



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.

Recorded in December 2020, Max Tweedie (Director of Auckland Pride) joins Auckland Art Gallery Director Kirsten Lacy to talk about what Auckland Pride Festival means to him, and its journey so far.

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Kirsten Lacy:

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Lacy, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. If you're familiar with our series, you'll notice I've moved from the safety of a quiet, closed-off studio into the open atrium of our Gallery, and we are open to the public, which is exciting – and in a world of Covid not something we take for granted anymore. You may see and hear people coming through as we converse today; I hope we do. My guest recently filled this whole atrium, the stairwells up to both mezzanine levels, with a huge party celebrating the launch of Pride Festival 2021. Pride Director, Max Tweedie, welcome back to Toi o Tāmaki.

Max Tweedie:

Kia ora Kirsten. Thanks so much for having me.

KL:

What a night – it was a wonderful launch and a huge party. What did it mean for you and how did that event express the aspirations that you're bringing to Pride next year?

MT:

In the context of this year, it was kind of momentous, and also unexpected. We had no idea what 2021 was going to have in store for us after we finished this year's festival. So to gather in this incredible space with 300 people to celebrate the launch of the festival theme and the kind of incredible things that we'll have going throughout just meant the world to us. We got to be excited about the future again and to have something certain, and to launch what I think is such a beautiful campaign and theme around what we're celebrating for 2021. It was just amazing.

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KL:

Tell me about the theme.

MT:

So the theme for the 2021 festival is 'karanga atu, karanga mai', call to us, so it's a collective call for change. It acknowledges that Pride exists in multiple spaces; it exists as a call for celebration, a call to acknowledge how far we've come, and to those who have fought, who I'm very privileged to stand on the shoulders of. But then it's also a call of, 'Hey, we're not there yet. We've got progress to make, we've got people to educate, communities to visibilise'. For all of us, it's about bringing those all together into one central call and also letting the community call to us as Pride, as a platform for what they want to see, what they want to hear and what they want us to make progress on. It's really beautiful because it brings all that together and allows people to use it as a platform to share their voices and their stories.

KL:

At a council meeting just this last week, Richard Hills, who's one of our councillors, talked about the Auckland Art Gallery and what he talked about was your night, your event. And he said to his fellow councillors: this is the role the Auckland Art Gallery should be playing, as a space for community dialogue, discussion, debate. He felt really hugely proud of the fact that this institution was partnering with you. I wanted to share that feedback with you.

MT:

That's feedback for you as well, and thank you for having us in this space. Only the year before, we were up in the little café. It felt like a huge movement and the kind of progress that I think we'd made in our relationship, and our organisation's relationship, to get to that point. It is something really beautiful that we should celebrate, this momentous occasion. To have that in here was really wonderful.

KL:

What I noticed as well was just how diverse the community is that you're working with and serving: all ages, all types, really. That must be quite a challenge. How do you build a programme to cater for so many different people?

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Honestly, we just hadn't done it before, in the sense of the programming, the people who we were speaking to, the language we were using – it used to only really speak to one section of the community. We have tried to expand that and to bring other voices into the fold. And oh my God, it's a journey. And it's one that we are all learning on as an organisation: the board, the community that sits with us, event producers, our partners – we're all figuring this out together.

But I think we've started to get to a point of: Where are our voices needed most? Where are the communities that we need to visibilise? Where's the progress that needs to be made? It informs our decision-making of who we highlight, who we spotlight, what issues we talk about, what communities we want to showcase in our programming, our major events. But also: Who do we want to give resource and access to through funding? It's turning the ship around – it's not quick and it's not easy and you'll trip up along the way. Pride, fundamentally, it was a protest: here, around the world, and it was always a platform for change. So we needed to make sure that we were continuing to evolve who we were, who we spoke to and continuing that legacy, but also juggling that for some communities progress has been made.

