

Crossing Currents: Episode 2

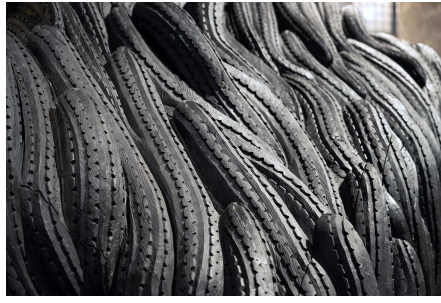
An interview with Brett Graham at the
60th Venice Biennale

by Contemporary HUM

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Brett Graham, *Wastelands*, 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands* (detail), 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



Brett Graham. Photo: Chris Trill. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



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Brett Graham, *Wastelands*, 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint, and Fred Graham, *Ngā Tamariki a Tangaroa (Children of the Sea God)*, 1970, mahogany wood. Courtesy Colleen Hill Collection. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

This is the second of eight interviews in [Crossing Currents: Aotearoa New Zealand Artists in Venice](#), a podcast series produced in 2024 by Contemporary HUM. Listen below or wherever you get your podcasts. This is a transcript of the episode that has been edited for clarity and length.

*In April 2024, Contemporary HUM spoke to Brett Graham (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, Tainui) about his work *Wastelands* (2024), which is featured in the 60th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, titled *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere* and curated by Adriano Pedrosa. In the exhibition, Graham joins three other artists and one collective from Aotearoa New Zealand, who together make up the largest number of artists from Aotearoa to ever be featured in the Biennale at once, despite there being no New Zealand Pavilion in this edition. Throughout the conversation, Graham discusses *Wastelands* as a palimpsest of historical conditions, comprising the turbulence of early colonial Aotearoa and the extractive attitudes to land that underpin the climate crisis, and as an appeal to revert to Indigenous knowledge systems. He also discusses the logistics of exhibiting at the Venice Biennale and what it's like to be included*

alongside an intergenerational selection of Māori artists, including his father, Fred Graham (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, Tainui).

CONTEMPORARY HUM Congratulations on participating in the Venice Biennale. What was the process of being invited to participate in the curated section?

BRETT GRAHAM Adriano Pedrosa had been in New Zealand to judge the Walters Prize, so he had a relationship with Natasha Conland, who had introduced him to Nigel Borrell. I think Nigel had told him about my father's work, and then maybe Natasha told him about my work, [and] then I met him in March last year. From there, we were sort of in constant communication. I still thought it was a bit of a dream, because people, even Natasha, were saying, “just wait until you get the email before you get too excited.” But then every time we communicated, he seemed very positive. I think we were among the first people that he'd seen because he'd been selected not so long beforehand. He'd gone to Australia, he came to New Zealand, and then he went to Wellington and saw that work of Mataaho, of course. It started from there.

HUM The work is called *Wastelands*. Would you be able to describe your work, what it's made of and where it's located?

BG The structure is similar to a work that I made that was part of an exhibition called *Tai Moana Tai Tangata* (at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2020–2021). That exhibition was looking at the history of Tainui and Taranaki (iwi, Māori tribes). In [accordance with] the notion that Māori believe that past, present and future all exist simultaneously, there were videos in that exhibition that alluded to a potential future. So the structure of the sculpture is a pātaka (raised storehouse) on a wagon. Pātaka used to be the storehouses or the pride of the tribe at one point, even before meeting houses,

which are a relatively new concept. The pride of the tribe used to be the storehouse, and it was elaborately carved and permanent, so it marked the place in the village; it was a statement of tūrangawaewae (place where one has the right to stand through kinship). You put that on wheels, of course, and it challenges that whole idea of permanence, because you're moving constantly. That was the idea, having to pick up all of your things and then move on.

