



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 artistic director and curator, Juliana Engberg.

Kirsten Paisley:

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, Director, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and we're going to have a conversation today about the kind of art we think audiences need to see in a post-pandemic recovery era here in New Zealand. I'm joined in conversation by acclaimed artistic director and curator Juliana Engberg, who has joined the Auckland Art Gallery as the Senior Curator, Contemporary Global Art. Most recently, Juliana was the Artistic Director of the International Capital of Culture and also the Artistic Director of the Australian pavilion at the Venice Biennale. She has a long career leading art festivals around the world. Welcome, Juliana.

Juliana Engberg:

Thank you, Kirsten. It's lovely to be here.

KP:

We've been talking throughout the lockdown period about the kind of art we want to share with the world right now. Coming to the forefront of our minds has been major works that we've experienced through our careers, which really resonated quite powerfully with us, and this enormous drive to bring them back to light, to bring them to New Zealand for the first time. Let's talk about the kind of art that we think audiences need to see right now.

JE:

The first thing is that people are desperate, aren't they, for something tangible. They want to feel something – they've been locked away. They're apprehensive. New Zealand is in a very different place to the rest of the world. We are uniquely placed, actually, but I sense from a lot of my international colleagues that there's still fear and trepidation, and there's an anxiety in the audience, I think, that they will never join again; that they will never become one again. It's quite profound when you start to realise just how intrinsically important art culture is for people and how it has tremendous capacity to call that people. The art that you and I are drawn to and the works that we want to bring in touch with an audience right now, those works that assist them to feel something, maybe to experience either *ensemble* or even individually

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those things that they have difficulty expressing. Maybe it's grief, perhaps it's fear, maybe it's also about providing them passages of joy. We're taking them on a kind of journey that they can experience, because art has this tremendous capability to provide a metaphoric experience for people where they can put their feelings and their emotions. That's one of its great deliverances.

KP:

We've talked a lot about loss, strangely and thinking about some of the artworks we're going to be presenting at the gallery in the next few months, there is a really strong theme of loss. It's not been all bad in New Zealand lockdown, obviously, and the Covid experience has lots of great things about it. But in terms of a longer view of what it means for humanity and for the art world and for us as individuals, we haven't yet grappled with what it is that we've lost. We don't quite know what it is but there's a sense that the world and ourselves within it will never be the same again.

JE:

I think people do feel as though they have gone through a transformation. The positive aspect of this is that people have been given time, time they didn't quite know what to do with, time they were perhaps even a little fearful of, but which they settled into and strange things started to happen. They started to listen to sounds, they started to observe nature, they were talking about birds; people were sending around robins about poetry, people were listening to music. I think most people's minds, ears, hearts were opened during that time. People also connected to families in a way they haven't done before and they found quite a physical connection to nature, something that they're not enabled to do in their rat-race life. They all of a sudden were slowed down – that is quite a profound thing but, of course, it can be scary if you're very attached to this sort of distraction economy that we have: always on the phone, always on the text, always on the email. We had a luxury of time, in which hopefully some of us started to think, *What kind of world do we want to craft? What sort of world do we want to see before us?* That stimulates us to actually make experiences that are not only talking about what we've been through but what we're heading toward; pathing away to optimism, pathing away to a freedom of thought or actually releasing us back into the atmosphere, changed, alchemical, but positive.

When we were down for a bit, as you know, I had embarked upon this exhibition *Rubble*, which was a pretty good exhibition, I want to say. I was mighty happy with it but it was a little bit arid. When we were talking on the telephone, I remember saying to you, 'I just feel it's a bit kind of dusty now.' It seemed to terminate at a point where I was saying to people, 'Okay, we have these issues, we have these problems for the world. What are we going to do with them?' But now I feel that we need to take people on a further journey and get them out of this dilemma. You were kind enough to say, 'Do it,' and so what we've arrived at is an exhibition I've now recrafted, which is *all that was solid melts*, which I think perfectly describes