It's a really fascinating one because the rainbow community was split. Not split; rather, our identities were in diverse sexual orientations – gender identities and there's diverse sex characteristics as well. So there's three kind of unique experiences, and then you add race, religion, age – they all come into the intersectionality piece. There's so many unique experiences that you can't just slate rainbow communities as a homogenous block. That is the challenge. That was part of the genesis of the theme. We have to allow our communities to call to us and be a platform for our communities, to use that however they want; that we are actually not necessarily the best ones to decide what that call is, who that community is, but that they will call out to us and that we will listen and do our best to hold that in advance progress for them.

KL:

It's more than just a festival and a series of events that are put together. The impact's really broad-ranging and in our conversation I want to share a little bit about the Gallery as well. When we met a year ago, I'd been in the directorship about four or five months, I think, and went to the staff and asked, 'What are we doing for Pride?' It was a bit of a scramble. I said, 'Well, at the very least, we're going to put the rainbow flag on the clock tower of the Auckland Art Gallery.' And my team said, 'Oh, you can't do that. You're not actually permitted. The only flag to hang on that pole is the flag of New Zealand.' I came back to the question again in a week's time and I said, 'I don't care. We're doing it.' I knew I was inviting criticism, because it's a really really big symbol to hang that flag, and we did some other signage around the building as well, when this institution doesn't have a great record; hasn't been a safe space always and has a way to go still in how we ensure that the rainbow community and artists are visible through our collections and exhibition-making. But inviting criticism is part of the change, right? And leaning into the conversation, much like using spaces like this to both celebrate but also converse.

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You must experience quite a lot of criticism, sometimes invited and sometimes not. Holding carriage is such an important role because people's experiences are different. There's a lot of hurt still. How do you navigate through that?

MT:

You're quite right. Pride is so personal. It's way more than a community arts and cultural festival. It's so attached to people's identities because of the way that it's been woven into our past. Then you add the fact that it's a festival that relates to people's identities; because our broken society is then linked with trauma, so the decisions we make are viewed through the community's lens of their own trauma and their own negative experiences. When people are hurt like that or they feel we have done something that reminds them of that trauma or brings that awful emotive feeling back up, yeah, we bear the brunt of it. The joy for me is when we get it right, and how beautiful it is when we get it right.

The pride flag on the clock tower was a symbol that you were starting to turn the ship around. That was quite important because you can't just conjure up an exhibition in a couple of months, so it was a nice symbol of, 'Hey, we know we've got work to do and we're turning that ship around'. We've got to call for progress and hold people accountable, and I think that is part of the journey of inviting criticism. Broadly, I think people can do better at giving people the benefit of the doubt and helping. Jump on board to shift turn the ship around.

You get criticism from all areas; some of it you can quite easily or handily discard because you go, *Okay, this person isn't coming from the same value set or the same core understanding of the world, and actually I feel very assured of my value set and the way that I express my values through the festival or through Pride more generally.* But when the values are aligned, you know there is a deeper conversation you have to have. For me, it's about filtering out the stuff that is just not worth engaging with, because no matter what, you're not going to agree. It's about the people you know are coming from that same beautiful space. That's when it's really interesting to have that conversation.

KL:

When you started answering this question, you talked about the fact that our experience with Pride is so personal. I wanted to ask you about that in terms of your own experience, in coming out as a gay man in Tāmaki and now leading this incredible festival. What happened in your family?

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MT:

My Mum's family had a Catholic background and my Dad was your classic Kiwi bloke who played rep rugby for Wellington and was then a motorcycle mechanic. It was classic. It was a classic New Zealand upbringing. Actually, down in Porirua, in Wellington – I grew up down there – I was really nervous. I'd heard Dad say the odd offhand homophobic comment and was like, *Oh, oh, no – this is gonna go badly*. And so I put it off. I kind of told everyone else bar them; they were the last real people to tell before other family members. At first, it was like, *Okay, that went okay. It's not awful*. You hear awful stories about people being kicked out and so in that frame I was like, *Okay, that's good*. But Dad especially came round very quickly and I was quite surprised by that. He's now one of my absolute biggest cheerleaders and it's so beautiful.

