



# 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.

Filmed in January 2021, in this episode of *Cultured Conversations*, Kirsten speaks with Sue Gardiner (MNZM), a passionate advocate of the arts and a Trustee of the Chartwell Trust, a New Zealand charitable philanthropic trust, which supports the visual arts and knowledge about the creative process. Sue is also co-Director of the Chartwell Collection, a major public collection of New Zealand and Australian contemporary art held on long-term loan at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Sue is a well-known advocate for arts access and education, engagement, philanthropy, fundraising, arts governance, and promoting art through national and international art tours.

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**Kirsten Lacy:**

Kia ora and welcome to Cultured Conversations. I'm Kirsten Lacy, Director of Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. Culture and creativity are fundamental to our common humanity. My next guest understands this well, having committed much of her life to this inquiry through her work with the Chartwell Trust, understanding and sharing so generously in a way that we all benefit. Welcome, Sue, to Cultured Conversations today.

**Sue Gardiner:**

Tēnā koe, Kirsten. Thanks for having me along today – it's really nice to be part of this series.

**KL:**

We're rapt that you are. We're talking about the Chartwell Trust. It's got a long legacy, 50 years, and as I've just mentioned you've spent much of your life devoted to it. Can you take us a little bit through the history of the Chartwell Trust?

**SG:**

Yes, it's my pleasure, because I'm really here standing on the shoulders of my father Rob, who started the Chartwell Trust in the very early 1970s. That came about because he and my mum were based in

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Hamilton and they were experimenting with all sorts of ways to raise funds to develop a new public gallery for the Waikato. What came out of all that experimentation, if you like – entrepreneurship around fundraising for a gallery in the collection – was the establishment of the Chartwell Trust. What was really important at the time, and it's still important today, is the Chartwell Trust is not a family trust. It's not called the Gardiner Trust. It's called the Chartwell, which we're really proud of. In a way, it's taken on its own meaning – this idea of charting well into the future through the visual arts. It was actually the name of the suburb in Hamilton that we lived in. So, there was that sense of separation that was really important. Rob established the charitable trust with a group of trustees who have been very dedicated to see the work through all of these decades. A collection was formed but also a lot of thinking, learning, research, commitment and making, to think about what the role of the charitable trust would be into the future.

**KL:**

It's such an amazing model and one I've never really seen replicated. I want to talk about the model; I really want to talk about the philosophy of Chartwell too, because it's much bigger than the collection itself, which is handsome and has been beautifully developed over the decades. But the actual structure – how did he do it? How have you created a trust which has an ongoing, committed legacy that's secured into the future, which will keep reviving and living on? How does that work?

**SG:**

When I look back at the old archives now and I look at some of the original documentation, I can see that – with the original trustees, for example – the model remains virtually identical to what it was in the 1970s, which was purely this idea that the visual arts is there for the benefit of everybody. How best can you deliver a kind of deeper understanding about the creative process to a general audience?

My dad was a partner in a Chartwell accountancy firm so he had these two worlds, if you like: both my parents were artists and he was working in this professional capacity as an accountant. He would meet people in his general world who didn't seem to have an interest or an understanding about the thing that he loved the most. It started him off on a lifelong inquiry to really come to terms with a deep understanding about what drives the creative process. He came to the conclusion, to use this phrase, called 'creative visual thinking'. This is the phrase we prefer to use rather than the term 'art'. If you say art to the person who's just walked past on the street now, all sorts of ideas – very personal, very individual, often very clichéd and stereotyped – might come into someone's mind. But how do you break away from those barriers and get to the core of what the creative thinking process is? What happens in the mind, in all our minds, whether we're artists or whether we have activity in any other sphere of life? What's at the core of that thinking? That was what he set out to achieve right at the very beginning. It's continued and is really growing from there. I think we're always going to be learning; we'll never reach the end of this inquiry.

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**KL:**

I've had the privilege and pleasure to sit with Rob a lot and hear him talk about creative visual thinking – and you as well, Sue – and it's had a huge influence on the Gallery's collections programmes, but also its thinking in terms of our role in creating opportunity for people to consider their creative capability here. Let's unpack this philosophy around creative visual thought because when Rob has talked about it, and when you've talked about it, you're often exploring in realms well beyond those within the art world, right, so you're thinking about how creative visual thinking can permeate and influence all spheres of activity, business activity, exchange between people. Is that hitting it right?

