Cultured Conversations

Cultured Conversations is a digital series produced by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

Exploring issues and ideas from the cultural sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, this series is hosted by Gallery Director, Kirsten Lacy, and invites exceptional leaders from arts, philanthropy, economics and politics to discuss topical issues facing the sector today.

As Artistic Director of the 2020-22 Melbourne Art Fair and Public Art Curator for City of Moreland, Emily Cormack has been curating exhibitions and commissioning public art throughout the Asia Pacific region and in Europe since 2001.

Recorded in December 2020, Emily Cormack joins Kirsten Lacy to talk about her experiences as a Kiwi working in Australia, her vision for Melbourne Art Fair and art as the medium that keeps us all connected.

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Kirsten Lacy:

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Lacy, Director of Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. Today, we're right here in the magnificent atrium of our Gallery but I wanted to shift our conversation here, to be with the public. It's why we exist. And that's a perfect introduction to my conversation partner today, Emily Cormack. Emily is a curator who is working in public spaces and is also the Artistic Director of Melbourne Art Fair, making artwork accessible to the public. A New Zealander working in Australia but here you are, back home in New Zealand, Emily. Welcome.

Emily Cormack:

Thank you.

KL:

What a tough year it's been. What's brought you back from Australia home to New Zealand?

EC:

Yes, it's been a year of pressure and release, really. Melbourne, people here may be aware, had a seven-month lockdown so we were in lockdown from March until October. During that time, I was working full-time, so was my partner, and we were trying to home-school two children. So it was a very challenging year. There have been some interesting upsides to Covid: the freedom and flexibility that came with remote working meant that we were able to move to New Zealand, be with our family who needed us

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at that time, and we have been able to put the children in school for the first time this year, and really get on with our work from New Zealand. We feel incredibly fortunate that we've been able to have this experience, coming back to our homeland. Both my husband and I are from New Zealand, so it's been a real privilege and a beautiful time for us.

KL:

You come from my home, Melbourne, and here I am welcoming you to yours. It's the nature of our times, as you describe it. The trans-Tasman relationship is the context for our conversation today. Is there a common culture, do you think, between Australia and New Zealand, that we share?

EC:

Well, it's an interesting question because if you're looking at it from a settler/invader Pākehā perspective, the stories are the same or similar at least. However, when you look at all of the other forces that go into creating culture – landscape, terrain, indigenous experience – they couldn't be more different, between New Zealand Australia. As you know, Australia is one of the longest constantly inhabited countries in the world, with evidence of people living there for 70,000 years, whereas here it's only been 1000 years. So even in that there is an incredible difference that feeds into the culture here. I'm not sure how that manifests exactly, or whether I could paraphrase it, but there is something intrinsic in the way that we relate to the land and the indigenous people that creates a difference between the two countries. But for me, it's not that productive to think about those differences too much. It's more interesting for us to think about ourselves in a geopolitical space within the world. We are in the periphery looking out, often looking out to the American/European canon, from the outside. Rather than thinking about that as a negative, I think that it's a freedom. I see it as a great freedom to be on the edge on the periphery because, for me, I find all of the exciting things happen at the edges: thresholds are where change happens, where transformation occurs. When we push things to the edge is when we release blockages and we can have free-flowing ideas. If we think about our position on the periphery as one of dynamism and activity, think about our relationship to Southeast Asia and South America and all of these other kinds of areas in our region, and really focus on those in building a strong kind of collective culture together, with all of the differences as part of that – that for me is a more exciting way of thinking about trans-Tasman relations.

KL:

It's interesting, isn't it, because the periphery is a really fascinating place to lead from as well. We recognise that we often slip between leading from different positions within our organisations. In terms of our industry, though, there are a lot of New Zealanders working in Australia, and a lot of Australians working here in New Zealand. What's your experience of that as an arts worker and a cultural leader, being in Australia for 20 years now as a Kiwi? Do you feel like you bring a part of your identity as a New Zealander to your practice there and how does that play out?

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EC:

Of course, I've experienced some antagonism because of my accent or people may have brought that up, but for me that's not the most interesting thing. We're very close neighbours and there's not much else around us, so it makes sense that there's this fluid reciprocity between New Zealand Australia, and all of my work has been very focused on activating those networks. I'm very focused on bringing New Zealand artists to Australia in all of my exhibitions; because my ideas naturally flow across both countries, I'll draw in New Zealand artists and introduce them to new audiences over there and vice versa over here. There are New Zealanders everywhere in the Australian art world and there are Australians everywhere in the New Zealand art world. If we were in Europe, for example, that wouldn't be unusual: the fluid movement of arts workers around Europe is something no one necessarily comments on. I'd prefer to think about us all as talented, curious people who are finding the best way to connect art with audiences.

