Islands on Sale

What recognition for New Zealand visual arts on the world stage?

by Alastair Carruthers, Contemporary HUM, Mataaho Collective, Tessa Giblin

Published on 05.08.2017



In July 2017, Contemporary HUM was invited by the New Zealand Studies Network in London to facilitate a panel discussion in the context of their annual conference ISLANDS ON SALE*, devoted to the discussion of recent developments affecting the production and reception of New Zealand and Pacific literary, visual and performance arts in a global context.*

We were thrilled to include four outstanding guest panelists from New Zealand: Erena Baker and Bridget Reweti from Mataaho Collective (exhibiting at documenta 14, Kassel), Alastair Carruthers (Commissioner of NZ at Venice 2017) and Tessa Giblin (Commissioner and Curator of Ireland at Venice 2017 and Director of Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh).

We felt that this was a rare opportunity to have an important discussion about New Zealand's contribution to the international contemporary art discourse, ask questions about who is supported to exhibit overseas and why, and gain insight into the presentation of New Zealand and Pacific-specific art in the context of some of the most prominent contemporary art shows in the world. The panel took place in London at a time of peak activity in Europe. All comments and feedback are welcome for future and further discussion.

WINSOME WILD (HUM) One of the key things we want to discuss today are signal events in the contemporary art world, particularly the 2017 Venice Biennale and documenta 14. We're thrilled to have here today people with exceptional insight into these major international exhibitions.

To start off let's talk about how artists are selected to participate, as the process of selection for documenta and the Venice Biennale are quite different. Erena and Bridget can you speak about the process of selection for documenta 14 and how your work came to be included?

BRIDGET REWETI I guess it happened over quite a long period of time, and the invitation came at quite a late stage. I'd been on an indigenous residency at The Banff Centre in Canada, maybe two years ago, and met Candice Hopkins—she's an indigenous curator, Canadian and lives down in Santa Fe at the moment—she was the curatorial advisor for the Banff residency of indigenous artists and she also started off as a curatorial advisor for documenta 14.

Candice had come to New Zealand the previous year for the ST PAUL St Symposium (Auckland) and happened to be in Wellington during Matariki. Matariki is quite a busy time for all Māori artists, because all of the sudden people are scrambling to try and show some Māori art. Mataaho had two shows on in Wellington at that time, so I got to meet Candice and take her to both shows.

I'm assuming that she had conversations with Hendrik Folkerts and probably told him to come and meet with us when he came through to New Zealand last year. Also part of the curatorial team, Hendrik is our curator for documenta 14. So on my first day at work at Pātaka, which was maybe August last year, I got a phone call from Stephen Cleland, who is curator at the Adam Art Gallery. I've never met Stephen, I didn't quite know who he was, he said, 'oh there's a curator here from Germany who'd like to meet with you' and I was, like, 'okay when?', 'this afternoon', 'oh okay... I'll call you back.'

Luckily my boss, Reuben Friend, is a big supporter of Māori and Pacific art, and he said, ‘you have to go!’, and I said ‘but it's my first day at work!’ And so I finished my first day of work very early to head to the pub to meet Stephen and Hendrik and we just had a really great conversation. I didn't actually think anything would come of it, it was just really nice to meet this curator who was coming over, meeting lots of different artists in New Zealand.

He was really sympathetic to our collective practice, and he asked —which no one else seems to ask—if it was okay that I talked on behalf of the Collective without the other members there. He understood our practice and he was able to give more insight into what's happening elsewhere.

And I just came away feeling like I had a really great conversation with this amazing curator. And then we got an invite through e-mail from Candice and Hendrik, maybe a month later, so that was maybe September 2016.



Bridget Reweti and Erena Baker are half of the Mataaho Collective, who are exhibiting at documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany. Contemporary HUM panel discussion at *Islands on Sale* conference, London. Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Mataaho Collective. Image courtesy of the artists.