**SG:**

Yes, that's absolutely vital to the inquiry. Just one point about the model because it ties into the philosophy: the model is that we were always committed to delivering this kind of thinking through the public art gallery. So, when the collection started – when the first acquisition was made in 1974 and every day since then – there's never been a Chartwell collection work hung in our own home. It's not a personal collection; it's a public collection. Every work, every acquisition is made with the public gallery and the public gallery audience in mind. So it's a different way of thinking; that's maybe to answer your question around the model. The model has always been a public model. But the reason for that is that we're wanting to reach out to the widest possible audience of people, to really tell them that everybody is creative.

Our advocacy is for the visual arts because we feel that, through the visual arts, people can have access to the kind of understanding that artists – or we like to think of them as aesthetic thinkers – have in the creative process. And those are the skills that can then be transferable to any other part of life. Whether you're a creative engineer or an imaginative scientist or if you're an entrepreneurial businessperson or if you're a young student leaving school and wondering about what your future is going to be – regardless of that, everybody has access and fundamental abilities to create, to think creatively. We advocate that it's through the visual arts you can access that creative thinking easily. You can come into a public art gallery and it's all here waiting for you.

**KL:**

When we look at art, there's an act of creativity that takes place in and of itself. It's not only about the making; it's also the act of looking, interpretation, seeing, understanding and all the thought processes that kick in when we look. How does that inform your collecting decisions for Chartwell?

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**SG:**

I'm pleased to talk about looking and but in a way, I prefer the word seeing. If we unpick the Chartwell philosophy, we've got these four fundamental aspects. The first one is being, and I think we've talked a bit about that – everybody's creative. They all should be able to have the access to understanding their own creative minds. That's the most important thing. We want to build creative communities, we want to have creative individuals but we need creative communities and we need creative futures that are going to lead us to make great decisions, as cultures, as nations. So this idea about being, our human beingness, is really important. Visual arts can deliver on that in terms of our empathy, about the way our well-being is built into our engagement with the arts.

The second one of these fundamental philosophies is seeing, and you mention this idea about looking. We see it very much as an active process so that's why we love the idea of a public gallery being a gymnasium for the mind. It's a gymnasium for the mind for the people who work here, it's a gymnasium for the mind, for the artwork and the artists who show work here, but it's also a gymnasium for the mind for the viewer. And the viewer is the one who activates the creative process that the artist is presenting us. Then what we really want them to do is take that inspiration, take that learning, take that seeing and take it back into their own lives and think about how the creative process might integrate into what they're doing in their lives.

**KL:**

That's right. And sometimes the four pillars coalesce in activity . . .

**SG:**

Yes, absolutely. Of course, making is one of the most fundamental aspects of what we're trying to advocate for. I like to think of it as the thought leadership of the visual artists who are in the collection. We see them as people who are dedicated to a lifetime of learning and growing and deepening understanding about their own artistic practice. But it's most important, as well, that we have as individuals, as viewers, that we have access to the making process because in a way it's through the experience of making that you better understand making. That's why public gallery programmes in an art gallery are so important making opportunities. The making ourselves: it's a holistic process of learning through our bodies and our hearts and our minds and our eyes and the materials of the world. We all have the ability to access that and under the great leadership of the visual artists that we collect for the Chartwell collection.

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**KL:**

As well as collecting, just a little bit to your practice. How is it that you express, I guess in your life? I'm curious about these principles of making, seeing, and we've talked about drawing a little bit, because we've got some projects coming up which reflect on drawing. But how is it that that takes form in your life?

