



Cultured Conversations



Cultured Conversations is a digital series that delves into the value of the arts and importance of visionary leadership in this time of global uncertainty. In each edition, Gallery Director Kirsten Paisley is joined by a guest whose thoughtful conversation offers listeners motivation, resolution and solace.

In this episode Kirsten Paisley talks to Curator, Māori Art at Auckland Art Gallery, Nigel Borell.

Kirsten Paisley:

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. This is a series of conversations we've put together to get the conversation going about the issues, ideas and strategies embracing the visual arts and culture in Aotearoa New Zealand and the world today. For today's discussion, I'm joined by Curator, Māori Art at Auckland Art Gallery, Nigel Borell. Welcome, Nigel.

Nigel Borell:

Kia ora, Kirsten.

KP:

Now, you've taken some time out in probably the busiest moment in your career to spend half an hour talking about contemporary Māori art with me, so thank you for doing that.

NB:

You're welcome.

KP:

We've this week announced a major project – tell me a little bit about it.

NB:

Oh, this week's been a phenomenal week for us at the Gallery. We launched officially to the public at large our ambition and our immediate programme of presenting the largest single show in our 132-year history at the Gallery, profiling the story of contemporary Māori art and revisiting a survey show of contemporary Māori art. It's aptly called *Toi Tū Toi Ora* – art standing tall, standing strong. It's been a long time coming for our institution but also for contemporary Māori art as a conversation, as a discourse nationally, so it's really exciting.

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KP:

It is. And when Nigel says the largest exhibition in Auckland Art Gallery's history, he means that it's encompassing nearly the entire building. We're de-installing all the collections for the first time. We've also engaged with a large number of commissions this year, of artists who are making new works; we have 10 artists making works for the show. Then not only is the show exhibition by virtue of the volume of artists and artworks that'll be on show, but it's monolithic because some of the works these artists are making are really ambitious, too, in scale and concept. It's a big deal for us. What is the significance, do you think, for the Gallery in making this step now?

NB:

I think there's several. We often say exhibition-making is such a timely exercise and the timing needs to be right for conversations and exhibitions to take place. I feel this is the right time for this conversation and to revisit the importance and the legacy of Māori art. Its ambition— actually, you'll need to remind me what the question was; I just went off on a tangent thinking about something else!

KP:

I was just saying to you that for the Auckland Art Gallery; it's 130 years old and it's been one of the only public buildings during that time that's open nearly every day but never before has it only shown Māori art. This is the first moment in its history. Why is that important? Have there been barriers to the celebration, or more fulsome exhibition-making around Māori art over the lifespan of the institution?

NB:

I suppose, like any exhibition, there are challenges. The ambition and the scale, as you say, of this show presents its own unique challenges but its own uniqueness within the landscape of presenting the story of contemporary Māori art. It's been 20 years since that story's been revisited. The Auckland Art Gallery is really taking the lead, as it has done in the past with other signature shows, in telling that next chapter. I feel what we're doing with this exhibition is not only revisiting the importance and the vitality of contemporary Māori art and culture, and the artists behind those works, but we're also taking the lead and turning the page. So, what is unique about contemporary art and in this year, at this moment in time? What are we engaging with, grappling with, as artists, as Māori people, as a cultural movement? What are our aspirations for the future? Those all sit neatly in any offer of any show but in a show that looks at the story of a culture, in an art form and in a movement even more so. There's so many layers to that and sometimes the art does the telling for us. Often we think we have to speak to issues but, actually, we can digest them through our eyes and through our visual way of communicating ideas or understanding complex ideas. Visual arts is one of those rare art forms where you can do that without words and in that way the power of the artists' work and their messages speak and resound in that forum.

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KP:

You touched on timing. I know you've been thinking about this exhibition and working on it for many years – in fact, it probably feels like your whole life's been leading up to this moment, I imagine.

NB:

It's a little bit like that, yeah!

KP:

A lot happened this month, globally, and we've seen right across the world Indigenous curators leading the conversation about contemporary art. *NIRIN* opened the week that lockdown was announced, the Covid lockdown, and we were in Sydney, you and I, experiencing that incredible exhibition led by Brook Andrew as the creative director. And there are other projects like this around the world, aren't there, that were in planning or are still in planning at this time. What do you think about the context of both exhibition-making internationally, alongside the Black Lives Matter movement, which has taken the world in its grit, really? How will this exhibition be posited in the context of that, do you think? Does it have a new agency? Is there a new urgency here?