Mataaho Collective, *Kiko Moana* (2017), polyethene tarpaulin and cotton thread. documenta 14, Kassel. Image: Contemporary HUM.

WW And from an official angle, could you also talk about Hendrik visiting New Zealand, how did that come about?

BR He came over through the CNZ Flying Friends Programme, and because we were selected by a curator who came through that programme, we could apply for the International Presentation Fund to then go to documenta. That's a different funding stream run by the international team: Jude Chambers and co.

PAULINE AUTET (HUM) For those who may not know of it, documenta is a major international art exhibition that takes place in Kassel, Germany every five years. This year's documenta is exceptional in two ways, one is that it's across two locations for the first time: in Athens as well as Kassel, and also New Zealand artists are included for the first time.

ERENA BAKER And they're all Māori.

PA Yes exactly, we'll come back to that... To follow up on selection questions, Alastair could you also talk about New Zealand's selection process for the Venice Biennale as you've been involved for a long time with our national presentations—you started off in your introduction—but can you expand on this point. Who are the artists selected to represent their country in a national pavilion? Is it about showing the best we've got? What are the criteria, and do we consider who went last time? I know the process can change from one Biennale to the next?

ALASTAIR CARRUTHERS The criteria are public and you can take a look at them. They haven't changed that much, but aspects of the process would vary from time to time. I commissioned the show for the first time this year, whereas previously I was a bit removed, chairing the Arts Council, the Arts Council in fact makes the decision on the recommendation of the Commissioner and the Panel. The things that I changed about this year's selection process are that I've just altered a couple of sentences, one, to encourage people to look back over the previous seven presentations and to consider the diversity of what had already

been presented, because I'm very conscious that we are laying down an art history to the world, to an international audiences as well as collecting it back home.

And one of the things that Jenny Harper, one of my predecessors, was very clear about with the three shows that she commissioned is that we just had to keep being different. And I think Lisa's reception, which has been astonishing this year, is very much to do with the fact that we had nailed fascinating shows and people cannot believe that the range of artists that come from this little country can be that diverse, in terms of their practice.

Beyond that, I also added another sentence which more or less said that the artists didn't have to be alive and this got quite a few people excited, especially those who support young artists that they wanted to get there. But I'm very pleased that documenta chose Ralph Hotere, because it means that should we ever choose a work by Len Lye or a collaboration with somebody like Gordon Walters and somebody very young, we would have some form.

And certainly Germany has presented works more than once, I think, by an artist who was deceased. So those are the things that I changed, but otherwise it's just who's ready and who's got the hot show, it's not actually that political, it's who is ready right now, will this work be their best, will they be at their best during this period and have we got the resources to do it. And it actually causes you to whittle down quickly in any process to two or maybe three people that are actually really viable and ready. A lot of people are talented enough, but not everybody's ready. Tessa over to you.



Tessa Giblin is Commissioner and Curator of the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017 and Director of the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh. Contemporary HUM panel discussion at *Islands on Sale* conference, London. Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Jesse Jones, *Tremble Tremble*, 2017, installation view, Ireland at the Venice Biennale. Photo by Ros Kavanagh.



Jesse Jones, *Tremble Tremble*, 2017, installation view, Ireland at the Venice Biennale. Photo by Ros Kavanagh.

TESSA GIBLIN Well, we do it differently in Ireland, we also submit an application, but you apply as a team. Ireland changes the way it does it regularly, but this year it was a team, and I think there's a real strength in that, because you're either in it together or you're not together, there's none of this, 'we select you and you select them.' But about an artist being ready, I think it's also about as a team do you think that you could build that artist to the point where they're going to make the best work that they've ever made in their life? There's no doubt that's the goal, and that has to be understood.

I think what made our selection quite special in the Irish context was how political Jesse Jones' work really was. In the interview we were saying strong things about the politics of the work in relation to the patriarchy. Which was important later on when we were at the opening with the Ambassador, who was wedged between myself and Jesse: I'd done my speech, Jesse started doing hers, including reference to the Magdalene Women, and about waking up in Seoul while doing an exhibition when Savita Halappanavar had just died on a hospital bed in Ireland, and not being able to explain to her hosts, how this could possibly happen in a modern country today.

