



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 filmmaker Chelsea Winstanley, the first-ever Indigenous woman nominated for Best Film at the Academy Awards and director / producer of *Toi Tū Toi Ora: Visual Sovereignty*, a documentary following Auckland Art Gallery's forthcoming major exhibition of contemporary Māori art.

Kirsten Paisley:

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, director of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Today, we're going to talk about film, New Zealand, racism and the arts, here and abroad. I'm joined by another Kiwi success story: the first Indigenous female producer nominated for a Best Motion Picture of the year award and most recently announced as a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Welcome, Chelsea Winstanley. It's great to have you here.

Chelsea Winstanley:

Kia ora, Kirsten. I'm happy to be here and to have a conversation with you today. Thank you for having me.

KP:

It's great. Now, we drew you across the ocean during Covid. You were bailed up in a hotel for two weeks and it's a really busy year for you, of course. You've got a lot on the horizon line, as well as the project that we're working on together – we're going to talk about that. You just launched a film company in February this year with a quite an unusual title. What are your aspirations with this company?

CW:

My film company is called This Too Shall Pass. I think what I love about that phrase is that everything is a movable feast; especially in the world of film and the realm of film, you're always creating something in parts. So I always feel like it's nothing you should ever hold on to; like, *This is the only thing I'm ever going to do, or, This is how it should actually ever be*, and especially in the world of documentaries. It's always changing. It's always growing, and I love that about film and storytelling. I just wanted to be free with my filmmaking, I think, and I wanted it to be very open and fluid. That's a phrase that has stuck with me because I think it's so important not to become too stuck in your ways and to allow things to come, allow things to flow, allow yourself to grow. I think that's what storytelling does naturally: you just allow

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yourself to grow with a story. That's what I'm hoping I can do and that I can invite people into that realm of storytelling with me by allowing them to feel a bit free with their own form of storytelling, whatever that might be.

KP:

You get so involved in a project when it's happening, it's like the whole world. But, of course, it bursts out into the world and takes on new readings as people engage with it internationally. You follow in the footsteps of a really amazing woman, who was the first Māori woman to create a dramatic feature film in New Zealand. Tell us about that and how it's shaped who you are and your practice today?

CW:

My mentor was an incredible woman named Merata Mita. She's no longer with us but I first saw her film *Bastion Point: Day 507*, which was about the illegal occupation of land, stolen land up at Ngāti Whātua, here in Ōrākei, Auckland. I remember watching that at university and just tears tears tears; this ultimate feeling of injustice in the world, and here in my own backyard. I remember thinking, *Whoever made this film is such an important person*. I had no idea who she was at the time. I come from Mount Maunganui, this tiny little beach town. Thinking that I could ever have a film career was not really on my horizon. So when I did finally get to university as an adult student – I was then with a little two-year-old baby, only 23 at the time but I was an adult student – so being exposed to that film really changed my trajectory and what I wanted to do.

So when I found out it was in fact Merata Mita, I thought, Wow. For an aspiring Māori woman, wanting to make films and tell stories in that vein, she was the pinnacle, and the person I would want to emulate in my career. I never ever thought I would have the chance to meet her, because you put someone like that up on a pedestal. Then the first job I ever got was at a company called Cuba Productions and it was amazing at the time – the first all-female Māori-led production company; that was Rhonda Kite and Libby Hakaraia. I was making coffee and doing photocopying and whatnot, but also trying to pitch ideas to my bosses. Then one day this beautiful woman just comes walking up the stairs and I literally stopped in my tracks. I was like, *Oh my god, my mentor, my mentor*. I had no idea that she was even coming into the office. Then I'm seeing her arrive, this queen, this presence. I'm nervously making her coffee and I see outside there's this gentleman walking around with this long leather coat and smoking cigarettes continuously. He was a bit rugged and had greyish hair, and I thought, *She is so amazing. The plight of people. Minorities and those displaced. Look at her, she's brought a homeless man with her*. It turns out that guy was her husband, Geoff Murphy. He was in this long trench coat but he's just such a rugged-looking dude that I thought he was this homeless man, and it's in fact Geoff Murphy. Oh my goodness. I felt like such a fool. So that's when I first laid eyes on her.

