



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.

In 2006, Royal Reed established Prestige Law, a boutique practice that specialises in dealing with cross-border investment and cross-cultural legal disputes. Royal is now a Partner at renowned law firm, Meredith Connell. An entrepreneur, public speaker, social media influencer and 'On Being Bold' founder, Royal is a well-known face and name for many Chinese migrants in Aotearoa.

Filmed in January 2021, Royal Reed speaks with Kirsten Lacy about cross-cultural communication, navigating heritage and identity, as well as the importance of focusing not on our differences, but instead on what we have in common.

Watch or listen now.

Kirsten Lacy:

Kia ora. I'm Kirsten Lacy, Director, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery, in a Cultured Conversation with Royal Reed, a partner in Meredith Connell, New Zealand's largest litigation firm. She built her reputation as founder of Prestige Law, a boutique multilingual law firm specialising in providing legal services to migrant clients in areas of immigration, property and business, family employment, and international litigation. She specialises in cross-cultural work, teaching and sharing her expertise widely, including with the Gallery on our advisory group. Welcome, Royal. It's great to have you here.

Royal Reed:

Thank you, Kirsten.

KL:

There's a tempting place to begin our conversation today and that is actually the art of conversation across cultures. How do we do that? How do we set that up, so it works?

RR:

I think it's very tempting to feel the difference in culture when we come to deal with a different culture; when we are focused on the differences and everything becomes a little bit tedious. In my experience, I always find it very amusing when people automatically slow down and become louder when they talk to me, assuming I might be a new migrant who can't understand this thing they're saying. That creates an

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automatic barrier, an imagined difficulty. My experience is that cross-cultural communication shouldn't be tedious or any different from our day-to-day conversation with another individual that we care about, because even between two completely – if you call them 'same culture' people – you still have your own differences; you have different backgrounds, you have different skills, you have different training, you have different expertise. Cross-cultural communication is really just a different habit of engaging, by being aware and willing to accept some differences.

It's like when I talk to you today, I don't feel I'm having a cross-cultural communication but apparently, we are, and it's not just because we are speaking in English. Even if we're not struggling, through a translator, we are still apparently talking to each other between two very different perspectives. We have different cultures, but we also have many similar interests and topics that we would like to share. I would like to think that the best way to manage a cross-cultural communication is to leave the differences of the culture at the door and forget about the fact that we are so different – try to look for that common interest and common topic. When you forget about the differences, you will be in a journey to find many similarities and many common enjoyments that make the rest of the conversation about our differences quite easy.

KL:

That resonates for me. I'm a new Kiwi, obviously, as well as a migrant, and falling in love with the country – and it's not always easy to find home. Often, we find and surround ourselves with support networks and start to build that, when you come to a new place. You grew up in Taiwan, very different experiences, obviously. But people often tell me I've taken a Kiwi's job. Is that an experience that resonates for you as a Taiwanese Kiwi?

RR:

If we want to look for reasons to mark someone apart from one of us around here, there will be many excuses to be given. In my career as a practising lawyer in New Zealand, there have been many opportunities where I felt I was deliberately told by people in the community that I don't belong. One typical example was when we used to do these social drinks – the fact that I was an Asian, Taiwanese, among the law grads also wanting to get a job and meeting some wonderful firms, in those drinks, I was always incorrectly assumed to be one of the catering team. Instead of talking to me about what I aspire to do, what kind of firm I would like to work for, people would actually say to me, 'Go look for wontons and champagne.' That wasn't asking: Why are you taking our place? It's actually assuming you don't take our place.

Going in further, in the legal career, I have also often been reminded: Why are you here or where is your senior or why have you not engaged a local counsel? When I'm equally qualified as a local counsel from Auckland. But apparently with the package, another look is expected.

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KL:

That's right. It's much easier for me. I'm a white Pākehā woman, in a way, and English being my first language, the dominant language here – it's a completely different experience. What are the barriers that you're involved with helping to remove in the legal profession?

RR:

The language barrier is real and the cultural habits in terms of the barrier are also quite real. One of the reasons why I set up a firm to specialise in these new-coming investors from Asia is because when they don't understand the language, they don't have the ability to understand our rules; they don't have the ability to relate immediately without some prior learning and mistakes, to necessarily pick up how to conduct themselves in a new environment. It is very expensive and it's very easy to make some mistakes. So, in my work I have found it really special to be in that role, to be able to bilingually identify what it is that they didn't understand or what it is that didn't make sense for them, and hopefully bridge that gap of misunderstanding or no understanding at all.

