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 talks with Graham Tipene (Ngāti Whātua, Ngāti Kahu, Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Haua, Ngāti Manu), a tā moko (tattoo) artist who has been involved as a consultant and key artist on civic and Council-led projects throughout Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Kirsten Paisley:

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. My name is Kirsten Paisley and I'm the director at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Now in that name is the central cultured conversation for Aotearoa New Zealand today, that of biculturalism. And I'm joined today by Graham Tipene to have that conversation with me. Kia ora and welcome, Graham.

Graham Tipene:

Tēnā koe. Tēnā koe. Tēnā koutou.

KP:

A mihi to you, Graham, to your tīpuna, to this whenua. I hope you will accept my mihi without te reo today.

GT:

Yeah, tēnā koe, absolutely. Thank you for having me. It's good to sit together and converse.

KP:

Yeah, you bring whakapapa to this conversation, Graham. Where are you from?

GT:

So I'm a born and bred Orakei boy. Lived there most of my life. And Orakei is like a five-minute drive from the centre of Auckland. I live up on Bastion Point Takaparawhā, and my people have been in the area for over 400 years and my family will be there for 400 more. So, yeah, we're not far from the CBD and have whakapapa history all around here. That's the genealogy of the whakapapa we have to the space, to the whānau here, in the history we have. Kia ora.

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KP:

Kia ora. So now you're a significant artist working on big architectural commissions for the CBD of Tāmaki Makaurau and other places up and down the country. Also an expert in tā moko, Māori traditional tattooing, and a cultural leader. When you talk about art and I talk about art, is it the same thing?

GT:

To dig deeper into the perspective or the idea of what Māori art is and non-Māori art is, I spend a lot of time trying to deconstruct that very perception when it comes to designers doing infrastructure for Tāmaki. One of the biggest factors we got into the mahi was travelling around Tāmaki compared to travelling around places like Rotorua or Gisborne — it was very apparent that Auckland could be any city anywhere without our cultural identification, the designs that we've come to know as Māori art. Māori art was never, build something then make it pretty —our art and our engineering are the same thing. A pō and a whare, was put there for its engineering purposes, and designed to put in that kōrero and whakapapa and genealogy, but it was never built first then made pretty. We wrote a document a few years ago just explaining that to architects, and saying, don't get us involved at the 75 per cent mark, when the building's almost finished and you want something to make it look nice. If you want true biculturalism, true collaboration, include us when the idea is birthed. That way you'll have a Māori lens through every part of the process, as opposed to making it pretty near the end.

And it still happens. But I think that in terms of the question, that that's the difference between us and our Māori worldview of artworks versus the non-Māori worldview. And why we have this conversation with our rangatahi constantly. We will show them and we will say, is that art or is it whakapapa, or is it genealogy or is it history? And they will think for a quick second — it's, pause, then realise the depth of the question they're being asked. And then they'll always come back with the Māori-view answer on our taonga, that it is whakapapa, kōrero nehe, historic stories. So, yeah, I think those are the differences and we have to keep pushing those ideas because we are not yet at the birth of a project. We are not 100 per cent there yet. But we'll get there.

KP:

When I was talking to Bernard Makoare, who you introduced me to and of course advised on the building of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki some seven, eight years ago now, at the conclusion of that project he put some thoughts on paper which he shared with me recently. And what he was saying in that text was that while he had been able to advise on the architectural design the Māori way from the beginning and it had been a good process, that for him as an artist and a cultural leader, he felt that it should extend further into what took place in the building itself. And that there was — I'm using my own words now —

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but a kind of separation or a beginning and end to the architectural process and the handing over of the keys to the institution, and for him that delineation did not make sense. What can we do better when we're thinking about buildings and design to ensure that the values that are embedded in the architectural fabric play out in what takes place?

GT:

Bernard Makoare, amazing artist, amazing carver, amazing historian, and I understand where he's going. It's a case of understanding our obligation to historic knowledge, and how we maintain the mana of the process past its unveiling date. And I think to me it sounds like that's what he was saying — we've done it now, what are the processes to maintain the mana of this work? Which I think is fundamental to everything Māori. You don't just do it just because, you do it with that long-term thinking of guardianship, the long-term thinking of being able to bring those stories back so that when we have rangatahi, or young people, coming in, we can actually tell them the process to the product. But part of its maintenance of the mana is explaining to these children, so that as they get older they understand the process.