Why have I used a wagon? As one of my friends here, Michelle LaVallee, who is at the National Gallery of Canada reminded me, looking at wagons probably started when I was doing a residency in Saskatchewan and I made a work that referred to their histories. I had actually seen images of wagons with buffalo bones in them—buffalo skulls and things on them. It seemed like this tragic image of abundant waste, you know, so I had been fascinated with that. In regard to Taranaki, I was fascinated by the wagon because it's such a primary element of moving things in so many cultures in the West, but Māori didn't have wagons, so you can imagine how much that changed their worldview: moving everything on canoes and the sea, very much like Venice, to moving everything on land. It also coincided with that real period of turbulence during the 1850s and 60s, where things were rapidly changing. People were coming in from Europe [and] Māori communities were responding. There were migrations of Māori, because of the musket, because of the turbulence that created, [and] to me the wagon represented that.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands*, 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint, with works by Marlene Gilson in background. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands* (detail), 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



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So, the idea was a pātaka, but of course the whole thing is covered in this layer of eels. There's literally, in some places, wood that is 70 centimetres thick that has been carved with eels. They immerse the form. Then you've got wagon wheels that I've sourced from elsewhere and then two shafts, and the shafts have hands on them, which very much come from niu poles, which are part of the Hauhau or Pai Mārire [movement]. The idea of the niu poles was this belief that you're receiving and sending messages from this pole, so you commit your karakia around them. But in the context of this crisis that befalls us now with climate change, this crisis [where] we can go on the way we are and it'll lead down this track or we can choose a new pathway and we'll have salvation, or we'll recover from this situation that we're in, the idea [was] this choice before you in the hands, but [still] very much alluding to the niu poles and the idea of giving and receiving messages, like an Indigenous satellite.

In the same way that I'd changed the language of the tuna (eels), I wanted to refer to a more naturalistic hand to talk about that period of change and turbulence. It's interesting, because [in] my father's work, he very much alludes to the [traditional] three-fingered hand [and] I wanted to suggest the same idea, but also that period of change, when things started to get mixed up, which reflects my identity, and it creates a sort of cultural dynamism that didn't exist before. It's slightly unsettling as well, which is the purpose.

HUM Yeah, the hands are really quite confronting.

BG Niu poles were fascinating because they reflect that period of change. Te Ua Haumēne, who was the prophet of that movement, created the Pai Mārire. He had been conscious of Europeans and their bizarre rituals. All these things we take for granted were actually unique in Aotearoa at one stage, and considered foreign or strange. So, flag poles, the idea of the soldiers gathering around them and saluting this thing which is material and wood, seemed so bizarre to Māori. They thought if they're going to spend all this time doing these weird things around them,

they must have some sort of spiritual power, so that's why there was that fascination with flags as [being capable of] sending messages to the atua (gods), to the realm above, so they would imitate these rituals. That's where the niu pole came from. The extension of that idea was that they actually carved them with hands, so [there's this] idea of appropriating technology to make it your own.

I've been fascinated by looking at settler letters, [though] even the word settler is contentious in some circles. Reading the letters was quite fascinating, because right from the onset of Europeans and English being in Aotearoa, there were certain assumptions that they made and that was that eventually all of the land, even though people lived there, would be theirs and all of the resources would be theirs. There was no question of that. What also fascinated me was everything had a value. Because they're convincing their relatives in England that they weren't crazy for coming all that way, they put a monetary value on everything: land, the price of the blacksmith, the cobbler, so I found that quite intriguing as well.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands* (detail), 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

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Brett Graham, Venice, April 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



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(In foreground) ceramic works by Juana Marta Rodas (L) and Julia Isídrez (R), with Brett Graham, *Wastelands*, 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: *Contemporary HUM*.

In the work I made in *Tai Moana Tai Tangata*, I had videos that showed the Taranaki coastline and elsewhere, like a place called Ohawe, for example. There are shots of the cliffs and it's almost as if the sand is dropping into the ocean. On one of the cliffs, for example—I'm reminded of this because I went to a talk yesterday, where they talked about the dangers of deep sea mining—that coast is being exposed, and although Ngāti Ruanui (iwi affiliated with the Taranaki region) have been fighting, and under the last government there was no chance of deep sea mining, under this government, the avenues have opened up for those companies to get the consents to mine again. In the film, I make reference to the fact that my great-grandfather was buried at an urupā (burial ground) on one of the cliffs, and that urupā has since dropped into the sea. Essentially, those companies are getting profit from bones that have become the sand. So, those are some of the background ideas that I had when making this work: looking very much at the past, the present, and the future, and trying to draw those things [together].