There were wet cheeks all over the room and the poor Ambassador was stuck there in the middle of us. I was thinking, 'what is he going to do or say?' But there was also not a shadow of a doubt or fear—have we gone too far, had it been too political, anything like that—because we'd been like that in the interview, we'd said this from the beginning. They chose us with these politics that they're

going to see through to the end. And the Ambassador, to his credit, was magnificent—funny, enlightened and really brilliant.

AC Let me just clarify one thing, the idea of representing a country probably needs a little bit of checking in on, in the Biennale's eyes only one person represents the country during the national exhibitions, and that's the Commissioner. The Commissioner actually has a part practical, and part diplomatic position, as the interface between the country and the presenter, the exhibitor. The artist is there to make a show.

And what happens is countries and communities often, I think, put really large burdens on their artists and require them to carry the mantle of some sort of ambassador, and indeed they are, but I can tell you the thing that is most important, and probably you Tessa did with Jesse, is to just make sure they make the best show. Because they are actually beside themselves when they go to the Biennale, even 73-year old Bill Culbert, nothing prepared him for it. So they don't represent countries actually, they make art.

PA That's a very good point to make and we should come back to this because actually official statements, Creative New Zealand and others, use the word 'represent' in relation to the artist. But first can we talk about what your personal experiences were this year being involved in these projects. Mataaho, what was your experience of installing and showing work in an exhibition like documenta, which is just colossal, and it's such a massive enterprise bringing the work over from New Zealand, what was it like for you on a personal level?

And how has the work been received so far, despite it only being a few weeks, how do you feel the experience of showing at documenta 14 and achieving the international exposure that documenta brings, would be likely to impact on your practice?

EB I'll start with the personal side. As Bridget mentioned, it was September last year we received an e-mail and then it was all guns blazing. We live in different places in New

Zealand, we meet in Palmerston North because it's more central. Sarah lives in Whakatāne and she has to fly down to see us, she's got her own family and so she has to leave them. Bridget drives up from Wellington usually and Terri and I are in Palmerston North. So there's the logistics of us getting together, which was one of the first hurdles that we had to get over. The second hurdle was that I had a baby in November last year, so Parekohatu was two weeks old when we had one of our wananga, our gatherings, where we started experimenting with the materials. It just went from there.

We set ourselves quite a laborious task—we kind of like that—so there were many hours of folding and sewing and as you saw the scale of it, just the logistics of trying to bring a piece like that up to a sewing machine to physically sew it together, it was labour. What I quite like about the work is that sewing is often considered quite a domestic, handicraft, it's something that's small and easy to do and we turned it into this monster that needed manpower, womanpower, to pull it off.

We received our funding quite late, the discussions were ongoing, but we didn't actually get the money in our pockets until Christmas, so that was when we were able to purchase our materials and actually start making the final piece. And then...we had a lot of long weekends. We purchased a really large fish bin to ship the work. Our piece weighs 50 kg, so the bin we purchased is a large bin for exporting tuna. 100 kg is the weight of the plastic bin empty and it turned up at my house and I don't own a forklift, so the truck driver had to drag it across the front lawn and I was home by myself with the baby and at the last moment my husband turned up, so he helped him lift it onto our deck. This massive bin actually only left New Zealand two days before we did, and was flown over to Germany.

The install went really smoothly, it's the first time we've ever had installers to help us install the work, we're used to just doing everything ourselves. The troubleshooting that usually happens during an install, done with two extra minds, and they weren't bad looking either, helped us get our work up. Then we left New Zealand and as most of you know it's a really long flight, we travelled for 30+ hours and the next day we were up seven meter high scaffolding. At home in New Zealand they don't let us get on the

scaffolding, so we were kind of excited to be up there. But yes it went really smoothly and I'll hand it to Bridget to talk about how the work was received.