Obviously, law is like anything important – you can't afford to make a wrong judgment and you can't make a mistake and expect to be forgiven. It is all really important that someone is there to catch you when you are going down the wrong path. I think for many of us who are lucky to be speaking more than one language and can therefore understand those people who only have one language, maybe stuck on it, it's a very special place to be able to offer a little bit of assistance in that particular need and that gap. With the understanding and with the right and timely help, most people then learn how to conduct themselves and how to fit in and how to respect the new rules. You don't actually have the ability to respect the rules if you didn't understand it in the first place.

KL:

With Prestige Law, you actively set out to create employment practices that led to a diverse workplace. What are the lessons that you might share with me about how you did that?

RR:

That wasn't something that was difficult to set up. In fact, I think in the legal career, in the legal industry, it is typically difficult for most people to be given the first opportunity, especially if you are not from here or, even worse, if you are here already but still very accented. It's also a special type of person who you need to be able to aspire to help those weaker ones. It's interesting because if you think about the role of a lawyer, and you think about those who are portrayed to be successful lawyers on TV, for example, you imagine them being associated with really glamorous, successful and well-to-do clients and companies. But if you come to help people who are more vulnerable, can't even conduct a decent civil conversation

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without the assistance of some other family members or translator, when you don't converse in that language very well, you come across thick, slow and not very fun because the language barrier is real. To go to the market and find those people who are not only brilliant, hard-working, willing to do law, but also having that additional appreciation and willingness to work with people who require a bit more empathy because they don't come across very successful and amazing when they don't speak the language. Over time, it became quite a natural tendency that we found ourselves hiring those people who may have come from also a migrant background or have assisted their older family generations to fit in. They see the struggle that their parents had; they experienced some of the expensive mistakes and lessons that their uncles and older generation may have made; they have that respect or that level of understanding that the fact that because some of us didn't get it right in the first place doesn't mean we were dumb or we were disrespectful. We simply didn't have the right information, the right understanding or we simply had no advice. And we didn't know where to get it.

KL:

In our conversations, you often talk about love, yet you're leading as a partner in a major law firm. I've got legal professionals in my own family – I've never heard them talk about love as being a critical component to how they've built their practice around them. I find that really amazing. I just wanted to probe you a little bit about how it is that you bring love into your legal practice as a value and a concept that you share with others and build amongst people.

RR:

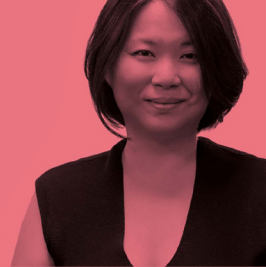
There are always two ways to do everything. I specialise in helping Asian families with very difficult battles and conflicts. It is not difficult to see many of these people got themselves into a really difficult tangle because they came in with an objective to do the transaction right. So instead of allowing your son to go along and marry someone he truly loved, you set it up so that he married someone who's going to benefit your enterprise. He's going to go to a school and live in a place where it's going to be smart and wise, transaction-wise. But most people who went through that sort of horrible experience end up failing in those arrangements because there was no foundation – there was no real love between them. They were just part of the legals to make a beautiful extension or a strongest composition.

But those things don't last; we know they are set up to fail. And in business, I find it's the same. We come together for business objectives and if we don't share the same goal, the same passion, the same purpose, those businesses set up tend to go separate ways very quickly. I don't think it's that difficult to see how we could be a little bit more subjective and a bit more careful with our consideration when we look into a possible business deal or a possible co-operation or a possible hiring or a possible business arrangement – just to check and really consider: Do we share the same purpose? Do we love the same thing? That often has helped me choose the right people to work with. Many of our clients also find that to

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be quite an easy test to learn. If you wouldn't want to spend the next two years having yum cha with these people every weekend, you probably don't want to go into business with them. It's quite basic to me and it's also, I think, quite an honest assessment. Do I really enjoy this? Do I really want to do this? Because if I don't, then the rest is just transaction – it's possibly just pretence and it's not going to last. And even if we make sure it lasts, with a lot of funding, a lot of hard work, it's not going to be healthy. We're not going to be feeling very fulfilled. We'll be successful but stuck or stuffed.

