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.

With more than 25 years' experience working in the museums and cultural heritage sector as a curator, creative director and strategist, Karl Johnstone (Rongowhakaata) has developed major cultural diplomacy initiatives, cultural centres, exhibitions and experiences.

Karl is currently working alongside the Gallery's team to provide strategic support through his creative agency, Haumi, as the public gallery focuses on building a Treaty-based multicultural framework.

In this episode of *Cultured Conversations*, Karl discusses his work as a Māori cultural development specialist and what it means to be a bicultural institution.

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Kirsten Lacy:

Kia ora. Welcome to Cultured Conversations. I am Kirsten Lacy, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery, today with Karl Johnstone, Māori cultural development specialist, Founder/Director of the agency Haumi, and Creative Director for the New Zealand Pavilion at Expo 2020, now to be held in 2021 in Dubai. Karl has worked in the cultural sector for 20 years, across cultural diplomacy initiatives, cultural centre and exhibition design, and content development. Formally trained in fine arts and education, he's been a member on the New Zealand Arts Council. In 2019, Karl led New Zealand's ninth official exhibition at the Venice Biennale. Formerly Director of the New Zealand Māori Arts and Crafts Institute, Karl also worked at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa, managing the bicultural development team and led or contributed to over 20 exhibitions there, and is now a colleague here at Toi o Tāmaki within our leadership team. Kia ora, Karl. Welcome to our conversation today.

Karl Johnstone:

Kia ora. Thank you for that.

KL:

First up: where are you from, Karl?

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KJ:

I'm from Tūranga, from Gisborne. I'm from the three iwi there: Rongowhakaata, Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki and Ngāi Tāmanuhiri. Born and bred in Gisborne, before coming to university in Auckland. And on my other side, I have Norwegian whakapapa, through my grandfather, and also Scottish whakapapa – so, very much a marine-based sort of whakapapa.

KL:

Thank you. I thought we might start our conversation talking a little bit about your business. You made the decision to move away from institutional employment to actually set up your own creative agency. With the projects that you're taking on, they're broad and varied, from here in New Zealand and internationally as well. What's the underpinning objective in the work and the philosophy that you bring to Haumi?

KJ:

Thanks for that question. It's in its name, in some ways. Haumi's the join of a canoe or of a waka, and what it does is it actually expresses metaphorically the sophistication of our ancestors, of our tīpuna. The idea that we can extend the length of the canoe, we can make it more agile, and I use that as a metaphor, I suppose, for partnerships, for process or the co-design process. For me, working outside of institutions is really about taking that philosophy of the sophistication, of what happened in the past, and then recontextualising it to the now. How do we actually recalibrate those things that once were into the full richness today? I think that that can happen. Institutions lead a lot of important work in that direction, but I think there's a freedom that comes when you're fully self-determined, in the way that you set not only the direction of the business but the culture of it and who you employ. And then equally, underneath that, how you bring through the next generation to carry on that because it has to be a multi-generational perspective in order to achieve lofty aspirations. My team are a young team and that's intentional because I want to really work with them to bring that sense of confidence, identity and celebration to the forefront, so they're completely unapologetic as they move into the future.

KL:

That long view: how is it expressed in the values that you bring to that young team?

KJ:

It's about enabling. I celebrate our institutions and I'm also critical of our institutions because I don't think

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it's ever either/or. For me, with the young people, they come from academic backgrounds and they're taught some wonderful things, but at a very simple level, the level of investigatory culture and philosophy that comes out isn't sufficient. I think what I'm trying to really explicitly do is set the challenge to them because if you set the challenge to anybody and you give or enable self-belief they will deliver. It's about: how do you set those cultural underpinnings around them and how do you support them to get to that outcome? I suppose it's informed a little bit by my first job after leaving art school – I was an art teacher. I only did it for three years; loved the students, despised the system. But to see the success that they enjoyed just through people believing in them has really stuck with me through my career.

KL:

You can have a huge impact in young people's lives at the right moment, through arts. Given what you say about the education system – loved working with young people, didn't like the structure of that – I wanted to ask about you joining the Gallery whānau here. You've been critical of institutions as well. Why at this point, instead of critiquing from the outside, have you chosen to also step into the institution to lead on biculturalism?