And it's hard because we will do work that once it's done the people who now either have that work or are using that work won't think the same as us, and you see it a lot. There are places where an artist has done something and then the producer of the people, the funders, don't treat it right after it's been produced. So I think, in terms of getting it right, there's an understanding that people have to have — that they don't know, and that it's okay. To not know is okay. In fact, we've been in wānanga, and that was one of the messages hit home to us —and if you don't know, that's totally okay, but make moves to know. So I think in terms of getting the processes right with you guys, it could be totally removing yourself from what you know, totally removing stuff from yourself, from what you know, to understand that it's okay not to know. But figure out how to gain that knowledge, so that you don't repeat what's already happened, so that the mana of the project, the mana of the people in their project, all remain intact. And that's not an easy feat, but it's absolutely worth it. Absolutely worth it.

KP:

Your artwork is literally worn on the body on the skin and also in public spaces, not so much in art galleries. Do you perhaps think that there's a limit to the usefulness of a public gallery to having carriage of that mana and artworks, I guess, that you're producing today?

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GT:

You know, how we view our pieces as well and the purpose we create those pieces become part of the reason of how we decide where they should be. And a lot of my work is historical kōrero, where we have a story from those areas, so we leave the art piece where that story was, or where that story took place, or where that story came from, as opposed to, here's an art piece about — we'll put it in this building for however many years. For Māori, you turn up to somewhere and you see an art piece and you know straight away this art piece has something to do with this region. I don't know what it is, but I do know that, because of its placement, the stories going into this work pertain to here. So an art gallery, our art galleries, are our wharenui, our art galleries are our homes, our art galleries are our garages, where people will come, have a cup of tea and look around the house, And it might be, oh, who made that? Who was the weaver of that? What is that?

I have taonga all around my house which could be put up in art galleries. But they are taonga I've either acquired over the years or have actively gone out to seek or made myself. But they're around my house — in fact, I need more walls just to put these taonga up. But those taonga speak about who we are as a family, who I am as a person, and I have a story for every piece in our house, why that has come to our family. And so doing it in our house it feels comfortable for us. We can then control who has access to it, who can pick it up and turn it over and look at it, who can stand in front of it and ask those stories.

I had Joe Hawke sitting in my lounge and we had an architect come in with a Native American and they brought her to Orakei. So we had the big Bastion Point protest in the '70s. And they brought this lady in and I say, oh, come in the lounge, we'll go and have a cup of tea. They walk out and Uncle Joe's sitting there, his grandson was being tattooed at the time in my studio. And then all the Māori freaked out and they explained to this lady, Joe Hawke here was the reason the Bastion Point protest took place. The whole reason we brought you up to visit Orakei was because of this man, and he's sitting in my lounge. But the point of this story is I got given an art piece from Te Papa because they had these posters called 'The Turning Point' and I was given one as a koha. The Turning Point talks about the turning point for Māori sovereignty and I framed this poster. Joe Hawke was sitting in front of it and he's the reason that poster exists. He was also the reason these ladies came to visit the land. Not him. They came to visit the land, then they came over to my house for a cup of tea and the man who started everything was sitting in the room. So all of these connections — it's not just about the poster, or the way that I framed it, or its place in my house — all of those connections mean our art galleries are our homes, our people, our land, our waters. They're all around people's houses, they're — you know, during the summer months, you change your art out, so some of them are sitting in cupboards waiting for the winter months. So all of these things, so yeah, it's a long way to go around it.

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KP:

I want to push you a little bit more because I understand partly what you've told me because you've shown me, you've taken me into a close family member and friend's home and shown me this in practice. I have a depth of understanding from that experience. But I'm also the director of a public gallery which is purposed to share ideas with the community and with the world. And I think also by virtue of the public works you're doing, that access in some broader access and the sharing of the Māori way, Māori design, Māori art and culture, is also kind of really core to who you are as a leader and as an artist. We can't take a big public into private land, rooms, to share that right so we have institutions like Te Papa and the Auckland Art Gallery and the museum and library and places like this where we do that work. It's the interface, I guess, and it's also recognising that for Māori people to feel comfortable in that, we need to do things differently to how we've done it up until now. And that's the nub of where the bicultural change is that we're seeking to explore. How do we make good of the mana that Bernard put into that architecture today?

