates this cross section of complexities. The Kokatha and Nukunu artist’s non-exhaustive survey spans two floors, three exhibition areas, and a lift, a captivating testament to Scarce’s prolific career but also her urgency to bring into consciousness histories that may have otherwise fallen forgotten. Working outward from her own family history, Scarce mines anthropogenic collections to champion individuals and subvert colonial impulses imposed upon archival material, weaving narratives of strength and resistance. Glass, photography, and installation shed light on the previously elusive threads that entangle environmental degradation and past denials (and attempted erasures) of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Abandoning chronological order, *The Light of Day* emphasizes conceptual links between works. Curatorial choices create the impression that works are physically layered throughout the exhibition space (with the recurring use of glass allowing for works to be glimpsed through those preceding them). This curatorial strategy encourages a wholistic, conversational consideration of the works displayed. Like the optical pull of a reflected sunbeam, works twinkle in and out of focus, gently overlapping. This is exemplified by *Thunder Raining Poison*, a colossal gathering of glittering glass yams (figure 1). Hanging in the void between floors one and two, the work is seen from all levels, both indicating the holistic nature of the exhibit and enticing viewers upstairs. A similar effect is encouraged downstairs via the use of slatted wooden dividers so that bodies of work are contained but equally positioned for contemplation within the greater whole. The ghostly backs of *Remember Royalty*, for example, shine through to frame works on either side so that they cannot be viewed separately.

Likewise on the second floor, *Cloud Chamber* is centrally suspended as to semi-eclipse different works whichever way viewers turn. When facing *Working Class Man (Andamooka Opal Fields)*, Scarce’s grandfather, Barwell Coleman, is cloaked in golden light so that a halo illuminates his smiling, determined face (figure 2). In this overlap the expanse between opposing walls melts away and viewers are prompted to consider Australia’s hidden history of indentured labor and a disregard for environmental custodianship as products of the same value system.

A truly successful survey show, *The Light of Day* also encourages alternative contemplations of works via curatorial reframing. This is particularly evident with *Dinah*, where curatorial choices emphasize the



Figure 1. Yhonnie Scarce, *Thunder Raining Poison*, 2016–17. Perth, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Courtesy Yhonnie Scarce/Bo Wong.

artist's treatment of archives as a workable medium (like glass or textiles). Distinguished from its previous display in *Missile Park* (Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane 2021) and *Border Crossings Ireland/Australia* (SASA Gallery, Adelaide), *The Light of Day* contextualizes *Dinah* within a scene of homely grandeur. Scarce's grandmother, Dinah, gazes proudly outward from her mantelpiece throne, framed atop an elegant fireplace in an ornately wallpapered room. Originally unnamed and undressed above her waist, Dinah was objectified with her photograph used to denote a type within an anthropological collection. In respectfully reassigning her grandmother's individuality and agency, Scarce demonstrates the malleability of the archive, employing archival material in a manner that actively subverts the agendas associated with its production.



Figure 2. Yhonnie Scarce, *Working Class Man* (Andamooka Opal Fields), 2016–17. Perth, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Courtesy Yhonnie Scarce/Bo Wong.

Allured by delicate beauty and technical mastery, viewers are confronted with dark underbellies in *The Light of Day*. In this successful survey exhibition, works are recontextualized to emphasize interlocking concerns. “Digging up the past,” the artist liberates individuals from archival tactics of classification and categorization previously used to maintain a colonial subject/object axis (Tate 2023). Paying homage to her relative’s resilience in the face of unimaginable evils, Scarce unearths somber and disturbing histories.

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Polarity: Fire & Ice

Fremantle Arts Centre (10 February–28 April 2024)

As part of the 2024 Perth Festival's program of public exhibitions, Fremantle Arts Centre held *Polarity: Fire & Ice*, a thought-provoking exhibition that brought together an international selection of artists (Fig. 1). Following signage that led visitors into the foyer at the heart of the building, the exhibition began with small sampler works representative of the key artists on display. On the left wall was a poster-sized monitor playing a short film by Adam Sébire of a man traversing arctic ice. To the right was a Tim Georgeson photographic print of a tree burning against a barren nightscape. Both works hung at the entrances of two mirrored hallways leading away from the foyer to the gallery spaces in the wings of the building. The non-subtle cues of white and orange wall paint and the respective works (one frozen, the other ablaze) clearly indicated the curatorial segregation of the *ice* from the *fire* works.

