An interview with Kāryn Taylor

by Contemporary HUM

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New Zealand artists in Venice 2017 *is a series of interviews conducted by the Contemporary HUM team during the vernissage of the 57th Biennale Arte di Venezia titled* Viva Arte Viva*, from 9-13th May 2017. While the multitude of official national pavilions and the extensive group exhibition put together by an invited curator make up the oldest and most notorious art biennale in the world, an equally vast number of collateral projects and parallel events take place throughout Venice every two years.*

Heading over to Venice this May, we knew that five New Zealand artists would be exhibiting in both official and parallel venues in 2017, and it seemed important for HUM to offer a space for artists to talk about their own work and the international context of its presentation, but also the challenges and particularities of working across the world. Interviewed artists are: Lisa Reihana, whose project Emissaries *was New Zealand's official presentation at the Biennale; Francis Upritchard, included in Christine Macel's central curated section for the Biennale; Bruce Barber, Paul Handley and Kāryn Taylor, exhibiting in Personal Structures' recurrent exhibition running parallel to the Biennale, titled* Open Borders *in 2017.*

Alongside these interviews, HUM's coverage of New Zealand's participation in Venice includes the following commissioned essays: Urges of Imperialism Unravelled, Rhana Devenport's presentation of Emissaries*: New Zealand's Pavilion 2017; What recognition for New*

Zealand visual arts on the world stage?, transcribed panel discussion with New Zealand Pavilion 2017 Commissioner Alastair Carruthers; Reporting from the Front Desk, Chris Winwood's take on New Zealand's Architecture Pavilion in 2016; Will Gresson on the history of the New Zealand's contribution to the Venice Art Biennale (upcoming 2017).



CONTEMPORARY HUM Kāryn, it's your first time in Venice and you're exhibiting! You've travelled from Auckland, where you currently live?

KĀRYN TAYLOR Yes, after I finished my Masters in Auckland I stayed on. I come from Dunedin though but I travelled away from New Zealand for quite a while, then came back and did my fine arts degree. Auckland is kind of where the action is so I've stayed there and it's been going well so far.

HUM I am familiar with your work from when you exhibited at 30upstairs, in Wellington, in 2015.

KT I've shown there twice. The solo show was first, which grew out of having just the small dark space of the gallery, but somebody pulled out and I was offered the larger space. That allowed me to continue with the thinking from my Masters, it was really great to have this big space to play in. They had seen my work at the end of year exhibition at Elam and offered me an exhibition slot.

HUM And how did you end up being in this exhibition *Pe rsonal Structures: Open Borders,* at Palazzo Bembo, which runs for the duration of the Venice Biennale.

KT The gallery that I'm represented by in Auckland, Sanderson Contemporary, was approached by Global Art Affairs, they were looking for artists that might fit into the theme: time, space, existence. And Adrienne said, 'that's definitely you, so do you want to put in a proposal?' We thought it was a long shot, but decided to do it anyway and surprisingly we got feedback, saying yes, we're really interested in the work. We were put on the shortlist and then I had to put in a full proposal of what I might actually show.

HUM Would you describe Personal Structures as an artist collective? They've presented an exhibition in parallel to the Art Biennale for multiple years, always fragmented into several venues. Do the artists in the collective select the artists themselves for each show or do they appoint a curator?

KT I'm not sure exactly how you would describe it, but I know that every Biennale they do this exhibition. I think in the past, they started by finding artists and then invited in a curator but there doesn't seem to be one this year. I've been

communicating with the Global Art Affairs people and the group who call themselves the *organisers* of the exhibition and before I turned up, I also had contact with a technician and a liaison person. So it was good. Although having said that, there's always that lost in translation issue where you think you're on the same page, you're trying to be really clear but you turn up and it’s not necessarily the case.

HUM So it was a good thing that you came early.

KT Definitely. I mean they try their best to understand what your work's going to be like and what they need to do, but they also have a lot of other artists to deal with, it’s a large exhibition.

HUM Did you produce this work as a site-specific piece?

KT To a certain extent. All I knew was that I had a long wall to work with and so I made these works with that in mind. They allow you to suggest where you'd like to be positioned as there are two main venues. I did choose this palazzo because it had less ornate rooms.

I had hoped that there would be a doorway along the same wall so the work could be seen from the front and the side but that wasn’t possible. You’ve just got to work with it in the end, it's the nature of doing it from New Zealand.



Kāryn Taylor, *Field Notations*, 2017. *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.



Kāryn Taylor, *Field Notations*, 2017. *Personal Structures: Open Borders*, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Courtesy of the artist.