**SG:**

I think of it like lifelong learning. You never reach the end point. And through this inquiry, a sense about philosophy, a sense about psychology, a sense about the visual, it is all-encompassing because it makes you feel so curious, it makes you want to learn more. It kind of taps a little bit into my playful side, which is a wonderful expression of the freedom to think, the freedom to feel, the freedom to make. I guess, in a way, it's quite a common experience now but it was lockdown that really brought all these things together. Suddenly, we're doing what visual artists are great at, which is slowing down our thinking, spending time, and looking and seeing and making. We all had the experience of being in our bubbles. Our bubbles were our family members around us. But I got the sense where I felt I had an art bubble as well, and the art bubble was the things that were hanging on my wall; when you're at home and you're sitting at the dining-room table and you were really looking and discovering. I felt it was a moment of epiphany for me as well, because I was doing a lot of making myself. I was doing a lot of mark-making; I had all the materials on the dining-room table. It was all there, it was accessible. I didn't feel any pressure at all to reach some kind of publicly sanctioned outcome, which is the barrier that stops a lot of people from making art. So many people I talk to, they throw their hands up in horror when I talk about drawing. They say, 'I can't draw a straight line!' I mean, it's a nonsensical comment just to start with, but why would you want to draw a straight line? You want to take a line and orchestrate it around a page, rehearse it in all different variations and rhythms and really just let all these definitions and expectations go. In a way, that's our final pillar of being, seeing, making, and thinking: the thinking is really important because it has enabled us to do a lot of research into the creative making and thinking process.

We're very, very lucky to have a very close relationship with the University of Auckland, and just recently have developed and launched a new faculty-based research centre, which is called CAST: the Centre for Arts and Social Transformation. It enables us to delve more deeply into the really important research around this and that helps us with our advocacy. We're doing advocacy for the public gallery and its ability to deliver to a creative audience, and advocacy for the arts to be recognised at all levels of society. Those are the things that, for me, keep circulating; it drives you forward. There's always an inquiry, and these wonderful moments of spontaneous joy. If you can experience moments of joy, moments of fulfilment through generating new creative ideas – as a mother, that happens to me all the time, and there are moments I can think of when all of these things coalesce together and you feel like you've just developed a wonderful idea for you in your life with your children.

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**KL:**

It's interesting you mention being a mother. I want to get to the university and the research, that's ahead, but first I want to ask you about the mind of the child, because when you're talking about thinking disciplines and the barriers that people feel they have just to even draw – we've got much to learn from the mind of the child in respect to creativity.

**SG:**

We do, we do. And if we talk to an education professor, like Professor Peter O'Connor – he talks about the joy and the capacity for creativity that all children have. As some educationalists might say, then they get to school and the system of the world start weighing heavily and exerting pressure on that freedom of spontaneity, that playfulness, the risk-taking that children naturally have, our intuition to sense the world. You think about a young child: you want to put something in their mouth because for them the senses are all working together to kind of create their understanding of the world. Picasso said that we all want to try and work our way backwards to become that child again, and if we can do that, we can bring in all these dimensions of creativity back into our lives as adults. I really think it's why a lot of people, as they get older, they want to go back and take art classes; they start engaging in creative activities later in life, because they realise they've had this kind of desert of creativity as they've grown up. So our goal is to reach that child through critical developmental points, encourage creativity through education as much as possible so that when they grow up, they've got it in their minds – they have the capacity to develop and understand their own creative minds.

For me, with my own children, I've experienced that and encouraged that as much as possible. I had a very strange thing happen to me the other day. I was borrowing in the cardboard boxes and the cupboards, as you do every now and again, to sort things out, and I found a drawing, a painting made by one of my children. I don't know which one – it's not signed, I can't remember and they don't remember either. And then I opened my own sketchbook from a couple of days earlier and I put the two together and the synchronicity between these two things – one done by a young child and one done by me as a 61-year-old, two days earlier – was so close in the marks in the making. It was a joyous—

**KL:**

Did you feel emotional?

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**SG:**

I did. It was an incredible moment and I couldn't really explain it. But I know that there's a way of thinking, a kind of a freedom, to interact with your intuition, to improvise, to be playful. For me, it felt like a moment of real significance.

**KL:**

That really resonates with me. I'm a piano player but I particularly improvise. In some ways, I think there's some similarity to drawing because you're never really fully conscious about where the music is coming from. You clearly have learned structures and cellular memory about patterns and so forth but you can't actually pinpoint where the inspiration for music comes from, other than a sense of being at one with the moment that you're inhabiting in some way, almost like a line on a page.