KL:

Interesting you say that because during lockdown, we commissioned a work by a New Zealander, who's based in Canberra, actually, about an issue that she experienced first-hand, which was the New South Wales bushfires in January this year; she was caught on the beaches of at Batemans Bay – Alicia Frankovich. I was in New Zealand at the time and I think you may have been, too, Emily, and the skies literally went orange. In Alicia's work, she's taken the orangeness of the sky and recreated a series of vignettes that are performed inside an orange box, which was located here in our atrium, and really spoke to the joining and the shared environmental experience and issues across the Tasman. That trans-Tasman arts practice is interesting, I think. Are there other examples of that that you're working with, or have seen coming to the fore at this particular moment, the Covid years?

EC:

That work was so profoundly disturbing and amazing. It really articulated the strange sense that we have. When the cloud came over, I was on a remote island in the Hauraki Gulf and the cloud came over and suddenly the trauma that was going on in our hometown of Melbourne, and in the eastern coast of Australia, really hit home. We felt it and we realised and for me it was a very tangible metaphor for our interconnectivity; how intrinsically connected we are, not just with Australia but with the world, and how all of our biosphere and our ecologies are dependent on each other's. It was interesting, Alicia's work, because it was inside a glass box so there was this idea of the other or being separate from this experience. But really, when the cloud came over, we were all reminded that we are subject to each country's different government policies. We are all influenced by someone's reluctance to meet climate targets or to stop cutting down forests. All that influences us intrinsically and we're not othered, we're not separate – we're all interconnected. I thought her work was so eloquent in thinking that through.

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KL:

This idea that the environment shares and has no national boundaries or borders is really what the work kind of touched on, I think . . .

EC:

Yes, because that cloud went all the way around the world.

KL:

And it was experienced and felt by so many. Common humanity and public work and public spaces – we'll get to the Art Fair, but you're also working in public spaces of commercial hotel settings, stewarding commissioned work for hotels. Here in New Zealand, the Cordis is the main project, I think, you're working on at the moment. How do you bring some of these dialogues into spaces like that?

EC:

It's a bigger narrative, really; how these kinds of projects came into my practice. For me, art is a capturing of forces, and what that means is that art holds all of the forces of the community, of subjectivities, and it captures them and it holds them. Then it reflects it back to us, so we're able to understand ourselves on a deeper level or contemplate ourselves through this capturing of forces that art is able to do. Public art has become quite interesting to me as I've explored this idea of art as a capturing of forces, because public art is a capturing of community forces and implicit within that – political rhetoric, community intentions, socio-political ideas – all of those come into these great forces, great gatherings of forces, in public art projects. So the public art projects become a kind of monument to now and that's a temporal thing, as we've seen with Black Lives Matter and the sculptures getting toppled and readdressed and thought about in different ways. Those forces change over time and I think it's a fascinating, challenging space to work in. Often, curatorial theory might imagine that an artwork is static, that its meaning is the same, and that we can slightly shift it by putting it in different contexts, but when you put something out in the world, you put an artwork out in the world, that is totally out of your hands. It's in the composition of the world, the choreography of the everyday. It's a really interesting field to try and work with. I work for local government in Melbourne and then I also work for corporations doing public art commissions within their public spaces – so Cordis is one, 101 Collins is another. I've done Bendigo Hospital artworks. I've commissioned artworks everywhere. Always my intention with these public art projects is thinking through the forces of that space, the forces that the visitor carries with them as they move through, and thinking about how the artwork can enliven, activate and stimulate the visitor, as well as the architecture.

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For example, at the Bendigo Hospital, it was a beautiful, long, architectural space with a kind of latticed open ceiling, but the energy of the space was being pushed out and dispersed, right out each end. They wanted artwork to bring the energy back in. That was part of the brief that I wrote for the artist. Now we've got a beautiful Esther Stewart commission, which works in harmony with the architecture and the broader context of Bendigo and the patient experience. It's a really interesting set of parameters and conditions to work with and I really enjoy that challenge, because I feel that art should be able to operate – it doesn't have to – but it has the ability to operate in all terrain. I'm a believer in art. I believe that it has the ability to connect with everyone and remind everyone of the innate human activity of contemplation or thinking; that these are essential human traits that are not accounted for in other aspects of our of our life. They're not accounted for within commerce or civic structures necessarily, but humans have the ability to contemplate and think through things, and public art is an opportunity to reflect that or encourage that in the public.

KL:

And personally, the encounter of art in different spaces is really helpful, in fact, because not only do we visit art galleries with intent but the work you're doing in these commissions enables us to have encounters in the everyday movements and busyness of our lives. Another project, though, is the Art Fair. It's a destination that you consciously choose to go to and most people visiting are looking for the opportunity to bring something into their domestic lives, settings or workplaces when they're visiting. How do you understand the idea of public, and a broad public, when you're setting out creatively to shape and frame an art fair, which is at its core about sales and the commercialisation of ideas to create a buoyant industry around it?