The only exception was Cass Lynch's audiovisual work, *Dampland 2.0*, which played in a room adjacent to the foyer and between the hallways. The placement of Lynch's work was pivotal in bringing together the two halves of the exhibition, as well as in providing a much-needed local context. In *Dampland 2.0*, Lynch narrates the history of the Western Australian coastline through the lens of Indigenous science and Noongar storytelling. Recalling generations of stories from Past Elders who witnessed Western Australia's ecological history, Lynch bridges the chasmic gap between fire and ice by reminding us that both are phases in nature's cycle. Lynch's work was the first clue to the nuances in *Polarity: Fire & Ice*, which evidently was much more than a plain viewing of polar extremes.



Figure 1. Installation view of *Polarity: Fire & Ice*. Photo by Rebecca Mansell. Courtesy of Fremantle Arts Centre.

The exhibition had a heavy emphasis on First Nation perspectives and systems of knowledge. Through its displayed works, the exhibition gave a critical commentary on the effects of global warming in disparate places. Sébire's lengthy video work, *AnthropoScene VII: Sikujumaataarpoq*, treads close to a message about cultural loss. His multiscreen installation was a meditative work looking in on the secluded, local world of Uummannaq Island. The term *Sikujumaataarpoq* is a Kalaallistuk word that translates to "sea ice formation is delayed." This term, with many other Kalaallistuk words appearing throughout the film, recognizes the forced changes to culture and community occurring in Uummannaq due to extreme climate change. Even while Sébire's film captivates with images of giant glaciers towering over tiny motorboats in the deep sea, these rare sights seen at an almost life-sized scale makes the loss within these places feel inescapable.

At the same time as the sea ice formation is decaying, Georgeson depicts images of the Kariyarra people scoping the Tanami Desert in the aftermath of the 2020–2021 desert fires (Fig. 2). With an almost identical three-piece multiscreen setup, the similarity between Georgeson's and Sébire's displays were one of the many successful curatorial attempts to form parallels between the two polarities in the exhibition. An even stronger connection across all the works was their common medium. Like Sébire and Georgeson's multiscreen displays, all the works in the exhibition were either films or photographs documenting the weathering extremes of nature's most inaccessible climates. With all artists working digitally, there was a sense of estrangement for visitors who saw intimate portrayals of local life and cultural practice, but only virtually. The growing desire to experience the beauty captured within these immersive works heightened the anxiety that these places may dissolve, irretrievably, into the past.



Figure 2. Installation view of *Chanamee, Never Die* (2023) by Tim Georgeson. Courtesy Miles Noel and Fremantle Arts Centre.

As a final instalment to the exhibition, there was Maureen Gruben's sensitive work, *Stitching My Landscape*. A gesture of hope, Gruben's video documents her stitching an extremely long roll of red fabric into a large plane of ice. To fasten the fabric in place, Gruben buries portions of the gigantic roll in traditional ice-fishing holes reminiscent of ones she recalls her brother making during the seasonal harvests. At the end of the laborious weaving, the camera scans across the 300 m long stitch, revealing a zigzag pattern that is representative of the stitch used in traditional Inuit dress and craft. Gruben's stitching speaks to the healing that is possible through persistent human effort and care, demonstrating the role that First Nation knowledge has as a guide in the climate crisis. It was this emphasis on cross-cultural cooperation in the face of global warming that was the main message successfully communicated in *Polarity: Fire & Ice*. Even while the dichotomous curatorial strategy was engaging, its masterful moderation by the parallelisms in the curation prevented it from overshadowing the strong unity in the exhibition's message.

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Tibuta – Kinaakiia Ainen Kiribati: Tibuta – Identifies Kiribati Women

Bottle Creek Gallery, Pātaka Art + Museum
Porirua, Aotearoa New Zealand (7 October to 11 November 2023)

Bottle Creek Gallery's white walls are a rainbow of tibuta, tibuta, and more tibuta, I-Kiribati women's embroidered and smocked blouses that are a symbol of their identity. At the center of the exhibition space (figure 1), surrounded by tibuta that appear to be paying tribute, stands *Otintaai*, a proud I-Kiribati climate warrior. She stands guard, a goddess protecting these precious textiles and I-Kiribati women's heritage arts for I-Kiribati women here in Aotearoa. Also, on display toward the back of the gallery are several mauri wear dresses, including a "tibuta smocking inspired wedding dress," made by Tiemeri Tiare, a tibuta and mauri wear maker based in Papakura. Among the many tibuta is the uniform for the Ueen Kiribati Group that originated in Waikato in the 1970s—four white tibuta with three embroidered flowers. Lastly, there is a red gingham fabric tibuta belonging to Louisa Humphry paired with a flax te riri woven by Kaetaeta Watson and Humphry. These other textiles fill out the gallery nicely and showcase the diversity of clothing worn by I-Kiribati people that evoke a strong sense of community, joy, and women's mana.