Personal Structures: Open Borders, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Image: HUM.



Personal Structures: Open Borders, Palazzo Mora, Venice. Image: HUM.

HUM How would you describe the work you are presenting here *Field Notations*?

KT Well I often work with geometric shapes and that's something to do with me trying to make everything very simple, simplifying back really complex ideas - I have this need to find an

answer or solution to what I'm thinking about. The structures are made to ‘shift’ when you walk across or around them, opening up different ways of seeing. And the moving light adds another dimension, the dimension of time, I’m making multidimensional drawings of sorts that look at both the ephemeral and the solid together.

So if you're looking at the science of the ideas I'm interested in, it’s about waves versus particles and how things can be both until we observe them and they become a solid particle versus an ephemeral wave. I use light to talk about the wave and solids, like the wood, rods and paint, for the particle. The light also speaks to science where they measure everything against the speed of light. I'm trying to keep the works open and transiting so that our reading of them shifts. I’m trying to restructure the ideas that I'm reading about so that I can get a more solid sense of them. It's like thinking out loud, in a visual sense.

HUM Are there particular publications that you’re reading at the moment that interests you?

KT Well, I read a lot about metaphysics in the past and that always comes up against the science of energy and everything just being a wave of energy until we observe it or interact with it. And the theory of how we are creating our reality on a moment-by-moment basis, which really, I find so interesting. Now I tend to read books that discuss the overlap between consciousness and quantum physics.

You may have heard of the double slit experiment. This is when they first discovered how light can be both a wave and a particle in the 1800’s with two slits that the light photons pass through. When they went to observe this experiment to see which slit the photons went through, as soon as they put something there to observe it or measure it, it changed from acting like a wave to acting like a particle, which was one of the huge, mind-blowing events of quantum physics. There's been scientists looking at all the reasons why… and going into the realm of consciousness and whether consciousness is actually the basis of reality. I find that really

interesting. Then there's other scientists who won't have a bar of it of course and said no way, this can't be what's happening. These works which I've called *Field Notations* are talking about the field in quantum physics, which is an idea that particles are actually just vibrations within a field. So they're not actually any kind of solid at all, it's just a blip of vibration basically.

HUM Does it relate to your choice of materials?

KT Wood to me feels very grounded as a material and I like that idea of grounding the work into the space that we're in, and our sense of reality. The PVC plastic is more industrial, but it gives me a three dimensional line coming out [of the wall]. I would like to do that in wood but I'm yet to discover how to make it bend like that, but again the PVC is very much something that we come across on a day-to-day basis. This is why I like my works to be lit more than what's the case here, I prefer them not to be in a darkened room because I want people to be experiencing something that might shift the way they see, but still be standing in our everyday experience. I'm interested in the idea that we can't actually experience the quantum level because as soon as we do it becomes this reality that we know, you can't actually do both at the same time. But I'm looking at how one might experience some of both at the same time.

HUM You spoke earlier of playing with illusions. Here you've manipulated light to create a straight linear shadow on the wall from the curved solid, which immediately points to different ways that something can appear, what you see versus what you think you're seeing. Then you are also using a projector to form moving shapes with light. Are these additional elements of the composition representations of the shapes formed by the solids?

KT Yes, in terms of the animated light, I do tend to create a representation of what I've produced in the main structure, I am thinking about the actual versus the potential. I

also tend to use a lot of square or rhombus shapes, and the square —for some reason I keep going back to the square—for me is the perfect answer to complex, abstract ideas. This work has no actual squares but it has related shapes, and the tetrahedron, the cube, are Platonic solids, once thought of as the building blocks of the universe.

HUM How do you develop new work? Do you work with the 3D shapes or the light shapes first?

KT It can be either. But often I envision the whole work in my mind and then I try and recreate it, which is not always successful, but it always brings up another question which I then investigate. This one here for instance, I saw this kind of spinning rhombus being held up by the structure, complete.

HUM Do you have a background in science?

KT No, I have no science background, I didn't even take sciences in high school, maybe biology for one year. But my interest was in metaphysics, which just kept coming back to these scientific ideas and I thought this is an interesting way to look at it, so I went down that route.

HUM So once you were invited to exhibit, did you have carte blanche to make what you wanted? How was your experience of exhibiting in Venice?

KT Yes, I could do what I wanted, they said they totally trusted my decision of what to show. So I decided that these installation works where the way to go, hopefully something different from what else might be in the exhibition.