BR I think reception ties in with this representation question, because most of the time if you're a Māori artist, whether you like it or not, you are representing Māoridom and so, this idea of representation we can't get away from, and so we just have to move through it as fluidly as we can. We try to do things to ensure that we are representing our communities and that we keep our own mana intact whenever we work with other people. Those are two integral aspects that we always consider when we show our work.

One of the interesting things, again tied with representation, is that, if it was New Zealand curators choosing which artists go to documenta, it wouldn't have been us and it wouldn't have been Nat han Pohio. We had these conversations with Nathan and we were really, in a way grateful that these curators from overseas came and recognised us for our work and not just for the fact that we can represent being Māori at an international scale.

How it's received, we're not sure, because we're not part of the mainstream arts in New Zealand anyway, so we had to contact a friend who is a writer to then contact Art New Zealand to propose writing about the work we made. Apart from that we got in contact with Mana Magazine to see if they wanted to write about us. Our comms is us thinking, oh, 'who do we know or who do we want to write about it?' We also got in contact with Te Ahi Kaa, the Māori Arts Programme, on Radio New Zealand on Sundays presented by Justine Murray and we'll have an interview with her when we get back, but other than that we don't know.

We hosted some New Zealand curators in Kassel, from different institutions, because they didn't know, or hadn't met all of us. We knew that they would be around so we shouted them dinner and a beer at a Vietnamese restaurant below where we stayed and you know, we have to do these things because part of keeping our mana intact is that we make those connections and relationships and

then it's up to other people whether they want to continue down that path.

Maybe you could all give us some further insight on how it might be received. From our position where we sit within our Māori arts world, within our friends and family, it's had an amazing reception there, we've had huge support from our friends and family. My mum came over, Erena's husband Reweti and their two kids are here, they were our main supporters in Kassel, making us cups of tea, making sure we ate, making sure we were getting food, but other than that we don't know.

AC I'm sure it's a sensation. It doesn't surprise me at all with all of the artists in documenta and even Luke Willis Thompson and Shannon Te Ao who is going to Edinburgh are Māori or have Polynesian backgrounds. Many non-Polynesian artists have used a Polynesian vocabulary inside their work for a very long time; Gordon Walters has been one of the most notable.

It actually marks, at a visual art sense, something very special about our part of the world, but we have now got a generation of Māori and Pacific artists coming through who are just kicking ass in all media and it's because their art is amazing, and I'm sure your show is incredible, you're there because you merit it.



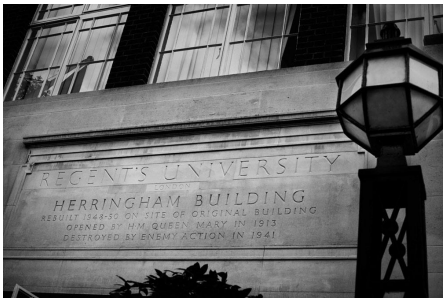
Islands on Sale, New Zealand Studies Network annual conference, co-convened with Regent's Uni. London, Uni. of Northampton and Uni. of the Balearic Islands. Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Contemporary HUM panel discussion with artists Bridget Reweti and Erena Baker from Mataaho Collective, Tessa Giblin (Commissioner, Ireland at Venice 2017), Alastair Carruthers (Commissioner, NZ at Venice 2017). Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Islands on Sale, New Zealand Studies Network annual conference, co-convened with Regent's Uni. London, Uni. of Northampton and Uni. of the Balearic Islands. Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Islands on Sale, New Zealand Studies Network annual conference, co-convened with Regent's Uni. London, Uni. of Northampton and Uni. of the Balearic Islands. Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.

PA Indeed this European summer of 2017 is huge in terms of international presentation of New Zealand arts in major international events and solo presentations like Luke Willis Thompson whose show just opened at the Chisenhale Gallery in London, Oscar Enberg at Art Basel...