The celebrated I-Kiribati artists Kaetaeta Watson and Louisa Humphry, MNZM created *Otintaai* or "sunrise," from harakeke, copper, lead, walnut, oak wood, nylon, plastic, and coconut fiber. She is in fact wearing a tibuta-inspired woven top. In 2021, *Otintaai* became an important part of Te Papa Tongarewa's Pacific Cultures collection (see figure 2 Lagi-Maama this issue). It is Watson and Humphry who wanted to develop an exhibition focused on the culturally significant tibuta as a form of documentation, given the limited scholarship on the blouses. With the support of Lagi-Maama, who have collaborated with the artists on previous projects, *Tibuta: Kinaakiia Ainen Kiribati* became a reality (*Tibuta* exhibition catalog 2023).

Like urohs en Pohnpei, machine-embroidered and appliqued skirts from Pohnpei Island, tibuta are vibrant, dynamic textiles that are so much more than meets the eye (Kihleng 2015). These “living garments” express the distinctiveness of I-Kiribati women’s aesthetics, and when worn, demonstrate the strength of the collective connecting I-Kiribati women living in the diaspora to women on the home islands. The tibuta are a link between I-Kiribati women and their genealogies, the tibuta makers and their mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and beyond. This first of its kind exhibition *Tibuta: Kinaakiia Ainen Kiribati* is curated by the I-Kiribati women who love, sew, gift, and wear them in Aotearoa, along with Lagi-Maama.



Figure 1. Entrance and installation view of the exhibition *Tibuta – Kinaakiia Ainen Kiribati: Tibuta – Identifies Kiribati Women* with *Otintaai* on the left, as the central display, Pātaka Art + Museum, Porirua, Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of Lagi-Maama.

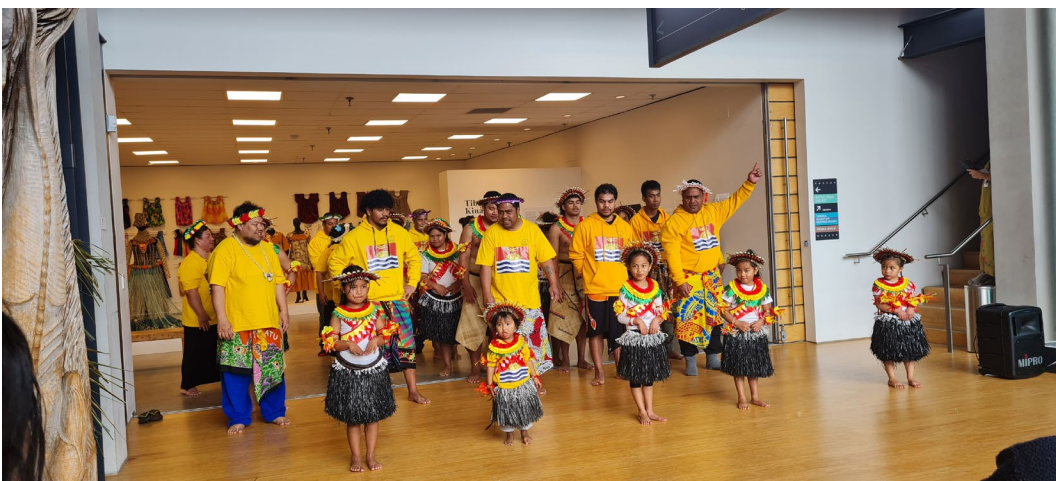


Figure 2. Community performance at the opening of the exhibition *Tibuta – Kinaakiia Ainen Kiribati: Tibuta – Identifies Kiribati Women*, Pātaka Art + Museum, Porirua, Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of Conal McCarthy.

It is a rare opportunity that one gets to visit an exhibition dedicated to Micronesian women's textile arts anywhere in the world including here in Aotearoa New Zealand where Moana Oceania arts tend to be Polynesia dominated. As a Micronesian woman from Pohnpei whose research has focused on Micronesian women's textile arts and fashion, I was thrilled to return to Pōneke in time to visit the exhibition *Tibuta: Kinaakiia Ainen Kiribati* at Pātaka Art + Museum in Porirua. The exhibition reminded me of other "firsts": *Nimameaā: The Fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet* curated by Tongan sisters Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai and Manuēsina Māhina (now Māhina-Fujimoto) in 2011 at Objectspace and *Urohs Fever*, which I co-curated with Deeleeann Daniel as part of a larger exhibition on Micronesian arts, *Air Canoe*, for the 10th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT10) at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, in 2021–2022. Like *Nimameaā* and *Urohs Fever*, *Tibuta: Kinaakiia Ainen Kiribati* elevates Moana Oceania women's textile arts into the white-walled gallery space where they can be appreciated and admired as art. Through these exhibitions, curated by members of these communities, audiences learn that Moana Oceania textiles, found in Pacific peoples' homes and worn at various functions, also belong in museums and galleries as fine works of art.