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Then I worked on a film called *Boy*, one of Taika Waititi's first features, and she was a producer on that film. So her and I started talking about projects that were really important to her – at the time it was child abuse and child abuse at the hands of Māori and Māori whānau (family). It was a very deep and tough subject to approach. I had made a few things by that stage – this was in 2008 – and we were talking and I think she was looking for someone she could mentor in the role of producing. We started talking more and more and then she invited me to join her on a project called *Saving Grace*. That project and having the opportunity to work with her on it really did change my life, because I got to delve into her practice. I got to see how she worked. It changed my life in many ways, but also because she died while we were making that film. We were delivering a rough cut to Māori Television and, just after, we were standing outside and talking about it; we were about to go and have lunch and she had a heart attack and passed away. It was pivotal point in my career because I was challenged by the funders at the time to finish the film, and I wasn't tough enough. I didn't have the guts at the time to say, 'You know what, I don't think we should be doing that. You're asking me to finish a film on behalf of this woman who really we should be honouring,' and instead to just say, 'This is as far as we got with this film. Let's keep it at that.' I was too naïve and I didn't have enough confidence to stand up for her, and myself. So I said, 'Okay.' I scrambled around and I got her long-time collaborator Annie Collins, who had edited a lot of her films back in the day, to come on board and help me finish the film.

But it was always something that really stuck in my guts, that was not the right move. So when her son Hepi was making a film about her called *Merata: How Mum Decolonised the Screen* and asked me to come on board and produce, it felt like a natural way for me to kind of say sorry for going ahead and finishing a film on her behalf when I shouldn't have. It was a nice way to support her son to make a film about her, too. And I think we all learned, as a nation, much more about her; I certainly did. It took us five years to make that film, so there was a lot to know and uncover, and to get to know her as the person. Through Hepi, her son, we were able to learn a lot more about her.

KP:

What do you think she would say if she could see you today? You've got four projects on the go, your own film company, you're the mother of three children . . .

CW:

That's what she was doing, too, right? She was a mother of five at the time when she was making these ground-breaking films. No one really gave her any belief that she could actually go ahead and do it, which was good because she flew under the radar. When she was making these movies, no one really

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gave her the time of day, thinking, *Oh, who's this silly woman, making a bit of noise over there?* They didn't understand the impact that she was going to have. But she also had this amazing philosophy to mentor and I think that's something I really learned from her, too – that I want to carry on. In everything I do, everything I'm trying to do in my career, I want to make sure that I'm bringing Māori up with me. The truth of the matter is we just don't have enough of us in those positions to make the films that we want to make. We've survived in this era of filmmaking with a lot of Pākehā [European New Zealander] producers making our work or telling our stories on our behalf. I know that her whole capacity was about how we need to be in charge of our own stories. So that's something I know I need to carry on in terms of whatever my legacy might be.

KP:

It's interesting also, isn't it, working in strong female teams. I find myself in the second directorial role with an entirely female executive, by happy accident, I think, not design necessarily – unless it's an accidental design of my subconscious! But it's interesting because in our world parity is such a big issue but you do find these moments when really strong female teams come together to tell global stories, which are so relevant and pertinent, and it can be very powerful to just be among your own gender in doing that, right?

CW:

I think by nature women are generally community-minded, whereas traditionally men have been the breadwinners – *I'm going to go out and have this individual life and career.* Women are naturally thinking about community and how we can best help our community, so I think we work best in our wolf packs, yeah.

[laughter]

KP:

Maybe that's true. You touched on Māori people being in control of Māori stories, and the racial aspect of the arts industry, the film industry, where you've got a lot of Pākehā people in powerful roles deciding what's made, how it's made, where, and who plays leading roles within it. Then we see, right now, coalescing with Covid, this huge global movement, which is attempting to address histories of racial prejudice and genocide across the world. You were in Los Angeles when George Floyd was killed. What was that like?

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CW:

Yeah, I was in LA at the time when that was happening. I mean, it's changed the whole world in a sense. Along with Covid and along with George Floyd, who is one of many, many black men – and women, to be fair – who have faced police brutality and the effects of a very, very dark history in America. But then what it also brought up is that there are a lot of dark histories. In our own backyard, we have colonisation to deal with and you can't think, *Oh, that's so long ago*; it's not. Intergenerational trauma carries on and it lives within people – we all have to own that, so that it's not just those who have been directly affected. If we have a real, honest conversation about Pākehā–Māori relationships, Pākehā also have that intergenerational trauma to own; to stand in that uncomfortable space. I think it will help us heal together. We should all just take ownership of what that feels like, because if we don't have that commonality of understanding we'll never be able to move together in the future. The thing about America that I find sometimes hard to deal with, too, is that there is definitely the very grave African American experience but there's also, before that, the Indigenous people. There's this erasure, if you just use that word, because it's very apparent when you're there that the Indigenous people of America are almost a forgotten thing.

KP:

But it's actually two centuries . . .