But in particular it is a big year for Māori artists in Europe, Shannon Te Ao has a solo presentation at the Edinburgh Arts Festival in August, Lisa Reihana's solo project for the New Zealand Pavilion in Venice and the three NZ artists/collective included in documenta are Māori. Is that a coincidence, is that strategy, what do you all think about that?

AC I'm going to ask Tessa to answer that one, because it's purely guesswork for me. What I do know though is that Creative New Zealand has been very smart with its international

programme and rather than sending people out in the world to have quite indifferent and sometimes disappointing and lonely experiences internationally, what we are trying to do is manage people's careers at home with a very rich domestic sector.

We're bringing a lot of people into the country regularly to select who they think is best. So it will be the curator who chose you (Mataaho), but it will be Creative New Zealand who chose the curators to visit. Tessa, why do you think they've got so many Māori artists out there?

TB I suppose the only thing I can really add is something I learnt from Marina Fokidis, the Greek curator who's part of documenta's curatorial team. She would have been out to New Zealand before, and I remember she got in touch with me asking who she should visit. This would happen all the time when people came out to New Zealand and the first thing I say to them is 'what do you want to do, what are you working on, what do you want to discover? I'm not going to give you the top names of New Zealand, it's very boring, it would be the same people circulating all the time, so what do you want to find out?'

And she was quite specific, she was saying that they're not ageist, they want to find some really distinct practices that haven't been exposed, but that are potentially not the youngest people on the field. I focussed her towards certain people in the New Zealand infrastructure—because you know they're going to be hosted by CNZ, you know that's going to be covered. So I pointed them towards people who I just individually think are crackers, really great curators and Tina Barton was the one at the Adam Art Gallery that I said if there's anybody working on some idiosyncratic bit of research that nobody's exposed yet, it's going to be her. That's really the only insight I have, I don't think there's a trend, I think that it's just logical, there are some really great artists coming out of this area.

WW Following on from that, are there additional challenges in terms of presenting Māori practices on the international stage? Bridget you were speaking of the pressure to

be representing Māori culture or Māori art practice as a whole so do you think there are additional challenges to contend with in these international contexts and are there some ways we can navigate celebrating identity, but avoiding exoticisation or the simplification of indigenous culture?

BR Erena, myself and Terri, and also Reweti, we all studied Māori Visual Arts through Massey University in Palmerston North and one of the key things of this degree is that it was under Māori studies, which meant that we could go talk to the Treaty lecturer, we had to do te reo Māori classes, we could go talk to any of the experts in their fields, at any time, about Te Ao Māori which meant that we didn't have to be representing in that space of learning, that we could be pushing an envelope and that we didn't have to, I guess, default back to essentialist modes of representation.

So that means that when we do go out into the art world we're not necessarily trying to make identifiably Māori works, but they are conceptually based within mātauranga Māori. I think that's one of our key strengths, that possibly we all have is that, the work itself is founded within this amazing wealth of knowledge that is unique to New Zealand, and it's probably why it's also good.

Of course there are additional challenges, one is that although we're all making really good art, I'm not sure that we have the writers—though Contemporary HUM is really good in trying to mitigate this—but we don't have many writers that can really delve into the concepts of the work without just talking about identity.

We're not making work about identity, we want to move beyond that, but the arts ecology of New Zealand, and hopefully this is changing, but currently there are not many people who can write in-depth on our Māori artworks.



Alastair Carruthers is Commissioner of NZ's presentation at the Venice Biennale 2017. Contemporary HUM panel discussion at *Islands on Sale* conference, London. Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Lisa Reihana: Emissaries. New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017. Image: Contemporary HUM.



Lisa Reihana: Emissaries. New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017. Image: Contemporary HUM.



Lisa Reihana. Biennale Arte 2017. Photo: Michael Hall. Image courtesy of New Zealand at Venice.