NB:

Great questions, and all really powerful propositions in themselves. The current climate's offered us a really timely opportunity to reset and to think through what our futures might be with this pandemic. We all live at such a fast pace and in such a strong digital realities these days that the pandemic is a breath of fresh air, and making us stop in our tracks and think about family, think about each other, think about the environment or just take a bit of a detox from all of those things that we are so heavily engaged in our lives, and in our way of living. For me, that's been quite interesting. But it's also highlighted the fragility of humankind and in our existence within the universe and within the landscape and environment, which we take for granted. Beyond that, globally, in terms of wider issues, in terms of the state of the environment we live in – global warming and the precarious nature of our footprint, which we're so conscious about – Indigenous ways of thinking and being, long-held ones, offer a way of thinking about how we can tread back on the earth mindfully; about our footprint and about the footprint we want to leave behind for other generations. It feels timely that we're thinking and shifting the paradigm around how we engage – not just with that but with the world around us. The Black Lives Matter movement, and emphasis that's been highlighted again through lockdown, has been interesting. Those two issues have gone hand in hand. It has really given people an opportunity to think through those issues, unabated by the world around

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them at this time and perhaps offered a lot of clarity around that. For me, what it's highlighted is the way in which power is wielded or shared or not. For Indigenous peoples, we can understand that struggle innately; we can see the things that change can offer in terms of a moment like this. We can either be predisposed with the grievance and the atrocity of an issue like this or we can actually see the window that starts to open, and what leaves behind for us to replot and to replant in a different way. I really like the idea of what that's setting up for us globally, to do a reset as well. So it's mixed feelings but it's a timely moment, across the globe and for a range of reasons.

For Indigenous people, art is just a part of the way we see the world, our cultural beliefs, our protocols, our systems of knowledge – they're also intimately entwined with art that sometimes to pry them apart is to do a disservice to that vision and that way of seeing the world.

KP:

When you started, you touched on family and the environment. With the exhibition you're curating, you've curated not a long, historical, linear narrative of 'this gave rise to this, which gave rise to this', as we often see exhibition-making unfold. But you've curated it along the broad, enduring, creation mythology narrative, one which artists have engaged with for many generations. It seems to me that this moment needs that story and needs to hear and reflect on this story, which is not only myth but actually a lived experience as humans walk on the planet.

NB:

Absolutely. When you're charged with both an exciting proposition of presenting 120 artists and this idea of what contemporary Māori art might mean today, you start thinking, *Okay, that's really diverse and really quite broad.* When you deduce it down to what the artists have in common, it's our cultural beliefs about how we be and live in this world, and our idea of place and place-making, and of being – they're all tied up in those creation stories. If you think about creation stories as grand narratives, about cultural truths or ways of living – justice and law in a Western sense occupies and works in a certain way, but for Indigenous people our narratives are a way of understanding the world around us. They really unlock greater learnings, all ways of thinking about values and beliefs.

When I started to think about the show in that way, every artist had a place next to one another and it wasn't compartmentalised by their training or by the ideas of high and low art, or medium, or being darlings of the art world or not. It was really the things that they had in common as Māori that really helped me see quite clearly what the connections were for the show and how to present their ideas. So the creation story, for me, is one that we still hold true and live by today. When we think about cultural beliefs

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or our belief systems, it's one that's still practised. It's one that artists have reflected in their work. To me, that's quite powerful. When I think about some of the first-generation Māori artists, contemporary Māori artists of the 1950s, they were looking at works that exemplify Tāne Mahuta, the god of the forest; and then I look at some of the work that the young artists of the 2000s have done, looking at Tāne Mahuta, they're highly different works but they're connected through this idea of their cultural understanding about the world but also how they understand knowledge. Western art history and the Western art canon has a certain way of viewing those ideas, and this is a way of intersecting that and bringing it back to a powerful way in which a Māori voice is telling you how they see the world and what the world's made up of.

KP:

What's been amazing to learn since I came here, a year ago, is to see the way in which you've so sensitively engaged with the big characters in the story, because there's some really critical female roles here. As a male curator, you have to navigate these really powerful and complex relationships within the family and the creation story. Tell us a little bit about how you've chosen to navigate the female protagonists?