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our situation. We thought we were on solid ground and now it's all melted around us. But if we think of the alchemical reaction of that, what that does is it releases vapours into the air and these are creative vapours. The ancients talked a lot about that. So what I've done in creating *all that was solid melts* is a passage through fear, apprehension, dilemma, catastrophe, but all the way out through nature again – birds and sounds and vividness and flowers blooming – and then eventually, when people get to the end of the show, people will see the body floating in bits and pieces, accompanied to lulling music, and they'll feel as though they've gone through an elixir. They'll come out the other end free, lighter and more able. I think art can be that sort of conveyance. I'm sure that that's true of many of the art forms. Personally, next week, I'm looking forward to going to listen to the Auckland Philharmonic, who are playing a lovely suite of works, and I'm certain that there's a reason that that concert is sold out. People want to come together. They want to be in that vibratory space that is created by music. It's one of the reasons why we've put Susan Philipsz's wonderful sound piece into the north atrium at the Gallery.

KP:

Yes, opening next week . . .

JE:

It's tremendous. We just did the sound testing this morning and as the staff were coming in they were all like, *Oh, but what is this? This is marvellous*. Even though I've described it many times, they weren't anticipating the bodily effect it would have on them.

KP:

Feeling the void with sound but sound that's embedded with so much cultural and personal memory because it is the 'Last Post' played on instruments, bugle instruments, basic wind instruments, damaged on the battlefield.

JE:

Yes, little wounded instruments that have holes in them and are a bit bent out of shape and make funny little wheezy sounds sometimes. It is a fragmented performance of the 'Last Post' but the lingering notes are so recognisable to people, especially here, where somewhat like Australia there is a great attachment to the Anzac concept. It is where our nations formed a sense of themselves, as nations. Even though they were fighting in the First World War on behalf of the Empire, they also realised that they were standing up on their own feet and were a force to be reckoned with. It's really where the mythology of our nation was first forged. I think it's a beautiful work to bring here because it has a very particular meaning for here.

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But it has a global meaning as well; anyone listening to those plaintive sounds thinks, *Oh, yes, I recognise these sounds as part of commemoration and memory.* There's something particularly pure about those sounds. It's like a learned memory.

KP:

I remember when you were proposing this work, commissioned first for the Tate – it's a piece of music that was devised to play to recall soldiers from the battlefield, when it's safe to return, and that's what we wanted to announce to Auckland: it's safe to come back into the community, we will be part of civic life and experience the collections and the Gallery and all it has to offer. I want to talk about the role of the artist. We're entering the third decade of the twenty-first century and the role of the artist as a kind of visual poet of this century, who we're turning to, particularly in this moment, is going to change, right?

JE:

Definitely.

KP:

As we're seeking out the voices of people who can translate experience into new kinds of memories, effectively . . .

JE:

Yes. It's been interesting, speaking with a lot of artist colleagues from around the world. A lot of them felt very stuck for a while; even really great ones were in a position where they were saying, 'I'm not quite sure what it is I'm going to do.' I think you are correct in calling them poets. I often also refer to artists as active philosophers. They're very good at using their tools of metaphor to give us the tools for thought and to think through our condition. I think another thing that is very true of art is that it often is forward-responsive. It sees the event before it gets there and I think in some ways artists have been brought up suddenly in a moment, which they perhaps couldn't have quite anticipated. They're not quite sure where they're going. I'm absolutely certain out of this time we will get tremendous work. If I think about some of the works that I'm putting into *all that melts* – Piranesi's suite of etchings was actually a response to the earthquakes in Lisbon but they came a little bit later. They weren't illustrating that directly but he was interested in the ruin and interested in particular in the weeds and the things that grew around the ruin: this is a history that has changed but here is the history that will grow again. In the same picture, you're seeing history and future.

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KP:

And the nature of reclamation as well, which we're also talking about.

JE:

I'm anticipating that great artists who have tremendous talents, people like Tacita Dean and so forth, they will be finding the thing that is right and it won't be illustrative; it won't say *this* was the pandemic, it will work around that. And that is its important shape, that it shouldn't be merely didactic or descriptive; it should be responsive in a different kind of way because you need to make art that allows for people to settle into it in their own particular fashion. Undoubtedly, the art will be very different, coming from all sorts of different spheres; rap will be different, music will be different, pausing will be different – and it's very interesting to contemplate the way in which music, for instance, is often described as pauses. In fact, those spaces between notes so just as important as the notes themselves. They build a picture or they build an atmosphere of either delightfulness or fastness or sombreness or soullessness. It'll be very interesting to see what composers come up with. We are so fortunate because we work with the visual arts and the visual arts, being the creature that it is, tends to take all the other arts to it; make what it will of it because all things are material for the visual arts, which is tremendous.