AC Can I make a comment on that, I do note that we are a bi-cultural society, and we have many other cultures as well, but the artists that I've looked at, particularly working for Venice, when they are non-Māori artists they tend to almost deny the State and often protest against it or make work, in the case of Sim on Denny in 2015, that is very challenging for the State.

What happens when I'm working with Māori artists is that you realise that you're exhibiting somebody's work who's going to be carried by their entire family, their whānau, and one of the practical questions for this project was actually designing a vernissage experience that would be a elastic enough to cope with all of the people from Lisa's iwi and her community who rightly wanted to be there to carry her forward.

And that's when having a chef in your life is quite handy, because Peter [Gordon] threw a dinner for 300 people on an island at the end of vernissage week, for many international guests we would not normally have been able to entertain and many of Lisa's community who came.

PA Mataaho, the work you produce is quite abstract, formally, there's not an overt connection or motif that would necessarily connect it to a Māori identity for an international audience. This really resonates with James Wenley's presentation yesterday: "New Zealand Theatre Goes Global: Contesting Identities." He discussed who was officially sent from New Zealand to represent the country at the 2014 Edinburgh Festival, most of them having a connection to New Zealand identity, but what he found was that some of the most successful shows had nothing to do with New Zealand identity and had made it to Edinburgh without funding.

Let's turn to the 2017 New Zealand Pavilion in Venice, as we haven't yet delved into the content and the story behind Lisa Reihana's project. Lisa's work *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*], relates to Māori and Pacific culture, and also to New Zealand's colonial history. Alastair can you speak of the challenges, but also how you went about showing this work to an international audience, while avoiding to present, as Lisa said, "brown bodies on show"?

AC The biggest challenges had nothing to do with those perceptions of content or presentation of colonialism or one culture or another...they were actually technical. One of the reasons why this work was such a compelling show for New Zealand to present is that it was radically bold in a digital context. It's 3.3 trillion pixels, it's 26 meters long, it animates and brings to life 19th Century French wallpaper, it's an astonishing tour de force of art making.

So we actually were very attracted to this piece because we knew no one was doing this and we'd certainly not presented any digital work. So I see this as a contemporary artwork that showcases astonishing digital practice. All the reviews internationally are

talking about that highly immersive magical experience that Lisa creates. And I think it's because of her practice actually. Then of course, the moment you get figurative or narrative work where human beings are involved people immediately see themselves in it. Abstract art is far less controversial, because you can just dismiss it if you don't get it. But if you think you're in it, as the Government sometimes does about the art, they can get offended, and I think also people, in this work there are over 150 characters acting in the wallpaper, they do represent moments in history, but Lisa doesn't set out to actually create a historical record, she's really presenting a series of contacts.

There's one thread that runs all the way through and that's Captain James Cook and the colonisers. Then there are groups of people that they meet, including a group that don't exist, Lisa calls them the Turtle Tribe, she just made them up, because she liked their costumes when she saw them in Cambridge, these beautiful turtle shells. So when we asked her about the Turtle people, she said, ‘oh I thought they were really cool; so I had James Cook go and visit them as well.’

So it's an artwork with a whole lot loaded into it and we were able to engage a lot more people from London, the Royal Society being the original grant maker for Captain Cook's voyages—they joined us and it was very powerful. We also have the Royal Academy presenting Lisa’s work as part of their summer show 2018, for their 250th anniversary. Knowing that we have that heft behind us up here was helpful, but you don't very often get artworks that go right back to the original DNA of the second visitors to your country.



Contemporary HUM panel discussion with artists Bridget Reweti and Erena Baker from Mataaho Collective, Tessa Giblin (Commissioner, Ireland at Venice 2017), Alastair Carruthers (Commissioner, NZ at Venice 2017). Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Contemporary HUM panel discussion with artists Bridget Reweti and Erena Baker from Mataaho Collective, Tessa Giblin (Commissioner, Ireland at Venice 2017), Alastair Carruthers (Commissioner, NZ at Venice 2017). Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.



