



# Fly Me Up

by Catharina van Bohemen

Tiffany Singh is a social-practice artist. The word “artist” might make you imagine someone with a brush and an easel, alone in their studio. If that artist is lucky – and they’re good – a gallery will hold an exhibition of their work. Art-lovers will come and buy it. Some of the paintings might even end up in a museum.

But a social-practice artist has a very different way of working.

## Big Things

Tiffany doesn't usually make art to sell. And she doesn't work alone. Her art is about collaborating with others: school children, new New Zealanders, people with a common interest. Often this art takes the form of an installation – something big that makes people take notice; something big that suits big ideas.

Tiffany likes to draw attention to social issues. Her art asks questions. What's it like to be poor and live in a cold house? What's it like to arrive in a new country and not speak the language? If her art affects enough people, it might even lead to change. For Tiffany, this is what being a social-practice artist is all about.

## Fifteen Thousand Flags

*Fly Me Up To Where You Are* is the name of one of Tiffany's biggest projects. It involves over fifteen thousand flags. The project began in schools in South Auckland, where Tiffany encouraged students to think about their future. What did they want for themselves, their families, their communities, their world? Then the students made flags and painted words or symbols to express these hopes. During the Auckland Arts Festival in 2013, the flags hung in Aotea Square – a joyful, jostling reminder that the city was full of young people who wanted a peaceful, co-operative world.

A year later, Tiffany worked with children in Christchurch. Their lives had been turned upside down by the earthquakes. Five thousand new flags were hung near the city council and Earthquake Commission buildings. The flags reminded adults what children wanted for the rebuild of their city. They gave children a voice.

In its early stages, the flag project surprised Tiffany. "I thought more kids would talk about wanting to be astronauts or explorers," she says. "But many simply wrote, 'I want to be warm' or 'I wish my family would stay together.'" One eight-year-old boy asked Tiffany what hope was. A seven-year-old girl said that making her flag had been the best day of her life.

In Porirua, Tiffany asked high school students to imagine how they could make a difference to their community. The students were interested in big, universal ideals: peace, the sharing of resources, an acceptance of diversity. Things that involve all of us.

## Close to the Spirits

The idea for the flag project began when Tiffany travelled to India and Nepal. She planned to go for three months but stayed three years! In India, Tiffany worked with all kinds of people. She worked

with children to paint the slums – that's when she discovered the importance of colour in everyday life. She helped craft workers to form collectives so they'd be better paid – that's when she learnt the power of the group.

While Tiffany was in India, there was heavy rain, and a dam collapsed. Thousands of people lost their homes, and Tiffany worked for an agency that helped them. "Families had lost everything; they had nowhere to go," she remembers, "but I could leave anytime I wanted."

This difference had a big impact on Tiffany. "It really messed with me," she says. Tiffany spent time at a Buddhist monastery in Nepal. Here, she was taught to treasure teaching, meditation, and service to others. "I learnt that life is cyclical. There is not one lifetime but many. I learnt to take responsibility for my own life and to practise loving kindness for the benefit of others."





While she was in Nepal – where around 10 percent of the population is Buddhist – Tiffany saw prayer flags fluttering beneath the Himalayas. Local people believe these mountains are close to the spirits. “Each flag was like a person’s dreams and wishes released directly to the gods,” Tiffany says. Back home, thinking about the Auckland Festival, Tiffany remembered those prayer flags in Nepal. She also remembered the children who’d painted the slums. “How good would it be,” she thought, “if Auckland children could make flags of their own?”

If you go to Tiffany’s website, the first thing you’ll notice is her photograph. She’s wearing a purple sari. Look at the short, fitted bodice (called a choli) beneath her sari. You might recognise the patterns. They’re similar to the ones on siapo, the traditional bark-cloth of Sāmoa. Tiffany’s father is also part-Samoan, although Tiffany grew up in Auckland with her Pākehā mother.