CW:

It's a hard thing to grapple with, too, because while you want to support Black Lives Matter – and we should, everyone should – we also have to understand that Indigenous peoples were annihilated and treated severely, before the experience in America with African Americans and slavery. So it's a little bittersweet. You want to support your black brothers and sisters at the same time, which is happening now. There are there are a lot of cool things happening, like the Redskins – people are like, *Hang on, none of that*. We've got to have the whole conversation; we can't just have one conversation. The effect from the Black Panthers meant that we had Ngā Tamatoa, we had the Polynesian Panthers. We have all these direct movements that happen here, which enable that conversation to happen. What I hope doesn't happen is that it's *just* a conversation and some protests again. I hope this will really change shift something in the consciousness of people, about wanting to work together for equality, because it's pretty much where it all stems from, right? One day, someone decided, *I'm a little bit better than you so I'm going to have a bit more of the world than you*, then there's inequality. We have to be brave enough to share. I often think, *Why are people so afraid? Why are people so fearful of sharing?* If we think about what this country really is, it's meant to be true partnership. We don't have it, we've never had it, so why are people so afraid of it? Look at the two languages: why are te reo Māori [the Māori language] and te reo Pākehā [English] not on par with each other? Why are people so afraid to embrace something so unique? We're happy to do a haka [posture dance] at the beginning of a rugby game; to stand up and do all that stuff and be all happy about it, but we push a little bit more and people are like, *Oh no, I can't*.

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KP:

These are boundaries that we're actually in the position of being able to shift now, aren't we, because you get a little bit of momentum building within culture community, society, institutions, like the one that I am part of, and the opportunity to look at how cultural change happens. There's also the role of artists in leading cultural change, agendas, in society as well. Let's talk a little bit about *Toi Tū Toi Ora*.

Toi Tū Toi Ora is the largest exhibition of Māori art that's been produced. It's 20 years since a survey of contemporary Māori practice has been created. It's opening on the 5th of December this year at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. We want to take it to the world: 150 artists, 300 artworks, 10 major new commissions. And Chelsea, you came knocking on the door nearly 10 months ago, maybe a year ago now, and suggested you might make a documentary about the film – and at the time, maybe we weren't brave enough, right?

CW:

But a part of the job, too, is me convincing people that this is important. And also to step outside the box of we're doing – hoping that it'll have 'this' impact on the world, when we could have *this* impact.

KP:

That multiplier effect, yes. Since you approached us, we had a new appointment to our leadership team: I can't believe I'm saying these words but the first Māori executive was appointed to the leadership team of the Auckland Art Gallery. We also created an advisory committee: Elizabeth Ellis is the chair of the Haerewa Māori Advisory Committee, so there's a new governance structure with representation as well. We're really trying to get that piece right. I think it was with that confidence, when you came back and the door was still open, we felt more able to walk through it – we had stewardship throughout the gallery, not just sitting in our curatorial team. And specialised curatorial expertise is so important: Nigel Borell is of course leading the project. What are your hopes for the film?

CW:

The thing that really fascinated me about the exhibition in and of itself was visibility, and the scale and the scope and how many Māori were going to be celebrated. Because I love celebrating anything to do with te ao Māori [the Māori world]. That's what I'm all about. Then when I was talking to Nigel about it – like you said, a year or two ago – I was asking him how on earth an exhibition on the scale even comes together, and as he started talking to me and telling me about everyone who's involved behind the scenes, I was

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fascinated. People who are creating opportunities and everyone within the gallery: your role, Tania's new role, Haerewa's role – everyone's role is supporting this, to make it happen. We as the audience or people who get to enjoy the exhibition, we get to come into these beautiful spaces and we have no idea what goes into actually making an exhibition happen on the scale.

Not only that, I was fascinated to learn about the commissions work, because they are enormous in scale; they are exciting by virtue of what the artists are going to be exploring and I just thought people need to know about this; they need to see what goes into creating this, these works. And then you actually have the conversation about contemporary Māori art and what that has looked like and who has been in control of that narrative for the last 70 years, from the 1950s to now. And the fact that you have Nigel Borell, a Māori curator, giving the audience an experience steeped in Māori thought process, te ao Māori and creation narrative in and of itself is going to be fascinating for those being able to experience such an exhibition. There were so many exciting factors for me as a filmmaker. So I was like, *Come on, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, you've got to see what I see*. I understand the process and it does take a while for people to feel comfortable, too. In this day and age, when we have so much reality TV going on – that's not the approach I ever wanted to take. Behind the scenes, giving the drama of what it's not about. It's about celebrating, because we need that, especially in this time of Covid – we need to have things that make us feel good. People underestimate the value of art and visual art and what it can do for your mental health; how it can uplift you and help you explain and experience things. But first and foremost, it was visibility for me. Seeing all these Māori occupy this space, which has never been done before. I'm dancing inside. It's so exciting.