The experience of exhibiting in Venice amongst so much artwork has been quite intense, but in a good way. Venice itself creates a

visual overload let alone all the artwork that is being shown here. It totally inspires me to make more work and take more risks. Preparing for the show was a bit stressful because I didn't know what other work would be in the room. I knew I may need to make the structures bigger or smaller, depending on what was on either side, and hoped that my minimalist work didn't get overshadowed. When installing there were initial technical issues, and finding out it was a darkened space when I'd asked for a well lit space threw me a bit. So the lighting has created different shadows, but in the end I actually like the stronger shadows.

Also it's an old palazzo, and when people walk [on the floor above] it makes my projector move. So I've already had them up the ladder adjusting it and they will have to possibly do that for 6 months. It's also the difficulty of not being around. But it all worked out in the end and I'm totally happy with it and have had lots of good feedback.



HUM How long will you stay in Venice?

KT I'm staying until the opening and then a couple more days to see the rest of the Biennale. Then I'm off to Athens, as I'm in the Art Athina Art Fair through my Melbourne Gallery, Anna Pappas and since I'm here I'm going to set up another structure there along with my lightboxes. I'm excited to put up another installation. Then I go back to New Zealand and have to go back to real life but I have a couple more shows happening near the end of the year. I've got the Sydney Contemporary Art Fair, and then I've got a solo show in Melbourne at Anna Pappas Gallery. So, it's a busy year.

HUM Great, being busy is a good thing?

KT Yes, that is a good thing, just need to stop working a day job and then it'll be even better, as we all want to do!

HUM What do you do for a day job?

KT I'm a picture framer, I run a picture frame shop for the owners, but I've cut down to three days a week so I think that's a little better.

HUM And how did you support this project and your trip here?

KT I didn't get public funding but Jan Warburton Trust supported me which was really great. And my gallery in Auckland, Sanderson, organised a fundraiser selling mini lightboxes without taking a commission, so that was fantastic. There are difficulties when coming from the bottom of the world, it's been a real effort but I am here now.

HUM It is very difficult, like you say, for artists to come from so far away, not just New Zealand but antipodes and other places. Because you come with little or no support and on top of that you have these huge costs involved in coming here and bringing works, leaving your job for a week or two because it's too far to come for three days… It's a pretty amazing achievement.

KT Yes exactly. And at the time I was thinking, should I be doing this, am I going to end up in a financial mess, of course you worry about money. But I thought, no the opportunity is too great to say no to, you just need to… And it did work out actually, I had family members who were happy to help me out as well.

Also if you can, it's always nice to see the venue before you make your work, right. But there's no way I could afford to come all the way over here for a few days! Even when I had my first show in Melbourne, I'd seen photographs of the space, but I hadn't gone there to see it because at the time I couldn't afford to and I couldn't afford the time off work. So you just have to go in relatively blind, that's the scary part, especially when you're doing installation work. Luckily for me this is not an expensive work to ship, I did everything here.

Postscriptum September 2017

HUM With the Biennale season drawing to an end in November, what do you take away from exhibiting in Venice this year?

KT Being a part of this show has allowed me to realise the potential of my work - that it can be successful in a bigger arena. The feedback, the contacts made, and the experience of working through installation issues have been invaluable. I feel far more confident in putting my work out into the world. Being immersed in the art of the Biennale, the collateral events,

museums and other art treasures of Venice has motivated me to move forward in all areas of my art practice. After my upcoming show in Melbourne I will be taking time out to experiment with new ideas and materials before coming back to Auckland to install work at Te Tuhi.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Biographies



Kāryn Taylor is an installation artist who lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand. She holds an MFA (First Class) from Elam School of Art, Auckland and a BFA (Hons) from Massey University, Wellington. Her work explores the space between the immaterial and the material, the transitional state between energy and matter. Quantum physics proposes that the observer and the observed are inter-connected, and considers the problem of our experienced reality being determined, or brought into existence, by our observation. Taylor manipulates aspects of light, form and shadow in order to explore the underlying potential of physical systems, she often uses animated lines of light connected to object and painted line to form multi dimensional structures or drawings.

Taylor exhibits both nationally and internationally with recent shows including Time. Space. Existence. at Sanderson Contemporary, Auckland; *Immaterial Alchemy* at Anna Pappas Gallery, Melbourne; *Art-Athina*, Faliron Pavilion, Athens, Greece; New Geometries, Sanderson Contemporary, Auckland; and *Abstract Philosophy*, 30 Upstairs, Wellington. Taylor was awarded a Merit in the Parkin Drawing Prize and has been a finalist in New Zealand's National Contemporary Art Awards and the Wallace Art Awards.

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