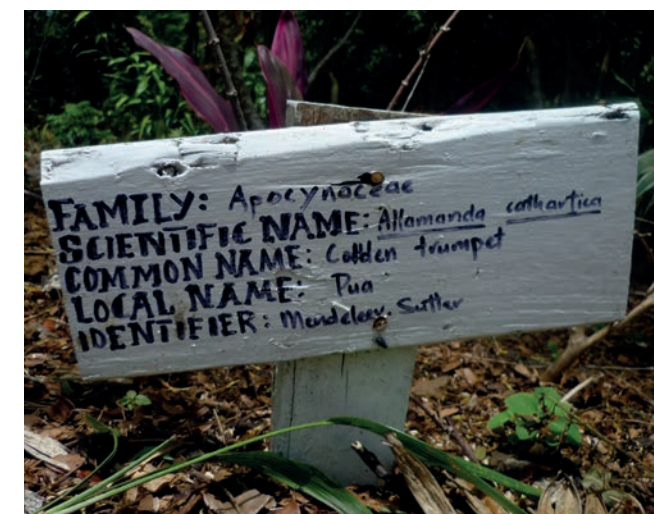


In 2011, Tiffany went to Sāmoa, where she worked with local people to transform a rubbish dump into a peace garden. Landscaping students created the garden’s design, filling it with medicinal plants that are indigenous to Sāmoa. Textile students made fabric flowers and prayer flags to thread through the trees. Performing arts students sang and danced, and everyone wrote a peace poem to bless the garden. For a brief time, the space became what Tiffany calls “a living theatre”. But really, she wanted the garden to be a place where people could go to be quiet and reflect.



## Choli and Siapo

Until she went to India, Tiffany didn’t think much about having an Indian grandfather (this is her father’s father). At first, the colour and crowds in India overwhelmed her, but then she began to dress like the local women. And although she couldn’t speak any of the local languages, gradually Tiffany blended in. When people learnt about her grandfather, they said, “You are Indian, too!” Tiffany thought, “Yes, I am. I’d never realised that.”





## Where Is Home?

In 2016, back in New Zealand, Tiffany began work on a new project – an installation on Waiheke Island. This time, she collaborated with people from the

Auckland Resettled Community Coalition. “Too often, resettled people are talked about in a narrow way,” Tiffany says. “We wanted to share the stories of new New Zealanders to show how they make our country more complete.”

*The Journey of a Million Miles Begins with One Step* was made from five abandoned dinghies, arranged upright, with tiny origami boats on their hulls. These smaller boats represented the journeys we – or our ancestors – all made to Aotearoa. “The boats were gold,” Tiffany says, “because gold lifts

your spirits and draws you forward.” Tiffany also used music to encourage people to enter the installation. Some of this music was sad, some more hopeful – to reflect the mixed feelings of new arrivals.

Once underneath a dinghy, people sat and listened to stories about migration, read by well-known New Zealanders. People from the resettled community wanted their experiences to become New Zealand stories – ones that we could all relate to. “Once someone with a refugee background is accepted into this country, they’re no longer a refugee,” Tiffany says. “They become a citizen of Aotearoa. This was an important part of our message.”

## Another Journey

One day soon, Tiffany hopes the *Fly Me Up* flags will start their final journey. She’d like to take them to India as a kind of peace offering from the students

of Aotearoa. “I imagine our flags, alongside countless others, tossed about by the high winds of the Himalayas.”

Tiffany and her family have now left New Zealand. They may not come back. Tiffany’s husband is English, and they both want their children to experience making a new home in a new country. Tiffany is also making the most of new opportunities for herself, studying social-practice art in England. Who knows what will come next?

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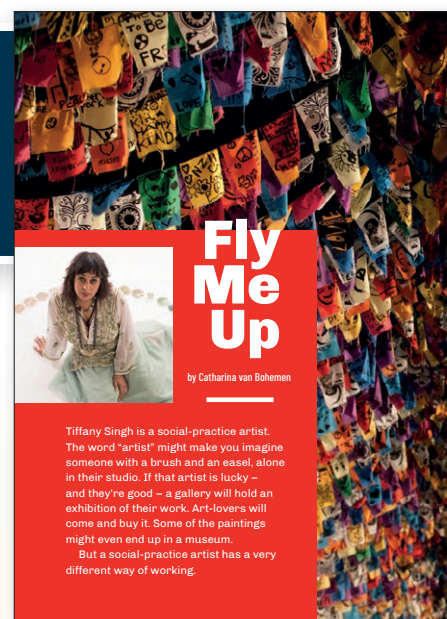
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