KP:

It is interesting, though, because pre-Covid, the trends that were well established in contemporary practice were so often participatory, community engaged, experiential; they depended upon audience and often multiple numbers of audience members to enact and enliven and make the works complete. In this moment, a lot of the works we've been drawn to are actually performative, auditory in nature, even more than other kinds of media material. We want to see bodies, the inferred bodies in the works, almost.

JE:

Well, architecture's had something to do with that but that's a completely different topic. I think for the last decade or maybe decade and a half or so, it's very true that artists have been seeking the co-operation of an audience; have been co-creating with audiences also. And we see those big ensemble projects, such as the 'Tino Sehgal', for instance, at the Tate, which was tremendous, or Olafur Eliasson and 'The Weather Project'; things that gather people. I think this is part of our desire to find communion; it is our secular replacement for the ecclesiastical. This is certainly a challenge now – not so much here but elsewhere, where you is going to remain in place for a very long time; touch and feeling and those tactile things are going to be more difficult for artists to actually deal with. We probably will go back to a more singular presentation but I doubt that we will ever go back to such a passive engagement, in which we had the art object that you could describe as somewhat proscenium, a bit like theatre. It was there on the wall you looked at it. It described pictorially something to you and you were learned from it. These days,

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we want a much more interactive thing. I think that's been true since 1968, when the audience began to participate in the creation of the idea and the art. It's going to be nuanced in a whole different direction. For museums and galleries, it will be a challenge, because we've been working hard on our engagements to bring people in. For you, one year into the job and with great plans, all of a sudden – boom! – out of the blue comes the meteor, or it was the pandemic? But did it give you a chance to recalibrate some thoughts about what you're going to do with the Gallery?

KP:

I think it's a gift because you've got suddenly permission to go in any direction, really. We've been able to make decisions very quickly on a whole range of things that are kind of transformative for the Auckland Art Gallery; things like our visitor charge, for example: gone overnight. There are no tourists, so the building's free again – wonderful. But in terms of programme, which is I think what you're asking about, we just launched a programme of fairly traditional mid-twentieth-century European painting exhibitions, among other things. In New Zealand's exhibition history, there are many shows that haven't come here. My initial urge on arriving as the director was to look at the exhibition history for major international projects and to try to populate the programme with major shows and artists of the 20th century that hadn't yet been here, as well as everything else we do in contemporary New Zealand obviously. Now, in a way, there's a permission to be much more nimble, reactive, responsive, and my urge has been to acquire, to present; to bring new works to New Zealand that I'm desperate to share with audiences – many of which you've put forward on the table, Juliana, as well as the rest of the team – that we are just terribly compelled to share and that's a different urge. That's been a really wonderful gift that Covid has enabled. We're able to do one-work exhibitions, for example.

JE:

Which sounds a bit puny but in fact they're big works; they're immersive and the audience has a place to be in them and they're multi-faceted in the way in which they actually address an audience. I think they speak directly to audiences at their own level. For instance, Candice Breitz's work, which is this portrait of Leonard Cohen, is this portrait made with an ensemble of men who talk about their stories and it's really about masculinity. It's also about how men need to support each other and how they ensemble as a choir and support each other in that way, and there is a need in a community to take account of where we're up to with things like that. A lot of men will have felt a little bit disabled somewhat through the pandemic. Where is my purpose? How can I save my family? A very primordial response is quite difficult for a lot of people to deal with. Getting through life is difficult to deal with. I think Candice's project is a wonderful thought around the whole way that one proceeds through one's life, warts and all, mistakes and everything, flaws and foibles, loves and losses, and all of that sort of stuff. It's a terrific project. I'm sure people are going to be incredibly captivated by it, taken with it, moved by it. People will cry.