KL:

I think I understand your philosophy – it makes sense to me. I like the yum cha hurdle. The yum cha test – it makes sense. I wanted to ask you about something else: in previous conversations we've had, you've talked a little bit about friends here in Tāmaki Makaurau who are changed because of their experience living in New Zealand and being Kiwi but have family in China that haven't experienced the same cultural shifts and the challenge of both maintaining the expectations of parents at home while being and becoming Asian Kiwi. I just wanted to draw out some of those stories a little bit from you and hear that perspective of: How do you bring with you cultural meaning in your life while also making a new home and some of the challenges of navigating that?

RR:

You must have seen a lot of that, possibly, in Australia. I always explain to my clients that moving to a new country as a migrant is like uprooting everything you had. When you uproot everything you had, that was understood, the way we do things around here become a bit more exposed because people have never seen other people do that. One way I have found that these younger generation nations that come to New Zealand is the first way they fit in, fitting themselves in, is by hiding those root-level exposures because we don't want you to think we're like that; we don't want you to judge us because we do things a certain way or we eat certain things that way or we have a certain habits – all those things that are not so well understood or well appreciated, they dropped them. If they were younger when they came, they even drop the language because even speaking the language makes them stand out, will make them look a bit different.

I have seen many who will drop everything that is unique about their culture and leave them at home. And after you stop using it for a while, you lose the language, you lose the familiarity and, most importantly, you lose the sense of identity that comes with that unique culture. I have seen many of the younger generation that try to become one of those; it could be a very fun process to learn another language and another culture but when they trade it by giving up what they had from their heritage and from their own culture, it becomes a little bit of a new thing. Also, it becomes a little bit of a different culture in their own right. I have found that: I have children myself who have found it really difficult to admit that they can speak Chinese, just in case it makes them look a bit weird. And it's not weird for them to be fluent but they don't

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necessarily want people to know that they are those people who speak Chinese. I have struggled with their difficulty because isn't that cool? That you can understand, and you can order food for your friends? No nobody does that. I didn't say I can understand, and I didn't really want people to know. I think that that willingness to drop what you owned and what you had in your heritage, it's a little bit of a habit and it's their way of fitting in so that it can look like: I'm exactly the same as you.

KL:

And what about the relationship back home, too, because equally there might be an urge, I imagine, to drop the new habits you're adopting from the new culture when you're engaging with family back in China or Taiwan. Is that another pressure that people feel?

RR:

I think the migration process and moving into a different culture definitely changed us in more ways than one, and we don't necessarily know it. One thing I noticed, quite interestingly, is when I start to speak English more during my day than Chinese, many of my senses of logic changes. If I'm thinking in Chinese and speaking to you in English, it's a different feeling from if I'm speaking to you in English and thinking in English. There are many things that don't translate between the languages and the culture. By choosing English to become my dominant and daily language, there are many things in Chinese I start to think: Oh, that doesn't make sense, or I don't want to do it that way. They seem to be really old-fashioned. I think that we all somehow lose a little bit of that or choose to lose more of that so that we come across more acceptable in our new home.

KL:

Is it a good thing?

RR:

I think it's a good and a bad thing. It's good that you get a job with it; it's bad that you wonder why you did that. I was thinking, there are many values that we hold, as in they're unique to our culture – they become a bit of a burden or a bit of a weird thing to do. That is the price we pay for moving to a place where we don't necessarily feel the liberty to just keep it all and just to be who we really are. I don't think we really can say we're just here to be who we really are. We always feel we have to go through this grooming process to change ourselves, to fit in. So instead, if I asked you: How was your day? Apparently, I was told, when people say, 'How was your day?' in New Zealand, you're supposed to say, 'Great,' even you've had the worst day ever.

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KL:

That's a bit of a Kiwi thing maybe!

RR:

Culturally, if we ask someone, 'Have you eaten?' you're always supposed to say, 'Yes,' even though you're hungry. We always ask in Chinese culture, 'Have you eaten?' in case you haven't – we will be very happy to feed you. Even when you say you have eaten, we will always feed you, but the unexpected answer is, 'I haven't eaten for three days,' because that would be an imposition, that I hadn't prepared three days' worth of food. I may have prepared some snacks.