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Cellphone: Unseen Connections

National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC (June 2023–2026)

Cellphone: Unseen Connections is the result of more than 12 years of intensive development and the brain-child of Joshua A. Bell, Curator of Globalization at the National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology. Emerging alongside ethnographic scholarship on the materiality of cell phones (Bell et al 2018), the exhibition draws on archaeological and ethnographic frameworks to "explode" the cell phone. This allows the curators to take the cell phone apart, element by element, and follow the life of its components, the people who work on them, and the effects this labor has on us and our environments.

The result is an engagingly interactive exhibition focusing on the materiality of the cell phone as an object and its essential infrastructure as well as cultural and linguistic changes wrought by cell phone use in diverse global contexts. The exhibition incorporates games, workshops, and stories from activists who are using cell phones to shape political possibilities in the present and future. Currently it is on display till 2026, with plans to travel. The exhibition also makes a free, print-on-demand toolkit, in Spanish,



Figure 1. The tower of recycled cellphones. Photograph by James D. Tiller and Brittany M. Hance, Smithsonian Institution.

French, Arabic and Chinese, available for a variety of venues that might want to replicate the exhibition outside Washington, DC. This feature makes the exhibition appropriately mobile and increases its reach as a pedagogical tool beyond the museum.

The exhibition is divided into four sections, starting with the principal components of cell phones, including specimens of minerals and elements extracted from the earth that are used in their making. Some of these include tantalum and coltan, found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the exhibition offers a glimpse into the lives of those who mine and labor in the extraction of these metals. Following the specific elements that go into the cell phone, we move to infrastructure that existed prior to the development of the cell phone and that formed the foundations on which cell phone affordances have been built. Replications of servers, cell phone towers, underground and undersea cables illustrate the physical backbone on which the illusion of “wirelessness” depends.

A third section focuses on the cultural impact of how cell phones have become an integral part of life globally focusing on, among other locations, Papua New Guinea, Kenya, and the Middle East. These sections highlight the incredible plasticity of how humans domesticate tools into “traditional” practices as well as forge novel uses and relationships through them. Finally, a section highlights the environmental impact of cell phone production and urges visitors to pay attention to electronic waste and what happens to our phones when we replace them with the latest models. Across these sections, the visitors are drawn into a complex “unseen global network of people, labor, and infrastructure.”¹

Designed with a younger demographic in mind, the curators have adopted a casual, interactive tone to address their visitors. My own interaction with the exhibition unfolded over multiple visits; on my own as well as with students in two courses that I taught during 2023 and 2024. Students were excited by the features that encouraged them to touch exhibits and play games that taught them how calls actually connect, what cell phone towers and servers look like, and how previous technologies like railways and radio

made their phones possible. The tone of the exhibition was a marked contrast to their typical experience with museums, not only teaching them an analytical approach to an everyday device they take utterly for granted, but also heightening their experience of the museum as a place of contemporary learning, which is not how they normally see it. The exhibit was “captivating,” “accessible,” and “fun.”

The exhibition is a demonstration of the *chaîne opératoire* as developed by the French archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan (Lewis and Arntz 2020) or the social life of things as developed by Igor Kopytoff (1986). This approach follows the life of an object and all those who are involved in its journey thus exposing connections that, as users removed from the contexts of production, we do not otherwise see. By exposing these “unseen personal, cultural, and technological connections your cellphone makes easier” the exhibition also forces us to face the ethical considerations of our consumer practices on those who labor to make possible the cell phone as an object.

There were two features in the exhibition that stood out to me, an older visitor who remembers a world before cellphones. The first was a tower of recycled cellphones that showcases the changes since the first cellphones became available (figure 1). This tower is a great icebreaker especially as people gather around it trying to spot their first cell phones and tell stories of how they got them and what a unique device it was “back then.” The second is a nod to the fact that the exhibition is housed in the National Museum of Natural History, which contains the Smithsonian’s Anthropology Department. Once you leave the exhibition you pass a small replica of Lucy, the ancient hominin that had both human and ape-like characteristics. Only, she seems rather modern in her stance, holding up a cell phone pursing her lips as she is about to take a selfie. This wink and a nod to the millions-year-old, tool-using past that we have come from connects nature and technology, emphasizing their co-dependence, rather than the superseding of one by the other.