**SG:**

That is a critical thing you've just said, being in the moment, because that's what we love about mark-making. If you have a pencil in your hand and you've got the light coming from the window and you're using your eyes and you've got a piece of pencil in front of you when you make a mark on the page, you're recording your own creative decision-making in the moment. And music is like that too. There's a lot of musical crossover with visual arts in the Chartwell collection. One work in particular, which encapsulates all of this, is the et al. and Samuel Holloway work called *Upright Piano*, which was exhibited in the Chartwell exhibition a couple of years ago. It's accompanied by a musical score, which in itself is a moment of spontaneous rhythm and patterning and variations that happen through a combination of orchestrated musical notation and the spontaneous marks of an artist.

**KL:**

With the Chartwell Trust, the university partnership and the research you're doing, and there's a lot more work to come ahead, is there something else or something across the years that you've been doing in this work, Sue, that really stands out for you as a highlight of what you've achieved?

**SG:**

There are certain moments when we get feedback from people who say they have finally understood themselves as creative people, so if we get that response. But I think for me, as well, one of the big highlights of anything that we do is seeing the Chartwell collection works hanging at the Auckland Art Gallery. We're in this unique situation when we make an acquisition: we commit ourselves intellectually, emotionally and in every way to this process of acquisition, and then we hand it over to you, to the Gallery, and we might not see it for a while and then we see it hanging on the walls with all the care and attention

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that's been put into it, to curate it into an exhibition. It's like meeting old friends again. So every time we see a work, that's the highlight, that's the highlight for us. Then taking and understanding what's going on there, understanding our own responses, has really been more deeply reinforced through the university project.

We've had the most amazing conversations – with Professor Cathy Stinear, for example, who's a neuroscientist and who understands the brain and the process of creative activity in the brain. She told me that the whole idea of the myth about the right brain and the left brain: you're a right brain person because you're into the arts – that myth has just been busted in the last few years. She's talked to us about the MRI scans that they do now to show that the most creative brain is the one that's got the most connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. So your and my brains are going like this at the moment . . .

**KL:**

They're dancing . . .

**SG:**

They're improvising. It's moments like that, the learning that we're doing as a result of the researchers – it has been absolutely amazing.

**KL:**

Perhaps just a final question. It's such a massive contribution you've made to the Auckland Art Gallery and to our audiences from the early 1990s, when the collection first came here, to now. It's now 30 per cent of our collection; it's come from being one scale to being this other massive pillar in the institution's collection. What are your hopes for the future for Chartwell?

**SG:**

One of our biggest hopes is to be able to realise, if you like, the other end of this whole process. We come to the public gallery and we're inspired by the thought leadership of the artists that we see here on the walls. At the other end of that is our greatest desire, which is the participation by everyday people in their own creative process. If we could see the growth over the generations of people, like yourself playing the piano, people taking dance classes, people making art, mark-making – that, is realising their own creative potentials – that can change the world, Kirsten! If all the leaders of the world understood their

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own imaginations, the leaders of the people in all the local councils who are running public galleries around New Zealand – they all need to understand that the world is based around two kinds of thinking: there's our sense-based thinking and our reasoning, mindful thinking. That's a kind of marrying, if you like, between the senses or the making or the idea process, and knowledge. That's what our message is. We've published a book about it called *Picture No Galleries*. The message is for everybody to understand first their own potential for creative thinking, then the realisation of the value and importance of that for everybody. And then we have our own outreach programme, which we call Squiggler. We see this as the participation tool; the way we can actually exercise our own creative lines, get going with a pencil and paper, orchestrate the marks around the page, and we've got a better world right in front of us there.

**KL:**

Excellent. Thank you so much, Sue. I think your life in philanthropy and commitment to creativity is just so inspiring. I really wish you well with the next few decades of Chartwell and our continued partnership working together. I'm very excited about the year ahead, of course, because we are profiling the Chartwell collection in a big way across a number of exhibitions.

**SG:**

We're really thankful. I want to give my wishes to everyone watching this from my father Rob, my mother Evelyn, and my sister Karen – we're all committed to seeing the public art gallery like the Auckland Art Gallery just doing it for everybody.

**KL:**

Thank you. This is a Cultured Conversation hosted by myself, Kirsten Lacy, Director Toi o Tāmaki. You can find more episodes of the series at [aucklandartgallery.com](http://aucklandartgallery.com).