One story that always sticks with me is, I think, less than a week after I came out, at the workshop someone made an offhand comment. It was something homophobic and so Dad called all the staff together and he said, 'All right, boys. My son just came out as gay. I won't have any of this in the workshop anymore.'

KL:

Wow...

MT:

We've moved past it, moved on, we're progressing. I remember him telling that story, and I'm like, *Whoa!* Growing up, you think your Dad has placed all these expectations on you. He was a rugby player, so I'm like, *Do I need to play rugby?* I did it for a year – I got Most Improved Player but I don't think I was that good at it. Like I said, now he's one of my biggest cheerleaders. My parents both came up for Pride this year, wearing 'Free Mum and Dad Hugs' T-shirts and hugging all the other people in the rainbow community whose parents weren't so loving and accepting. So their journey was really beautiful. I'm so lucky. My parents, I absolutely love them. They're the most wonderful, accepting humans. Not everyone has that experience but that's something that I'm always so grateful for. It's how it should be. I feel lucky but I also feel like, *No, no, they're just they're just doing their job as parents*. It's a weird mix. What's your experience with that? Because you've got a couple of sisters who are lesbians, right?

KL:

So there's five daughters. I'm the youngest and there's a half-brother and two of my older sisters are lesbians. I'm the younger to each of them by about seven years so their adolescent experience was different to mine. And as I was entering adolescence, they were almost leaving home and came out I

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guess quite late to my parents. My family were religious as well but Anglican and lived in the deep Bible belt of the eastern suburbs of Victoria in Australia. Most of us went to girls' schools and it was very much a Church of England kind of environment that we grew up in. But similarly to you, and it's a thread here, my parents changed very quickly, almost overnight, and I think there's a lesson in this: around how change happens through relationships and the more we're able to see people from the rainbow community out and leading in civic life, the quicker perhaps we see the mainstream change and the institutions starting to shift. Is that part of the mission behind Pride and your work?

MT:

Absolutely. It's that visibility piece and that representation piece that I think is something quite challenging. A fabulous book came out last year called *The Children of Harvey Milk*, which looked at queer politicians throughout history and the kind of change that they were able to make. They formed personal relationships and their identities didn't become something that was being scammed about or was written in the Bible. It became about a real human, a real colleague, and how much actual progress that that advanced through those personal relationships. And I think that's not a lesson just for politics but for all of the work that we do around in these spaces – that the relationships are key. I remember my Dad always saying to me, 'It's not what you know, it's who you know.' I thought, *Oh yeah, that's a good old saying, Dad*, but I found it to be so true.

KL:

Well, maybe who you make friends with . . .

MT:

Exactly, yeah.

KL:

Speaking about who you make friends with – it's had a huge impact for me, meeting you a year ago. The Gallery is now stepping out furtively on a rigorous process, which is the rainbow tick accreditation process. It will take us 12 to 18 months to achieve that, but then the opportunity with the Gallery making those steps is in fact that all the other cultural visitor destination entities that my peers run through Auckland Unlimited will also begin to consider and step out on that journey. You start to see the scale of the change, that one coffee date we had a year ago can be tracked back, too.

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In terms of the future of Pride and the question about supporting people nationally, and you mentioned it at the beginning of our conversation, you want your programme to be where it's needed most. What are the challenges around that, do you think, for the future of Pride?

MT:

What a question. It's about meeting people where they're at and the way we traditionally deliver events or support people, to put on events. We have to change that sometimes, we have to be flexible, we can't just impose a registration form, funding application, festival registration information upon every one of the communities and every one of the events and expect that what we'll actually get out of that is the same thing from each community. There's this small process stuff where you're like, *Hang on, we need to change this. We need to adapt this to this community or we need to speak about this in different ways or we need to involve this in our events.* We have this kind of checklist of making sure that we are being responsive.