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The Tora-san Memorial Museum

Katsushika Shibamata, Tokyo

Otoko wa Tsurai yo (It's Tough Being a Man) is a series of comedy films produced by the Japanese studio Shochiku. From 1969 to 1995, a total of 48 films were made, making it the longest-running comedy series in film history. The series ended with the death of its star, Atsumi Kiyoshi, who played the protagonist Tora-san. In 1997, the Tora-san Memorial Museum was built in the Shibamata area of Tokyo, where Tora-san was born and raised. Since 2012, the local government has been renovating the museum approximately every three years. In 2022, coinciding with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the museum's establishment, it underwent a significant renovation and was re-opened to the public (*Tokyo News* 2022). The overall scale of the museum is not large, but the exhibition design utilizes the space in a very impressive way.

At the entrance, Mr. Ken Yabuno, the director of the Fuchu City Art Museum, created paintings themed around the films and the Shibamata area, blending reality with cinema through projections, immediately immersing visitors in the world of *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*. The first section of the museum traces the growth of the main character Tora-san, with moving installations and narrations that weave Tora-san's story into the broader context of Japan's historical development, showcasing key scenes at different points and reflecting the significance of the film—as a record and mirror of Japanese societal evolution since 1969.

The second section of the exhibition focuses on recreating scenes from the films, specifically the “Dango Shop” and “Printing Factory.” The museum has transported these actual film sets into the museum space,



Figure 1. Art installation reproducing famous scenes. Courtesy of The Tora-san Memorial Museum.

using real objects from the film, including the props used by the characters and the ink from the printing press. Models and valuable footage reconstruct the most important living areas depicted in the films, allowing visitors to step into 1969 Japan, even if they have never seen the *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* series.

The third section centers around the neighborhood where Tora-san was raised, offering an immersive setup within a limited space. For instance, visitors can hear the cries of street vendors through amplification tubes; interact with installations to find Tora-san hidden in the neighborhood; explore the shopping street with a fully hand-drawn map; see lost cat notices on streetlamps, echoing the sleeping cats on the eaves; and the nineteenth-century human-powered railway cars built for pilgrims visiting the Taishakuten Temple.

The Tora-san Memorial Museum is both typical and atypical of Japanese museums. Typically, Japanese exhibition design excels in maximizing limited space with meticulous attention to detail. In addition to the detailed exhibits mentioned, all display installations are set at heights comfortable for both adults and children, with permanent interactive puzzle activities designed for elementary and middle school students. Although the facility is small, every inch of space is efficiently used.

Yet I believe the Tora-san Memorial Museum is *not* a typical Japanese museum due to its unique location. It is situated in the Shibamata area of Katsushika, which was developed during the early modern period, centering around the Taishakuten Temple. This precinct has successfully preserved the history of suburban industrial and social infrastructure since the nineteenth century. On 13 February 2018, it was designated as Japan's first national important cultural landscape within Tokyo (Katsushika City 2018). Shibamata has always been a major transportation hub due to its transportation network, connecting it with other regions. In modern times, as the number of pilgrims increased, the growth in shipping linked



Figure 2. A bronze statue of Tora-san. Courtesy of The Tora-san Memorial Museum.

the area closely with Edo. With the opening of the station and rickshaw roads in the mid- to late-Meiji period, the number of visitors further increased. Farmers near Taishakuten gradually started operating eateries such as river fish cuisine and dango shops around the pilgrimage routes. Following the growth of urbanization after the Great Kanto Earthquake, the commercial street in front of Taishakuten was gradually formed.

The selection of Shibamata as the central backdrop for the movie is based on the uniqueness of the location. In the midst of rapid economic development, the slowly vanishing culture and lifestyle of the local community, situated at the junction between urban and rural areas, have survived in the Shibamata district. This has become an essential “vintage” landscape in the hearts of the Japanese.

As the birthplace of the film character Tora-san, a bronze statue of Tora-san stands in front of Shibamata Station. Additionally, the shopping street in front of the Taishakuten Temple forms an important part of the cultural landscape, with shops including the “Dango Shop,” as seen in the movies, preserving the appearance of the nineteenth century. Not only is the Edo River in the Shibamata area often featured in films, but it is also common to see scenes where baseball players come to the dango shop to eat, due to the many baseball fields around the Shinamata area. Thus, the visit to the Tora-san Memorial Museum begins not just at the museum’s entrance, but from the moment one arrives at Shibamata Station.

The Tora-san Memorial Museum is a tribute to the *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* film series and to a historic era in Japan. The concept of cultural landscapes extends the life and expression of this museum and exhibition through the protection and support of the Shibamata area.

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