KP:

It's monolithic in a whole range of ways. What's amazing about it is that the Western art historical canon is completely irrelevant. It has no bearing on this project at all. It's completely enriched through Māori, as you've said, so for audiences coming in, of any kind of cultural background, you'll be experiencing Māori history, culture, and creation mythology in a way we haven't seen before, partly because of scale, because the story is big. It is a creation myth that Nigel's pulling together, as it's been told by practitioners over 70 years. It really is going to open the world's eyes to a very unique cultural offer that's so resonant and salient. Now, that's how it feels here in Tāmaki Makaurau – we're in the throes of producing it.

CW:

I feel like that, too. I'm hopeful that it will have the same impact, and maybe even more so, that *Te Maori* had so many years ago, where there were lines around the block and it went to New York. The appetite for what we have to offer to the world – our culture, our language, our stories – is huge. *Te Maori* was a really good offering to the world and it showed people exactly that, and so this in a contemporary context. Some of the artists I've spoken to already have said, 'We've never had the opportunity to show in this

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space, let alone have our art be seen in the world.' It's such a great opportunity for not only the Gallery to have that relationship with new artists, too, but for the rest of the country: people here who live in Tāmaki Makaurau, people overseas. It's going to be ground-breaking on so many levels.

KP:

It will no doubt encourage a whole lot of creative practitioners, gallery directors, arts workers to be thinking about the essential stories they need to be making, and the work that institutions need to be doing right now. There's a real urgency within some of the artists as they're producing these works. To be heard, to be seen – visibility, like you said. And it's so great to hear that you can see an international appetite for Māori art and stories.

CW:

I was talking to a colleague at the Hollywood Foreign Press – so the people who basically run the Golden Globes – and I was telling him that I was heading home to work on this project. He's French – and the French love anything Māori, too, right? – and said he loved Māori contemporary art. And I was like, 'Wow, how do you even know much about Māori contemporary art?' But there have been little ripples and waves of people breaking through, just nothing on this scale. He just lit up he: 'What? The largest survey ever? Oh my god, where's it going to go? Is it going to travel overseas?' I said that that is the hope, that this exhibition will travel overseas – and so too will the film. I want to see it have its rightful place in another city that embraces another Indigenous perspective on this incredible show. I want to see that. I want to follow it right through, so yes, we must get it to an overseas venue.

KP:

Absolutely, and we're working on that. It's great we're launching here in New Zealand and, by the time the show is concluded here next May, we'll be in a different position, hopefully, with our borders, to be able to make sure it gets on the road.

CW:

What this exhibition will do is enable Māori who probably have never been to Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, to actually experience the building, the place, and know that they have a rightful place to be there. In terms of mana whenua [authority over land], where do they sit within that building if there is less than two per cent Māori coming to the Gallery right now? What are you hoping this exhibition will do for that audience?

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KP:

Well, great question. In our strategic plan, we have KPIs around seeing that audience grow. Moreover, the exhibition not only is about today's audience; it's also about the audience of the future, so it's organisational change that's curatorial and artist-led. For example, once we've produced an exhibition like this that is bilingual in its presentation, how do you then return after six months of being a bilingual institution to going back to English only? They're the kind of questions you're going to have to address. Equally, how is it that in 20 years, we still have two institutional positions for Māori curators in New Zealand, when Māori art is the most significant cultural output of the nation?

CW:

It's the same with film. Every single film that has ever made it, if you like, overseas has either Māori content or a Māori director. It's what the world finds unique in us. It's our culture, our language, our stories. You have to present yourself in a way that makes that particular institution or that building or that Gallery unique. What is it that makes us unique?

KP:

To your question, too: as an Australian tourist, now resident and Kiwi, or slowly becoming Kiwi—

CW:

Welcome, Anzac!

KP:

—my role is only about ensuring there's a platform there and that it's reinforced, stable, safe; everything that needs to take place on it can.

CW:

Obviously, Australia has its own colonial history. How would you compare Australia and what's happening there within the art world to what we're doing here?

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KP:

As we entered Covid, I was in Sydney at *NIRIN*, which was curated by Brook Andrew and the first Sydney Biennale curated by a First Nations curator with First Nation artists, and it's the best biennale I think we've ever seen. So there's a movement, and I see our project positing within this wave, which will be, in my view, a defining moment for the 21st century, for contemporary practice.

CW:

That's fantastic.

KP:

Thanks so much for joining us today, Chelsea, and we look forward to continuing our conversations over the coming months, and of course the debut of the film you're in the thick of making.

CW:

Yes, thank you so much for having me.

KP:

You've been listening to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, director Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. You can find out more about the series online and I encourage you to use the hashtag #culturedconversations in all your dialoguing online about art today.