KL:

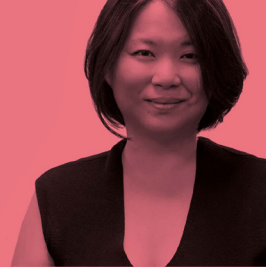
Wow. You're a business success, a leader in your profession: mentor, advisor, mum of two teens – crazily busy, really active in your community, in media and your cultural life. But you said yes to new demands on your time. All I do is ask you to do things for me, a drain on your intellect and energy. Why is it that you engage with the Auckland Art Gallery and what do you look and hope for in your role on our advisory committee and for the institution?

RR:

This comes down to a desire to really be part of what we have here. One of the biggest challenges in my head, mentally, is many times as a migrant, we are considered takers – we are here to take what there is on offer in New Zealand; we are here to take advantage of something in a system, whether it's educational resources, beautiful properties, beautiful environment, wonderful infrastructure. We are considered people who are just here to take what there is already and take away from those who have made it available and possible. I think that is not entirely correct. We are actually here to contribute with our hard work, our expertise.

Some of my clients came with capital, some of them came with excellent skills. And, therefore, it is always my advice to them that when you have an opportunity, you are invited to go somewhere and help in any charitable community project, say yes. Contribute. Do something you can offer. Because mentally, we struggle and think: Am I qualified to advise anyone? I can't even draw; can I qualify to join an advisory group that involves art? Instead of doubting and wondering how much I will need to prepare before I become qualified, I say yes, because I would love to contribute. And hopefully to help in a baby-step way to change the perception that we are here to take – no, we're here to give.

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KL:

I've got two more questions for you. I wanted to touch on at the beginning of lockdown, you interviewed me – we've changed chairs – and it was it was in the chaos of that second lockdown for Sky TV and a with huge viewership, hundreds of thousands of people, watching your programme. Tell me about that relationship to your audience from here in Tāmaki?

RR:

I was very worried before I interviewed you for that because I was thinking: if I talk about where to buy real estate or how to comply with the new immigration policy, we can get hundreds of thousands of people, but talking about art and the Art Gallery, I was worried that people might tell me it's not very relevant! But you made it so relevant. I realised after that I changed my mind and I realised, actually, my worry and the question I asked in my head, which was probably a wrong question, was: Why would people care about the Art Gallery? I think that was a wrong worry to have because the feedback we got from our, I think, close to 300,000 audience of your interview was: Why would we not embrace art and what a gallery can offer more for our own well-being?

It was a perfect timing that you spoke to us about that in the middle of Covid because we all were reminded how much it is more important in our busy life and day-to-day to look after our own well-being. And the way art trains our children's brains, like you mentioned – you talked about how it trains us to have certain skills and makes our brain think differently and broaden our ability to sing and problem-solve. That's why so many Chinese parents invest so much in art education. But surely, even as we become qualified and matured and start to work, we continue to need to use our brain and we continue to need to look after our well-being and even more. That was wonderful, that I came to see that through that interview with you. Art is not about someone being very good at presenting something very visually pleasant; it's about a need in our brains and in our daily life to be there and to enjoy being wowed.

KL:

It was a really enjoyable conversation. I think I was sat down in front of my piano at the time, which was when I was moving house. My last question – in a conversation I had with Ngahiwi Apanui, who's the CEO of the Māori Language Commission, in late last year, fairly recent to when you interviewed me, he pointed out to me that the projections for Aotearoa in 2040–2050 are that the combined population of Māori, Asian and Pasifika people will be by far the majority for New Zealand. That means things are going to change enormously in the next couple of decades, in our lives and in our leadership. I'm really curious to know how you feel about that and what milestones do you see for our Chinese community in New Zealand in that timeframe?

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RR:

I'm very bad at working with data. I don't know how to give you a projection that involves numbers, but I'm just always very looking forward to a better dialogue and a better relationship. I think we are all learning, every day, how to be with one another. We're doing pretty well in New Zealand, and whether there's someone who came from the Pacific, the Asians, the Europeans, I just think we are all learning. The compact size of New Zealand makes it pretty neat for learning; we're all learning every day, every week, and our business dealings and our social dealings should be here to make something wonderful for our own families, for our own community. I don't think we will really feel it's a massive change; it's just going to be a gradual collective growth that we will all find ourselves being somewhat more related than we ever could expect before we came here.

KL:

I love that. I love finishing on that – somewhat more related than we were when we first started and came here. Thank you so much for your conversation today, Royal.

This has been a Cultured Conversation. You can find more at aucklandartgallery.com.

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