HUM The work is in reference to the “Waste Lands Act” that was instituted by the settler government at the time?

BG It's complicated. The [work] description talks about wastelands as being swamp land, and they certainly were, but the Waste Lands Act was interesting in that it actually referred to all land that came to be in the government's possession that was then sold on to settlers, because the treaty meant that you could not, as a settler, approach Māori directly and say, “sell that land to me.” You had to do all your transactions through the Crown, so any of the land that came into the possession of the Crown was sold to the Crown by Māori [and] was then sold on to those settlers who wanted land. But any [part] of that land was called, effectively, “wasteland”, [and] I just found that term so bizarre, because no land is wasteland to Māori. Every colonial account you seem to read about [settlers] arriving in Aotearoa, they always say, “In the beginning, when we came, there was nothing here but swamp, from Christchurch all the way to Waikato.” In fact, you go to the Christchurch Museum and the first thing you read is a plaque that says, “There was nothing in Christchurch but swamp.” But, of course, that swamp was an incredibly valuable resource to Māori, so that's what I'm alluding to: how we look at our histories and how we potentially need to revert to looking at Indigenous knowledge systems to get us back on track. Like peat swamps, [for example]. Peat swamps were the enemy of the colonial farmer, when they were draining the land, especially in Waikato, but it's interesting because peat swamps are 3% of the land's surface, but they contain something like 40% of the world's carbon. So, of course, once they're drained, they release all of that carbon. Peat swamps are also fascinating because, at home, they tend to be where forests were, so there are essentially layers and layers of history and of former forests: thousands of years of layers, so even that is quite fascinating.

Adriano had asked me to respond to my father's work. He always was very clear about my father's work being on the wall and then me making something for the space, which suited me fine. At first I thought, “Jeez, this is a chance to make something that looks

physically like my father's work," because I was brainwashed at an early age. I know that style so well, the three fingers and the thrown-back heads and so on. I grew up with that. All of those works in the show, I grew up with. One of them, *Whiti Te Rā* (1966), used to be at our dentist's place. I love that work. There are so many images. There's one of my father standing heroically by *Whiti Te Rā* [as] a young man in his forties, clearly proud that they had contemporised the style; they took elements of traditional art, they took elements from the West. Then there's another image of him and of that work in his studio, and I'm seven and proudly holding up these paintings that I'd made of airplanes or whatever they were.

The other works in the show I [also] grew up loving as a child. In fact, it was kind of a shock to see a couple of them. I thought they were much bigger. Imagine these massive things as a five year old, especially *Maui Steals the Sun* (1971). In fact, I went so far as to write that this thing was two metres long. I think Adriano was a little bit annoyed at me, because we went to the space and it's one metre. It's the same size as the other one, but anyway... they're big stories.

So, there are those four works that I grew up with. But then I thought I should do something the way I do things but look at the themes of his work, and one of the most fundamental elements is that they're homages to nature and homages to Papatūānuku (Earth, Earth Mother). Maui stealing the sun and the Tinirau story (*Tinirau and the Whale*, 1971) are very much about what happens when humans manipulate nature, but they're also fundamental stories—purākau, we call them—that lay out how people deal with situations. There are examples that we use to determine protocols in those two stories, certainly the Tinirau story, but they are homages to nature as well. I wanted to take those ideas and put that into this work and in combination with the idea of looking at how the greed for using resources had ultimately led to this crisis that we're in now with climate change.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands* (detail), 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint, and Fred Graham, *Whiti Te Rā*, 1966, oil stick on board. Courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands* (detail), 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint, and Fred Graham, *Ngā Tamariki a Tangaroa (Children of the Sea God)*, 1970, mahogany wood. Courtesy Colleen Hill Collection. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



Work by Brett Graham and Fred Graham, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.

HUM Something you've spoken about before is the historical role of Venice as a major trading port and point of connection between East and West. I wondered if you have thoughts about what kind of meanings your work takes on in the context of Venice and its history as this major point of early empire?