KJ:

Everything works in a spectrum and it's really easy to sit on the outside and throw stones. But I actually believe that with the right intent – and certainly the intent and philosophy that we've had in our discussions, around where the potential is in the direction of the organiser of the institution – it is an opportunity and actually a responsibility because I enjoy what I do in the spaces that I do them in, but there's a reciprocity that has to happen. You can't work, for example, in the Māori space without understanding that there needs to be a cultural return on investment. It can't just be an economic return on investment; you have to look at how you actually partner and work to give back.

In respect to the Gallery, it's about identifying the kaupapa, identifying it in a singular way, which is actually: how can we position and represent arts in its full extent on behalf of all of the constituent communities of New Zealand to better reflect, interrogate, provoke our identity? How can we strengthen identity? Because everything that I work on has identity at its core. There are so many ways that identity shapes and is understood and formed and, for me, it's about enabling identity through art with the right people in the right alignments to actually create future opportunities. Because of, again, the discussions that we've had, in the willingness that we've shared to have that discussion, I think it's an incredibly dynamic space that can actually – with the right inclusion – really change the shape and face and reflections of us as a nation. That's a really exciting thing for me and that's why I'm really excited about supporting the team and supporting the institution.

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KL:

Just briefly, we spent a bit of a process working out what the title might be. I wondered if you might unpack that because it speaks to what you were just saying, really.

KJ:

The first conversation we had was about the idea of a head of kaupapa Māori. And in some ways, that's the right intent. But I think that sometimes there's a humility that needs to come with a title and a positioning that conceptually orientates it to its cultural function. So I've recommended the title of Pou Urungi. Obviously, the name of my business is Haumi, so that's a part of a waka or of a canoe. The urungi or the hoe urungi was the steering paddle, so it's a thing that enabled the direction or supported the direction, noting that there's a whole lot of other factors that need to be considered and that's really about, for me, relationships and partnerships and co-design and those types of things. No matter how much I might hold a paddle, I need to share that paddle at times. It's going to be affected by currents and tides and the impact of weight loadings and a whole lot of other factors. For me, it was about: how do we bring up the right humility to see that this is an opportunity for us to sit alongside and work with the team internally, with the communities both within Auckland – mana whenua, obviously, the broader iwi stakeholding and interests – and in the wider New Zealand. How do we actually do that in a way that is built out of a spirit of partnership?

KL:

The question we've touched on, I think, perhaps I even proposed it to you when we first started talking about working together, was: how do we build the DNA of the Gallery founded in biculturalism? Which is to say, it's not about plans or programmes or staffing; it's actually about the foundations and what the root system looks like, and how we build the spirit of place so that it comes out and is expressed through all the functions we do. I wondered if we might explore a little bit what biculturalism means from your perspective and how you've seen it played out and explored in some of the other organisations you've worked with.

KJ:

Biculturalism, like everything, it's an opportunity – but it has some cautions around it. At a simple level, the way I think about it is about constituent communities being central. It puts the Treaty into a central place in the discussion because it acknowledges two constituent groups, and those two constituent groups are dynamic. You obviously have tangata whenua, those here through original connection to the

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land, to the whenua; and tangata Tiriti, all of the constituent communities that came to New Zealand through that founding document or their document. The basis of it, then, for me, is about how you establish frameworks, rather than policy documents and strategic documents that assume a destination; a framework as a way as a contextual device, upon which, every time something occurs, you're able to refer to the principles and values that underpin it in order to make the right decision in time. That's about acknowledging the dynamism of culture and the dynamism of our environments and the dynamism of people, but creating those and creating the fluency as a result because you're always interrogating the opportunity or the consideration or the context, often building the philosophy and the values of the institution through the cultural frameworks. And, actually, biculturalism, it's not a perfect model. It's as much about understanding convergence as it is about alignment, and the convergence is sometimes where the wonderful things happen, when we actually start to have conversations and understand how we see things differently.

KL:

You mentioned values and we've talked about organisational values and how they can become almost rule-bound, which is perhaps not their ideal purpose. For example, manaakitanga is one of the values at the Gallery here – how do we connect manaakitanga to the reo meaning and express that within the organisation?