GT:

I mean you could find those artists and rebuild their houses, rebuild their lounges, rebuild the walls, you know what I mean. Then the public's not going to their house, the public's going to the art gallery to look at a version of their house. But the mana of the mahi that's in the space — it could be one of those things, it could be different. Intimate still, because actually this is very much the same as this artist's lounge or this artist's kitchen, but public enough to not have 300 people show up to your house on open day.

KP:

You also talked about learning and I want to talk about that as well — how you have learned your craft and art and cultural practice, and what we need in order to continue that, because it's outside of the formal Pākehā western institutions that this cultural knowledge is passed down. And you've got young children in your life that are also having this deep, rich cultural education by virtue of all that you share with them. What do we need to support this in more formal ways? Is that a question you're exploring?

GT:

You know, we go to education programmes all the time, and you walk in and you've got a gun accountant teaching kids about accounting, you've got a gun lawyer telling kids law's the way to go, you've got architects, get into architecture. And I say to our education people at Ngāti Whātua, where are your carvers? Where are your painters? Where are the 'titu', the people who don't want to read books, they don't want to go through policy —they want to look at a piece of timber and figure out how to make it look like their tīpuna, they want to look at a flax bush and figure out how to make muka to bind. I say, you're actually missing out a whole skill set that needs nurturing from a young age. And children of artists get

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it all the time. It's those other artists who don't — who come from a non-artist family, who visit places like the museum and the art gallery and walking through hospital hallways and seeing art — you know, they're there to see a sick person and then they're staring at an artwork. Where is the nurture for those kids? Where is the focus for those kids? Because nurturing them in this work is also nurturing their mental health, also nurturing their identity, also nurturing growing them to be a strong human, Māori artist so that we don't have to fix an adult artist. So that — you know, if that makes sense — that's one of the things I think we're not focusing enough on. There are kuia out there that do it, that help, but you have to be able to apply for the school and stuff like that. You want them to be strong enough as a 12 year old to actually say, my mate over there wants to be a cop, my mate over there wants to be accountant, I want to draw for the rest of my life, and let it be okay. Because too many times we need to get a real job. But we need to let kids know that's totally fine. Do that if you feel good here and here, do it and we will support you 100 per cent.

KP:

Let's talk about tā moko for a little bit. So you etch permanently into the skin designs that talk to whakapapa, family, the purpose and motivation of the individual in arriving at that point. It's not about you, the work that you're doing, it's about the individual, and you bring to the carriage a whole range of different knowledge systems around that person as you design your tattoo. Is it art, Graham? Is there a different lens?

GT:

We use the word art because it's freely available to use to describe what people see. And that's okay. But it is so not. It is way more genealogy, whakapapa, history. It is a snapshot of the individual in that space in that time being etched into their skin as a reminder to them of what they've come for. That's how I see it. It's a reminder. And it's hard too, because as a practitioner we become counsellor, and a lot of the kōrero that's given to us stays here. We can be broad about some stuff, but we can never say, we can never be specific when it comes to our clients, because the kōrero they offer could be so deep, so traumatic, that you know they've entrusted us. So it's way different to art because of those little things. It's whakapapa, genealogy, histories. It's our expression of ourselves in our skin and it's the one thing, the one part of us that takes the longest to remove if that was ever going to happen. If you go into moko, that's a one-way trip — you are not reversing out of that. It's a one-way trip and it's a beautiful, beautiful journey. Intimate, yeah. Tears flow, stories flow, songs flow, and when we did my nephew's face a few weeks , by the end of the session I told the house, right, start singing, we've got 45 minutes to go. Any song. It's the resonance of the sound that helped him get through it, any song. So if you're looking at moko as in, oh, he's got a moko, you're looking at the wrong part. He's got a moko in its entirety — that's the way to look at moko. It is art but it's not art. It's so much more, so much more.

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KP:

Very layered and deep. And when you were tattooing your nephew, you touched on the purpose of song to help him through the last vestiges of pain in the last 45 minutes. But the song has a whole range of purposes, doesn't it? I mean, he was surrounded by his family and it was a long session because it was a big day. What happens when whānau has seen to him? And what happens for you as you're doing that work so close?