BG In its heyday, there were 300,000 people that lived here. They had their own empire. They were bringing things in from the East. That's what I love about this place; it's sort of a melting point. And to me, the most interesting part of culture is when [cultures] meet and what results from that. It's great to engage with Māori in our communities at home and with Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) in their natural environment—where is that? The North Shore?—but, the most interesting things happen when cultures meet. I suppose I'm saying that because my mother is Pākehā and my father is Māori. Just like the Pacific community, the Asian community... when those cultures meet, that's when you have tensions, but that's also when you have that excitement, that spark that creates cultural change. So that's what we're always sitting on, especially if you're of mixed race, and that's why the notion of the outsider is interesting. Outsiders, “foreigners”, everywhere. What exactly does that mean? Do we all feel like we're slightly imposters? [Being] tangata whenua in this

sort of environment, does that make me an imposter here? Certainly a foreigner. Or when New Zealanders come here, we suffer from this cultural cringe because you're engaging with thousands of years of history here and it's visible everywhere. It's much harder to read those signs at home, but, of course, for Māori, the landscape's different and has those layers of history.

HUM This year, there is strong Māori representation within the Biennale and events that are running at the same time. What do you think about having such strong representation of Ngā toi Māori at this major international event?

BG It's amazing to me. To be fair, if you have that theme of “the stranger”, “the outsider”, “the queer”, rather than just “Indigenous”, there's no end to artists from New Zealand that address those issues that could have been here. The fact that [Pedrosa] has just focused on Indigenous art is incredible. I know that he's been intrigued by the fact that Māoridom had a connection to modernism. Māori artists were looking at Western art from the 1950s. I know that he was intrigued by that and that's perhaps why he included Selwyn Wilson's work. It's interesting, in the room of “Portraits”, it's a chronology, [and] Selwyn Wilson's work is one of the first. I think that was done in the late 40s. He trained at the Royal College of Art, I think. So, you had Māori that were going to Europe as early as the 40s and 50s to look at their art. That was 70 years ago, although you had Māori who were going to Europe ever since the whalers arrived, from the 1820s. You had those sorts of encounters. There was a ship that was a scientific expedition that came in the 1860s and took two Māori chiefs to Vienna and reading that account is quite fascinating.

HUM We've spoken a little bit about the inclusion of your father in the curated section and the dialogue between your works. How is it for you to have that whānau representation in Venice?

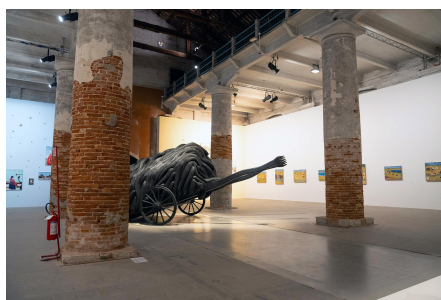
BG Because the container [with the artwork] arrived so late and went to the wrong coast—it took so long, literally, if we'd had a day longer, we would have been really struggling to put that work together—it was very reassuring to look over my shoulder and see that his works were there; as I say, works that I grew up with from my childhood.

Someone else made the point that [in Fred Graham's work], one is an homage to Tangaroa (atua of the sea and fish, in *Ngā Tamariki a Tangaroa (Children of the Sea God)*, 1970) and then [there is a] reference to a whale with the Tinirau story, and then mine are tuna, so there are those kind of replications. The carved pattern on my work is called taratara a kai and that refers to the Tinirau story as well, so there are a lot of crossovers.

But it's also about abundance, what Māori value and what Māori put emphasis on, and how that has shifted. I'm just thinking of the words of Selwyn Muru, who was influential on me, in a play that he wrote. He said, “Ka riro te mana o te whenua i ngā hipi me ngā kau,” which is: “The mana of the land has gone to sheep and cows,” the idea [being] that so many people were displaced and forests were destroyed in order to create a nice place for sheep and cows to live up and down the country. The other part of the homage is my father grew up near a place called Arapuni and “Ko te rohe o te tuna e” are the words of a song that we sing down there, which is an homage to that area and the prevalence of tuna, of eels.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands*, 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint, with works by Emmi Whitehorse (L) and River Claire (R) in background. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.