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KP:

Well, I did find myself in tears when I saw it for the first time. It's hard not to think about one's own life, loved ones, children, partner, father, grandfather, as you see these 18 men seeing Cohen's comeback album *I'm Your Man*, with the beautiful backing vocals of Cohen's synagogue choir synthesising those many voices together. It's a really powerful work.

I grew up as an art student with your exhibitions as the backdrop to my early formative career and then went on to become a curator as well. The art school in Melbourne, where I grew up, the Victorian College of the Arts, is right next door to the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, which you built during that period of my life, when I was transitioning from being an artist to a curator. After that, as well, there were the exhibitions you produced at Heide Museum of Modern Art and then at the Melbourne Biennale. What I'm interested to get your thoughts on, Juliana, is the relationship between what happens in an inner city for artists and investing in creativity, innovation and a really exciting art scene; the relationship between that and the bringing of major international works to a city.

JE:

I embarked on an international concept for ACCA, for Heidi, for all of those places – people hadn't done it before. But I believe in cultural contagion, to sort of stretch a metaphor. I believe it's very important for the local producers to be in proximity of their international peers to see what is happening; not to be fearful of it or to feel themselves being compared unnecessarily with it, but simply to be a part of it, to be a participant in it I hope I'm right in thinking that during the time in which ACCA was doing that international programming right next door to the VCA, the Victorian College of the Arts, the ambition really went into that college. We started to see work that was coming up to a very high level of thinking, of making. The philosophy was broader, the world was expanded. I hope that's something that might be possible here. New Zealand is already quite worldly, in a way that Australia is perhaps not, because it's always had a strong connection up to America. The Govett-Brewster, for instance, has always had a tremendously interesting programme, very global in its approach. But I think what you're trying to do with the Auckland Art Gallery is make sure that the public have access to those things, too, because some of those are cognoscenti spaces; it's for the more practitioner or the more invested kind of viewer. We want to create ambition in an audience also; giving them the tools for looking and the tools for thinking and engaging, so they also go on that journey. I think that's incredibly important because the more they know, the more they are excited about things, the more they will actually support the local practices as well.

You're also shifting things quite a bit with the forthcoming large survey, the first of its kind, as I understand, of Māori art. That is a very significant thing to be undertaking and scary because it's always scary to be the first. And our colleague Nigel Borell is doing a fantastic job with that. This is a new shape,

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isn't it? What does global mean? Upon a time, in the 1950s, it would have meant New York. But the periphery entered and the centre went away and now I think we've actually got many peripheries, and one of the peripheries that is perhaps less navigated, less visible, but you're going to do it, is the Pacific region. It seems very exciting to me: Māori, the Pacific Islands, going all the way up through that Ring of Fire zone, circuiting into Asia – this is a whole new dawn. It's going to be fascinating because those aesthetics are very different.

KP:

It's geologically charged . . .

JE:

It's geologically charged. I was having a little thought the other night because you mentioned that I had run the European Capital of Culture scheme, which is a tremendous scheme – any politician who's listening should grab a hold of this quite quickly; it's a great economic driver. But the thing that makes it work up in Europe is that it's based on a commonality, so there's a kind of common sense: we are European, Scandinavian, etcetera. But there are great differences and so that makes it interesting. You will then go to Denmark to see their Capital of Culture because they do things in a Danish way. When I got back from Denmark to Australia, people kept saying to me, 'You could do a European Capital of Culture-type thing here.' I said, 'I don't think so. I think it's too homogenised.' But now I realise that in fact the trans-Tasman and Pacific zone is quite the right environment for it because we have commonality; we have shared histories but we have very different cultures, which would make it an entirely attractive idea.

KP:

One of the great opportunities that we have here in Auckland is defining international from Aotearoa, and that's exactly what the gallery has in store ahead, in the longer view of this century, consolidating the perspective of international art here in the Pacific. Thanks so much for joining me today, Juliana. We could talk all day.

You've been listening to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Paisley, Director, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. If you'd like to find out more about our series, you can go online at www.aucklandauntgallery.com. We ask you to use the hashtag #culturedconversations in all your online engagement about art today.