NB:

Good question. I think it helps that I'm a younger twin and my older twin by two minutes is female. I feel like I've been mindful of that from the get-go; that the male and the female elements and in life are dualities and really important. It also helps having a really strong mother, who reminded me of that when I needed to be told! But beyond that, curating from a Māori point of view for me is that you're always conscious of how you wield power and what power means in offering opportunities for others. Of course, we're sometimes at the receiving end of trying to navigate an opportunity or navigate a power structure. The best thing I can do, the most generous thing I can do as a Māori curator, is be mindful of that when I'm engaging the artists or different stakeholder groups that I would like to work with. When it came to the women's narratives, it was about trying to rebalance their place visually within the exhibition-making but also within the emphasis of presenting that story. I think one of the wisest and most elemental things was to allow contemporary Māori women artists to tell the women's roles in the show; it was really powerful. I knew that they would pick up on things or have a view about that narrative that I could never bring to the table as a male, as a Māori male. That has been really fascinating – to be a fly on the wall and watch it grow and to watch how they've come to the story. But again, it's making visible that we share power and that we share the opportunity to allow as many people as possible to tell their stories or to take their place within those presentations.

For us, in our creation story, we've also sensitively looked at Te Kore, Te Pō, Te Ao Mārama – so, Te Kore, the great nothingness, Te Pō, the great darkness, Te Ao Mārama, the world of light and life that we live in today, brought forward by Tāne Mahuta, the god of the forest who separated his parents. Within that narrative,

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we see the first woman, which is Hine-tītama. That narrative within Māori creation stories is quite a fraught one and it's had a certain perception because Hine-tītama, through shame, disappears into the underworld and becomes the most powerful female deity in our narratives, Hine-nui-te-pō. Often, through our colonial experience, we've been told that that story is about shame and is about a woman turning into a disparaging figure. But really, when we humanise that story, and when we allow Māori women to tell their own story, we get a very different reading. I think this is the power of the show in a nutshell – when Māori are telling their own stories, we have a much richer account, a much more diverse take and a much more sophisticated offer. Where possible, we're sharing that with artists to help tell.

As an artist myself, artist trained, I'm a curious person and I have a creative spirit. I'm really interested to see where they go when they get given a brief and work creatively and rise to a challenge or proposition. They often exceed our expectations.

KP:

To see new works coming into being this year is just such a great privilege of our roles, right?

NB:

Absolutely.

KP:

I'd love to know a bit more about how you were first drawn into the role that you're in now. The idea that you would go into curatorship or the world of art, where did that come from? Was it a family-inspired direction? What was the seed that got you going on this journey?

NB:

It was being an artist. I was always interested in creating and I was not that interested in maths, science or physics. My older twin was, and she was very bright and she excelled in the conventional scholarly way and is very bright today. I'm really grateful to have her as a sounding board for my own ideas. But I was always interested in the creative pursuits and very introspective as a person and quite shy, and of course you learn a lot of tricks along the way to combat those things. Being an artist was my journey. I studied art at art school but before I did that I actually worked on Māori meeting houses, on the kōwhaiwhai and the mural works, so it was a privileged beginning but probably a bit odd because I was working with a quite elderly team of art makers and tohunga whakairo, such as master carver Paki Harrison and the kōwhaiwhai tukutuku artist Peter Boyd. I worked on several houses; three houses before I did my art-school training. I did my art-school training a little bit late, in my early-mid-20s, and I had all that profound

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knowledge of customary Māori art. I was trying to find a home for it in my contemporary practice – really what I was doing was just reconciling two different modes of knowledge. They coalesce and sit side by side now, but there was a period there when a lot of that was about growing it and learning it and figuring out my own feet, in terms of my own voice as an artist. I did my Master's at Elam and around that time I was really interested in the way in which curators were curating; the decisions that curators made around artworks and the messages they wanted to present, and of course we all have different ideas – 'I'd do this differently, I'd think about that.' And so I decided out of frustration that I would go and curate a small community art Gallery show in my suburb of Manurewa, where I lived at the time; just trial a few ideas and see what the big mystery was, not having done formal curator training myself or art history, for that matter.