Brett Graham, *Wastelands*, 2024, wood, synthetic polymer paint, with works by Marlene Gilson in background. *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia installation view, 20 April–24 November 2024. Photo: Ben Stewart. Courtesy of Creative New Zealand.

HUM There isn't a national pavilion for Aotearoa this year, but the public funding that would have typically gone towards a pavilion has gone towards supporting the artists exhibiting in the curated section, which are more than ever before. The Biennale is such a complex international event; I wondered whether you could explain what it's like being an artist to put together a project of this scale and how it's supported, from the Biennale to public funding or other resources you've had to put together yourself?

BG It's a massive exercise, as you can imagine. Sean Duxfield, who I met at the Christchurch Art Gallery, has brought many exhibitions to Venice, so he did the logistical side of it, which is fantastic. The shipping was a major issue this year, just because the ships couldn't go through the Suez Canal; all of those things are important. In regards to funding, they have certainly made that point, how lucky we are, in the sense that there wasn't a national pavilion, but then if there had been a national pavilion, who's to say that Mataaho and my work wouldn't have been there anyway?

In the curated section, there have been two New Zealanders before. My understanding is Francis Upritchard and Simon Denny have had work in there. But when you think about where [our] works are positioned in the Arsenale, they are given much higher visibility, I believe, with those works being there in the forefront of the Arsenale than any national pavilion that is stuck in the middle of town somewhere. I mean, you've seen the Giardini and Arsenale and just how much work [there is], how saturated you become with art, just in those two spaces. It's wonderful to go out and come across the pavilions, and if you're a dedicated fan of the arts, you'll do that, but just seeing [the Arsenale and Giardini] is so much that most people get totally exhausted visiting the other places. Arguably, it's given us much more visibility than if we had a pavilion in some obscure part of town.

HUM Absolutely, because Mataaho Collective's work *Ta kapau* (2024) is the very first work that you see.

BG It welcomes you into the space. It's been reconfigured from Te Papa (Museum of New Zealand) in a brilliant way. They're sort of like maihi and amo (the bargeboards and supports of a meeting house), those columns in the space, so it's welcoming you in.

HUM And then your work is not much further from theirs.

BG I'm very happy with the space it's in. It's also surrounded by examples of Indigenous art, so you have an Aboriginal artist on one side (Marlene Gilson), and she actually has carts, like wagons, in her paintings, which I love. And then there's a Bolivian photographer (River Claire), and then there's works by a Diné/Navajo artist (Emmi Whitehorse) as well. So, I'm very happy to be contextualised into space like that. And, of course, the Arsenale is so big that if you're in the front, people are fresh and they're excited, and then the further on you get, you start to get a bit weary, so, we're lucky to be there.

Crossing Currents: Aotearoa New Zealand Artists in Venice is an original podcast series produced with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, with editing and mixing by Hamish Petersen. Cultural advisory is provided by Matariki Williams, graphic design by Emma Kaniuk and music by João Veríssimo.

Click here for the first interview in the series: [Areez Katki in Personal Structures](#)

Biographies



Brett Graham (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, Tainui, b. 1967) has a doctorate in Fine Arts from the University of Auckland and an MFA from the University of Hawai'i. Grounded in Te Ao Māori, a Māori world-view, Graham produces large scale sculptures and installations that explore Indigenous histories, politics and philosophies. Questions of power relations are at the heart of his practice. He is highly regarded for his ability to abstract complex political, historical and cultural ideas into strong sculptural form.

Graham's work was featured at the 2024 Venice Biennale, 2017 Honolulu Biennial, 2013 survey of international Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Canada and 2010 Sydney Biennale. His collaboration with Rachael Rakena, *Āniwaniwa* was exhibited at the 2007 Venice Biennale and their work *UFOB* was shown at the 2006 Sydney Biennale. He has also produced several major public artworks throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and has undertaken artist residencies in Switzerland, the United States and Australia. In 2021 he received the Arts Foundation of New Zealand Laureate Award.



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