GT:

I think we underestimate the power of lullaby. As an adult we sing to our children to make them sleep, but what we're doing is singing to their heart to make them safe. So we return that whole thing to our clients — it says, you're okay, pain is pain, but you've got the most important people in the room with you right now and they're going to sing. The songs they sing is totally up to them. We were lucky that the composer was also in the room, and the songs he composed everybody in the room knew, and the songs he composed had genealogy about this boy and about the family, and about the family members who were on the wall. So everything was focused on the love that family had for this boy, his genealogy, his future and his past. So that's where the singing — and it could be a whisper in the ear, it could be a hum. But the point of all of that is everything is connected. You can't just do the tattoo, you can't just get your face done — you actually need the prayer, the song, the stories, the laughter.

KP:

And they're all almost sung into the ink, aren't they? In a sense, it recollects forever that moment in time as well.

GT:

The minute you pierce the skin your whakapapa is exposed, and so to give that whakapapa, to make it safe, that's where the singing and the karakia come into play, so that the whakapapa is looked after. And I'm not talking now — I'm talking hundreds of years prior, hundreds of years forward, for this moment. It goes, this moment here is a thousand years long either side of this boy.

KP:

It's a big responsibility. You're almost channelling through you all of that into the work that you're doing.

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GT:

And that's all part of the process. We understand, because toto is sacred, super-sacred blood, super sacred, which is why there was only one person that could set up and break down — no one else was allowed to touch the gear. So it's super sacred, so we have to look after that and the weight on our shoulders is immense. But it's more immense if you don't know what you're doing. It's scarier if you aren't prepared. My cousin and I had prepared for two years for that day so we were good. We went away and ate lots of oysters on the Monday.

KP:

Very good. Well, it was for you hours and hours of concentration and work but —

GT:

Yeah, and you only came on the second day. We had the first day as well, was awesome.

KP:

It was a great privilege to be there. We've kind of explored how art, for want of a different word perhaps is spiritual, and has this kind of very deep spiritual connection which is not about a point in time, it's about all of time in a way. It's a powerful part of the wellbeing of a community and a whole culture. How do we then fit the commercial into that? It's a pragmatic part of life in that artists need to sustain themselves and we live in an era of late capitalism, and around all of that we still have to survive

GT:

One of the things — when people talk to us about the mahi we do, especially tā moko, I always tell them, if you're in it for the money you're in it for the wrong reasons. This is not the reason to get into this, especially Māori art. If you're trying to get into Māori art because you know, oh, this makes x amount commission, you're in it for the wrong reason. It's totally not about that. You do the mahi because our tīpuna say we need this mahi done. Once you're in a flow of that thinking, there's only one thing that can happen. And that's people recognise the mana before the money. Once they recognise the mana, the money comes with that, but if there's no mana involved you won't get anything. If you are only in it for the money, you will not achieve anything that way. Do not ever once think this is about money. Once you do that, you're on the wrong path. And we have to hit that home so many times, that once you focus on the mana the rest will come. But it's that hard, got to get through hard to get to easy. You have to get through hard to get to easy. If you're not willing to make that sacrifice, you're going to stay in the hard.

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KP:

How did you learn all of this? What was your experience growing up?

GT:

I had a really great mother who really pushed me, pulled me out of sport, put me into work, into artwork at a really young age. But also a really good work ethic — do the mahi, get the treats, if that makes sense. And then of course mistakes — thinking, yeah, I'm going to make this much, and then realising not only does that sound stupid but it feels stupid and it doesn't align with what's right. And so you have to stop doing that and remove yourself from the ego and get into just getting the work done, and doing the work right in terms of the grand plan that our tīpuna had for us. So I think that's a big message for our young ones — don't get into it for the money. Whatever path they choose, choose that path because you have a story to tell and you want to be right first. Do what's right.

KP:

It's been so great talking to you, Graham. I could talk for many more hours. Perhaps just in closing, thinking about what you said at the beginning, that your family had lived at Orakei for 400 years and would be there for another 400 to come, if there were a message you might give yourself 400 years from now about the work that you're doing, what might that be?

GT:

Saved that one for last, didn't you? I think mana maintenance matters is probably the biggest thing I would give to our kids. Don't worry about how people feel, but make sure their mana is intact, that they feel safe. Yes, in 400 years I hope that my descendants have T-shirts that say things like that.

KP:

Thank you so much, Graham. You've been listening to Cultured Conversations. If you'd like to find out more about the series, you can do so at www.auckland.gallery.com. Find the Cultured Conversation link and if you want to be part of it and get involved you'll find my details there also.