I realised it was a powerful role but it was one that I excelled at and was quite interested in, and ultimately was a role where you were facilitating relationships with people and that hasn't changed today. From those early beginnings of curating small community Gallery shows and then getting more ambitious and more confident and learning the craft and how to get the best project up and running, I just refined it over the years. There are a lot of young curators today who ask me, 'How did you do it?' or 'How do I get that job?' or 'How do I do this?' It's not a glamorous answer; it's really that you need to go and shape some ideas in a small Gallery space, where the stakes aren't high but in which you can do a lot of learning and shaping of your your thinking. Of course, they don't want to hear that! They want the internship or they want the fabulous role, and it's just not built that way.

KP:

And maybe it's not there, either. You shared with me the responsibility that you carry in Aotearoa, because there are only two positions for Māori curators in public institutions in New Zealand. As an Australian coming to New Zealand, I find that quite extraordinary because it's clear to me that Māori contemporary art is the most significant cultural offer that New Zealand has brought to the world. It really is extraordinary the way in which Māori artists have penetrated the international contemporary art world abroad, and also the significance of their practice to Māori art throughout the last 70 years; but also Pākehā artists, who have been hugely informed by Māori artists from the 1950s until now. Are there enough opportunities here? It seems like maybe there's work to do.

NB:

Definitely, I agree. There are only two roles where Māori curators specifically dealing with contemporary Māori art are sanctioned and mandated through institutions. Ours is one, at the Auckland Art Gallery, and the other is at Te Papa. When we think about the implications of what those represent or the scarcity

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of those roles and what they represent, they have huge impact on our collection practices. From a pragmatic point of view, there's only these two experts voices, if you like, in these institutions helping shape their collections, which is great, but what about all those other institutions and their collections? The collection practices of other institutions can be quite ad hoc; the contemporary Māori art story and the shaping of it. So there's that practical end, but there's also the logistics of being one of only two. Let's just say that we are each other's right-hand man, person, colleague, because we understand what each other's going through, in terms of trying to achieve challenges and outcomes in our institutions. And more broadly, you become a spokesperson and a kaitiaki or a guardian for the art form beyond the building. Those are really important roles and important spaces to occupy. There's a lot of diplomacy involved in that but there's also a lot of informed decision making that needs to be carried out – sometimes it falls within the institution and sometimes it falls within the sector that you work in. The best thing that we can do as Māori curators is not be daunted by the four walls of your building but to see them as just one aspect of what you offer Māori arts and culture, and to realise that we need to support one another and we need to see more of these roles. We have seen in the last 20 years more Māori interested in curatorship across the board, and they may sit in general roles in different institutions, but when we look at specific roles, to think that in the last 20 years there's only still two, it's pretty dire.

KP:

It's a really important conversation to be having and it's because of the exhibition that we're having these conversations, isn't it? It's an opportunity to not only talk about artist practice but to talk about the role of public policy, public governance and cultural institutions here, and how they might change and continue the commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi, ultimately.

In finishing, I wonder if you might talk a little bit about what you hope a visitor to *Toi Tū Toi Ora* might come away with at the end of that engagement.

NB:

Pride. There are so many different things that audiences will get, but I hope for a Māori audience that they come away from the show feeling proud, represented, acknowledged within the sphere of New Zealand art, but also feeling inspired. This is how we choose the past we want, to move into it seeing things that move us and that shape our futures. For young aspiring artists or creatives or just Māori in general, if they can see themselves represented in the world around them and in the institutions that they are said to be part of, then that has such a profound effect on their future and how they see themselves. So there's that practical outcome. There's the outcome of repositioning contemporary Māori art as vital and important and crucial to the story of New Zealand art, and the show will do that; it'll do that in a range of different ways, both in our control and out of our control, and I find that fascinating and exciting. It'll do the simple thing of bringing the conversation back to the surface. What is contemporary Māori art?

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Where is it today? How does it manifest? How does it sit in conversation with New Zealand art and all of those conversations that need to be reinvigorated? It'll do that through proxy, through just existing. I think for New Zealanders it will be a sense of pride. It will reiterate the uniqueness of not just Māori art but our place here in the world.

KP:

Thanks so much, Nigel. It's great talking to you. Thank you for your time, too – I know it's really busy right now, in the lead-up to this exhibition opening on the fifth of December at Auckland Art Gallery.

Thanks for joining us. You've been listening to a Cultured Conversation with me, Kirsten Paisley, Director at Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. You can find out more about *Toi Tū Toi Ora* and the Cultured Conversations series at aucklandartGallery.com. Use the hashtag #culturedconversations in your conversations because it's important we keep them going.