Contemporary HUM panel discussion with artists Bridget Reweti and Erena Baker from Mataaho Collective, Tessa Giblin (Commissioner, Ireland at Venice 2017), Alastair Carruthers (Commissioner, NZ at Venice 2017). Image: Crystal Te Moananui-Squares.

WW Thinking about how these international events impact the artists and their artistic practice, Tessa, could you talk about how participating in the Biennale might impact Jesse Jones' practice, what does it mean for her as an artist to be presenting in Venice? Then we can look at Lisa Reihana and Mataaho too.

TG Jesse will tell you that everything has changed for her in both making this artwork and staging this artwork. I think that she feels she has become a new artist, a different artist, having gone down that path with the kind of support she went down it with - because it's very rare for artists to be supported to the level of support received when you do the Venice Biennale. So she feels like she's come into her stride and she's never going to take her foot off that pedal again, it's a wonderful thing. She'll tell you as well that she has realised that her practice can stand up internationally. I think that's the only time you really know that as an artist, when you're given the opportunity to be part of it and to see yourself merited by your peers and whether the work can be talked about, be understood and be appreciated.

On a more strategic level it's been incredible, the amount of people who are coming to us and wanting to show this artwork, from private galleries, to institutions, people who are talking about commissioning new work with her.

EB I agree, for us it was the first time we'd seen our work on the international stage mirrored with other artists, so initially we were quite apprehensive and wondering how do we fit in, how our work is going to be received. It was suggested that we stay with the work for the first two days, so we took shifts and hung around so we got to see a lot of people see the work, and that was really lovely. Although sometimes they thought we might have been attendants, asking for directions to other areas of the museum, we had some beautiful moments and some people, yes, they could read the work, they didn't even need the wall text. I know that Bridget and Sarah had a beautiful moment with an elderly gentleman who walked in, walked around the work and came straight to them and said 'are you the artists?' They said yes and he said, 'I get it, water, New Zealand' and he had tears in his eyes. So there were those beautiful moments when you think, oh yes, this fits in this space.

After the opening we were able to see other works around documenta in the other venues. We were really fortunate in our venue to have a lot of space around our site specific work. documenta's huge, 100's of artists are crammed in because they want to show as much work as they can. Bridget, you want to add anything?

BR A really cool thing that we found being in Kassel for two weeks was that we got to meet a lot of other amazing artists and curators, many of the artists at documenta this year are indigenous, so there's a Sámi artist group, we got to meet the President of the Sámi Parliament in Norway, we gave her a Tino Rangatiratanga flag and she said she'd hang it in her office. It was amazing meeting those artists.

There were also quite a few First Nation or Native American artists, one is a collective called Post Commodity and like us they

have a collective voice and it was amazing for us to meet them and hang out with them and share our, kind of similar lived experiences that are so similar but the distance is vast, you know, the Pacific Ocean... We talked about our indigenous collective practice and strengthened those indigenous relationships even more, which for us was one of the coolest things we could have done while we were there.

AC I think the outcomes for every artist chosen that I'm aware of, in the history of New Zealand at Venice to make an exhibition, have been fantastic. There is a period when they have a nervous breakdown and then their practice goes to a whole new level. And where they practice and what they do depends somewhat on the choices they make about where they spend their lives.

Michael Parekowhai has recently made this incredible work on the end of a wharf in the Auckland harbour, alluding to Captain Cook and the housing crisis, it's an absolute knockout.

Lisa Reihana's practice is not widely represented by dealer galleries, and she doesn't generally make small work, this is a monumental piece, that’s come out of the Auckland Art Gallery, been developed to an international standard, for an international audience and it's going to go to the Royal Academy and Musée du Quai Branly and I expect that her future will be working with significant museums and institutions, because that's the style of practice that now she's working with.

Michael Stevenson stayed in Germany and the last time I saw a show of his, he had inserted a light aircraft into the attic of an art gallery on the River Main in Frankfurt and turned the entire building into a camera obscura. So he was doing huge technical physical work. They're all right, where they do it and how they do it, well who knows, they're artists.