EC:

Art fairs and the art market are an essential part of the arts ecosystem. Artists can't survive without art fairs. I read somewhere that 70 per cent of sales, actually, are occurring through art fair contexts, so to imagine that I'm a supporter of artists but I don't support art fairs is very hypocritical. If you want to support artists, if you want to give them opportunities, you need to support the entire ecosystem. Working as the Artistic Director in the Art Fair has allowed me to think through exactly the challenges that you're talking about: How does an art fair commercial context work with what are essentially quite philosophical or experimental ideas that underpin my practice? But it translates very well, because the intention is the same. My intention is to provide opportunities for artists and provide opportunities for artists to create new work and for audiences to engage with that work. So whatever opportunity I have to do that, I'm going to jump at it and try to make something really exciting. For the Art Fair, it was the first time they'd ever had an Artistic Director, and they invited me to come on and curate the vision for the 'Beyond' section, which is the section of big public commissions in the spaces. I had the opportunity to curate the arrangement of the booths as well, and to try to make a sort of logical narrative as you

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moved through the exhibition and convention centre. But also, it was more about introducing an overall vision for the installations within the 'Beyond' section, which are scattered across the entire space. So for that, I really wanted to think it through because when you go to an art fair, sometimes one that's not considered curatorially, it's just a very front-brain exercise, to use the Len Lye-ism. It's a very front-brain exercise, where you go in and you're just shopping and it's frenetic and it's stressful and it's an indexical approach of practices. There's no opportunity to get deep with things. Quite frankly, I find that a very unsatisfying encounter. What I wanted to do is offer the opportunity for visitors to engage with another part of their body while they were experiencing it, so all of the works that I was going to commission – well, I will be commissioning but now in 2022 because of Covid – they were works which activate the body. They're works that talk about how we hold stories, history, knowledge in our bodies. They connect with that aspect of the viewer's body as well. It was also these works that affect you sensorially; there was dance and movement, so there's that mirror neuron idea, where if you see someone moving, you start moving. So there were works that were drawing on that as well, and large commissions of dancers thinking through storytelling with their bodies. I really wanted people to come in and their bodies to be activated as soon as they entered, so then they could go through the spaces and really engage effectively with the artwork, which is often a way of engaging more deeply, right? We go into a gallery and often it's something that gets us in the heart or in the guts that will stay with us. But you have to be open to that. In some ways, that's the curator's job, to open people to that. That's what I'm hoping to achieve with the Art Fair.

KL:

And in the context of the Fair, they're often busy, crowded, noisy places, so I love your approach to bringing performance into those spaces. It's really, really exciting. You mentioned that the Art Fair's postponed until 2022. Are there impacts of Covid on the world of art fairs that will have a longer-standing legacy in how they're run and developed creatively?

EC:

It's impossible to say, really, because we don't know how effective the vaccine is going to be, so we don't know whether we're going to be able to encourage mass gatherings or whether we're going to be able to invite people to attend performances – all of these things. I was at the opening here the other night and I took photos from the balcony and sent them to my friends in Melbourne, who were just in disbelief that there were 800 people gathering in a space together. It's just not a possibility anywhere else in the world.

KL:

But you have delivered the Art Fair digitally this year and so, in terms of those changes, is there any of those new initiatives that you'll carry forward with you into the 2022 programme?

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EC:

It worked quite well in that context. We had lots of Instagram stories, studio visits, interviews, and all of these kinds of things. We did a lot of programming online and the digital art fairs went quite well all around the world. I think lots of people were quite interested in thinking about art while they were sitting at home, locked in their homes. But at the same time, there's nothing like the physical encounter with artwork. I think that's something that will always be present and necessary. In any experience with us, we need to bring back the effective dimension of it.

KL:

The art world loves congregating, too – I mean, it's a huge industry event. You get to do so much business but also connect with so many people at once from all over the world.

EC:

Exactly.

KL:

We look forward to the New Zealand Art Fair here in Auckland. But we have noticed in terms of the economics of these entities that because people have been unable to travel, disposable incomes have still been quite strong and the luxury goods market – which I guess you might say the art industry falls squarely in – has done quite well, despite the fact that that experiential offer hasn't been available to people. It'd be interesting to see whether new collectors that have been brought into the market carry with you into 2022.

EC:

I guess buying out is buying an experience, so they'll get the work in their home and then they'll be able to have a new experience, so it's interesting, isn't it?

KL:

It is. It's so wonderful meeting you and talking with you, Emily. Thank you. You've been listening to Cultured Conversations. My name's Kirsten Lacy. I'm the Director of Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. Thank you for your time and energy in joining me in this conversation. We began these chats under partial lockdown and I'm happy to be here in a noisy open gallery. That's how I'd like these conversations to be. Please get in touch. I'd love to hear your comments. Share your thoughts at aucklandartgallery.com and build the conversation of our culture.