KJ:

The issue is that often those values get rendered down into a single statement and they lose their contextual wealth, their beauty. So how do we actually interrogate that into really talking about a dynamic worldview and philosophy? Manaakitanga, at its essence, has the notion of mana. Mana is not complex because it's actually quite intuitive, but it is about our connections and how we draw, for lack of better words, energy from the different environments. How do you draw that and maintain that and transact it? And what's the implication of transaction as well? Because manaakitanga is not singular, it's not one way; it's actually reciprocal. To be able to elevate another person through that process of manaakitanga is an incredibly empowering but selfless thing to do.

I think we often use these terminologies without a full understanding of what our responsibilities are with them. It's a little bit like the terminology kaitiaki – we've humanised that as a concept; we've elevated humanity above the natural world. We're now the guardians of the natural world. Whereas, actually, it's about our indivisibility. We're extensions of the natural world, we *are* the natural world – we don't actually have the right to rule over it. I think about holding considered spaces where we can really talk about those things and start to understand the philosophy and the conceptual kind of dynamism that sits in behind, so that each time it comes up, you can think: how do I apply that framework to this circumstance? That's the basis of our tikanga, that is what tikanga is – it's about: what's the correct application?

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KL:

They're really powerful concepts, too, in leadership, particularly when we've got a lot of change or challenge around us – to have these concepts as part of our consciousness as we're rising to deal with so many sticky and complex issues. A great place to start in terms of our work with staff, even . . .

KJ:

Totally, and interrogating concepts so that we can continually explore what it really means within the workplace; how that carries on through home where it becomes incongruent with policy and other things. It's a rich way and it's a mana-enhancing way of thinking about how we all work together collectively.

KL:

One of the things in my mind at the moment: we've got a lot going on at the Gallery around race, understanding how to talk about racism, developing a bicultural framework for the first time in our history. It's a 130-year-old institution; the values it was founded on no longer resonate. We're at this kind of nexus point, a restart. How do we have the conversation with staff? This is a beginning and being able to share your thoughts is a great start, but how do we have it as an organisation?

KJ:

Number one, it takes a huge amount of bravery. It takes bravery to hear the different perspectives, the mamae, the hurt that people hold because, remember, people bring things from the outside as well; to be really brave and courageous and thoughtful, how we create those environments to have those conversations. A great thing about cultural contexts is we celebrate openness and we celebrate opinion and we create the environment in which it's okay for that to happen. But then we also have mechanisms in which we reset. Sometimes, the resetting process is really critical symbolically, in terms of acknowledging moments in time to actually say: okay, there's been things that have happened that we need to acknowledge and not diminish, but which we need to acknowledge in order to create a platform that has the right safety to express an opinion.

It's important, in leadership roles as much as in staff, for us to be open to changing points of view; to understanding and respecting things that we've done really well, as well as things that we could have done better. It's about generosity. It's about understanding that there's a universality that connects us all together. I often think about it in respect to the term whakapapa; we often use that now to differentiate ourselves from each other, but actually whakapapa is about connection and it's not connection and

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humanity but connection between all living things. The opportunity to use those conceptual frameworks as ways of reinvigorating concepts of humanity is really important because we are far too hegemonic in the way that we articulate our identity these days. It's something that I've really fine-tuned in my own thinking, at least from working a lot internationally with First Nations and communities all around the world. We share so much in common; to be exclusive or hegemonic in the way that we present who we are misses opportunities to actually garner and strengthen knowledge, not only of each other but actually strengthen ourselves through reflections of others. So I have quite a liberal view on that, which is why when I introduced myself, I introduced my Norwegian and Scottish side as well. The interesting thing for me is I'm really proud of that heritage. If I was living in Norway, my identity would strengthen toward the Norwegian part of my whakapapa. I unashamedly and unapologetically celebrate the fact that I'm in New Zealand, that I'm connected to the land here, the whenua here. I celebrate the taha Māori, the Māori side, of who I am. But identity is dynamic. Getting to that freedom, liberating each other from the restraints that sometimes cultural identity can impose on us is a really important part of that process.

KL:

It's such an interesting point that our identities are fluid and our cultural identities as well – about where we make home and how we put roots down, and there's a fluidity to that. Your conversation around whakapapa raises another question in my mind around concepts of time; in lineage but also in how we think about art. As you know, at the moment, we've got the exhibition *Toi Tū Toi Ora* in the building, which is taking over. It's presented nearly across the entire exhibition real estate of the Auckland Art Gallery, and it's the first survey in about 20, 25 years of contemporary Māori art, spanning 1950s to today. I wanted to touch on the idea of contemporary and its usefulness in the context of a Māori worldview around time, which is not often presented in galleries and museums. Does it serve a function and how do we interact with the idea of contemporary and how it's been described in this particular instance?