But more broadly, it's still such a tough one because you've got this challenge that you're constantly trying to meet of you want to be visibilising these people in these communities more and you want to be sharing their stories. But that's hard for them on a personal level, to stand in front of the camera, be plastered around Auckland as a poster person for Pride. But you know that that will do so much good so it's chicken and the egg as well, and that's why it's such a slow ship to turn. But I think we're going to get there because the people we've got working alongside us and our communities, on the board and the kind of people around Pride, are really committed to this work. I have a firm belief that we will get there and that it will be a fantastic celebration of all of our identities and all of our cultures and our religions and the kind of beautiful ways that they all intersect with each other. That's my hope and I also hope, actually, that we strengthen ourselves as an arts festival because I think that's where our future is. I take vogue balls, for example – the incredible things and words and sayings and that we've adopted from that ballroom culture, which we didn't know had leaked its way into mainstream gay culture. 'Drag Race' had a lot to do with it. But then there's this kind of unlearning of those words and terms and phrases, and then this massive exposure to the vogue arts scene and you go, *This is some of the most talented and beautiful expressions of queer art and it's been in the shadows for the last 30, 40 years.* So, actually opening those doors to all those different communities with those different experiences, and the way that they've survived those has predominantly been through art. Then suddenly you put it in the Auckland Art Gallery atrium for Pride and more people get to experience that and the incredible culture and stories. I see that as actually a huge opportunity for us to be a home of queer art that helps shift that paradigm and helps visibilise all the incredible art that our communities do, and to bring it quite strongly into the mainstream. That's where I see our future.

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KL:

And the exciting challenge for us and our staff here has been to have thrown down the mantle and said, 'Where do we take the queering of our collections and how do we look back in history throughout the development of the collections over 130 years?' But in fact spanning, really, five centuries, because we've got European collections, Dutch and Flemish art and British art in there, to develop exhibitions in our forward programmes and in our forward programmes not just in the now month of Pride but populated throughout the programme in the year. I can't wait to start sharing some of those projects with the community.

If you were speaking to a young person confronting some of the challenges that you did coming out, what might you say to their parents or their support people around them about the journey ahead?

MT:

Before I maybe answer that question: I think one of the things I've learned going from being a queer kid and to this is that parents are people, just like us. We look up to them as these bastions of knowledge and wise old beings but they're really just the same flawed human beings who have been shaped by our society, who are just carrying the stuff that they've experienced and then sharing that with their kids. Something I've learned is that you can't just expect parents to flick a switch like that.

But what I would say is: just love them unconditionally. That should be the simplest of answers and the most obvious of answers but I think it opens so many doors; when there's no weight of expectation on the kid, on a child, to be a certain way or end up a certain way or have certain experiences; when there's no worry about how a parent will react or if they'll love them. All these sorts of things have deep and long-lasting impacts on queer people. When we talk about that kind of trauma, like I was saying before, a lot of it comes from parents and families – parents who are not accepting or parents who have laid their expectations on their kids, and they're impossible to meet so they feel inadequate. It's just loving them unconditionally for who they are, for whatever they do and for however they choose to live their lives. It feels like the simplest of answers but I think it's the most challenging of things to love unconditionally, and I would really hope that.

KL:

Thank you for that parenting advice. I'll carry that with me as I continue to parent my two teenage boys.

MT:

I don't envy you at all!

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KL:

Kia ora Max. Thank you so much for your conversation today. I'm rapt that the Gallery is partnering with Pride going forward.

MT:

Kia ora Kirsten. It's a real privilege to be partnering with you and the Gallery.

KL:

You've been listening to Cultured Conversations. My name's Kirsten Lacy, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. You can join the conversation online – we'd love to hear your feedback – and also dip into other episodes in the series there. You can find us at aucklandartgallery.com.