KJ:

All terminologies are helpful and also problematic. I think it's understanding the context often in which they're used. I mean a counter to the notion of contemporary – well, there is a challenge to the notion of contemporary that I often give, which is based on this idea that sometimes it's about a diminishing of traditional, and sometimes that's the way that it's used: to differentiate again rather than connect. I don't fundamentally have an issue with it, just to be clear; I just think there's other conversations that can happen, that need to happen around it before settling on it as a word. For us, time is governed by the notion of tikanga. Tikanga is to be correct, and the correctness through time is about the presentation of the intangible, rather than, say, materiality, for example. To be tika over time is actually about the continuation or the continuity of philosophy and thought. How that gets applied in context is driven pragmatically, is driven opportunistically.

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Our tīpuna, our ancestors, arrived in New Zealand and for a lot of them, in Aotearoa, for a lot of our tīpuna, they adapted. From an art perspective, there was a huge abundance of wood here, there was a huge abundance of flora generally. They took the same principles of building from the islands and readapted them to a colder climate. In the islands, we didn't have whare, meeting houses as such. Our marae were precincts; there were open spaces often but, because of the environment here, we adapted. It's a really good reminder that adaptation is served through all sorts of things, not only pragmatism. We need to interrogate those concepts in order to understand or to land on them being the appropriate moment in time. There requires discussion to disempower the notion of tradition if that's part of that ongoing dialogue – it has some issues sitting in and around it. One of my uncles, Derek Lardelli, says innovation is our tradition. There's another way of flipping it around and looking at it, and I think the most important thing is that we interrogate them and that we really try to understand what that means within a cultural context; how that cultural context can actually influence the broader shape of an organisation.

KL:

One thing you've said to me previously – perhaps this is a place we might finish up our conversation today – is that we need to think less about the commercialisation of culture and more about the culturalisation of commerce. Given the conversation we've had today about manaakitanga and whakapapa and all these concepts, how do you set out to do that?

KJ:

Again, it's about the interrogation of concepts. Often you will hear that caution, that we have to be careful to commercialise culture, and there's nothing wrong with that as a notion, but actually you have to look at the other side of it, which is where that saying comes from around reinterrogating and reculturalising commerce. Actually, the Māori economy was really, really broad because the implication of that or to put it another way: we need to liberate our ability to be commercial. We need to liberate our ability to be entrepreneurs. When I look back at models within the Māori economy, particularly transactional trade-based models, I often refer back to *Te Toki-a-Tāpiri. Te Toki-a-Tāpiri* was a war canoe, a waka taua, that was initially carved down at Whakakī, just by Iwitea by Ngāti Matawhāiti. Then it was taken through the river channels to my ancestors and particularly Perohuka, Raharuhi Rukupō, Natanahera, a whole lot of carvers; they carved the prow and the stern and the strakes. It's now at the Auckland Museum. It was traded because we supported Matawhāiti in a battle and they gave it to Perohuka to acknowledge his support. So that was transactional. He then gifted it to Ngāpuhi, to Waka Nene and Patuone, and in return they gifted him a korowai. And there was a gifting of a horse. These transactions went on; it ended up in the Rangaunu Harbour with Panakareao, before coming down into Waikato and then now in the Auckland Museum. That was a transactional relationship. There were taonga, there was, as I said, a horse, but also relationships; so relationships were a part of that transactional environment as well. For me, what that says is that we were entrepreneurs, we had freedom to trade, we understood the transactional nature of

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it, we understood the power of relationship. When I talk about reculturalisation of commerce, the central thing is about understanding the power of relationships and ultimately the ability to create other forms of equity that can be leveraged to get cultural advantage.

KL:

Such a great point to end our conversation today, which I know will continue over the months and years ahead. Thank you so much, Karl, for joining with me in this conversation and creating culture here.

KJ:

Kia ora. Thank you for having me here and I'm really looking forward to some of the work we're going to do together, Kirsten, soon. Thank you.

KL:

This is one of our series of Cultured Conversations, hosted by myself, Kirsten Lacy, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. Find all of our conversations at aucklandartgallery.com.