Francis Upritchard came back to the Biennale because she was chosen by the curator this year and that's not to be sneezed at. We picked her as a very young artist and she made a show with Judy Miller for the New Zealand presentation and six years later she's in the main exhibition.

PA Tessa, as you pointed out, you moved from Dublin to Edinburgh after you had been appointed as Commissioner and Curator of the Irish Pavilion. Are those cross-national collaborations common?

TG Before I moved to Edinburgh the first thing I did was ask my artist if I could apply for the job. Jesse said ‘go for it Tess’. So I applied for this job in Edinburgh and in the interview I was saying, if I come, I'm coming with the Irish Pavilion, and I'm actually aware that the Talbot Rice Gallery is collaborating on the Scottish Pavilion, so how's that going to go down? There were a lot of stroking of chins around the table and then, credit to the University, also seeing what status it can bring the University at Edinburgh of course, declared that this was going to be no problem. Then I had to go back to the CEO of Culture Ireland, who'd appointed me as their Commissioner and Curator, and I was a little nervous, but she just gave me the biggest hug and said, ‘congratulations, now the Scots are going to come too.’

I loved it, the spirit of growth and understanding, here I am with my New Zealand accent representing Ireland in the first place and now I'm actually going to be Scottish and everybody involved saw this as being a really great story. This even grew further in my heart when I met Alastair for the first time at a Commissioners meeting in Venice, and we pledged to make the most of these cross-overs. Then we ended up being fond neighbours, the Irish and New Zealand Pavilions in the Arsenale.



NZ at Venice 2017 artist Lisa Reihana and NZ Governor-General Dame Patsy Reddy arriving to the opening of the NZ pavilion on Venice’s largest gondola, helmed by 18 rowers. Image: Contemporary HUM.



La Biennale di Venezia President Paolo Baratta, greeting NZ at Venice artist Lisa Reihana and NZ Governor-General Dame Patsy Reddy. Image: Contemporary HUM.

PA While developing and producing Contemporary HUM, we've spoken to many artists and art professionals from Aotearoa New Zealand living or working overseas. From these discussions and our own experience here in Europe we've come up with two contrasting observations that we'd like your view on. One, is that New Zealand produces some of the most critically engaged and conceptually ambitious creative practices presented internationally at current, and as Tessa said, it's really once they get presented in this context that it becomes quite obvious.

The other reflection is that this success on the world stage is perhaps underestimated and doesn't get the full recognition and support it deserves back home. This was mentioned already in the conference yesterday. We've been wondering whether it's a tall poppy syndrome, whether, because of New Zealand's geographical remoteness, it's unavoidably more difficult for people to experience and therefore connect and follow what takes place overseas.

So from your personal experiences, do you feel New Zealand recognises and supports overseas achievement or do we still suffer from some elements of cultural cringe, as others raised yesterday too?

AC Isolation makes people feel lonely and want more affirmation. One of the things that I've discovered since I moved to London is that almost no one in New Zealand can imagine my life here, so they're not thinking about what I am doing much. But I think about New Zealand, because I have lived that life and I can deal with it simultaneously in my head.

In terms of recognition, I suspect that most artists in most countries at the moment feel under-recognised by their own countries and in our country we're doing our best. This year we were incredibly blessed that our Head of State, the Governor General, came to the exhibition and didn't just open it, stayed for four days and worked the Biennale, and she did it because she loves art and believes in artists. One of the most astonishing moments of her behaviour was on the day of the opening when we were given the use of the longest gondola in the world to bring her and our artist to the exhibition. It was rowed by 18 people, an incredible

Venetian craft, it once carried Pope Paul VI and then Helmut Kohl up the Grand Canal, and Dame Patsy Reddy is the next Head of State to hop on board. She sat behind the artist, she put the artist in the front, they were both dressed in Korowai, Māori cloaks, she out-seniored Lisa on every level at this international engagement, but she sat behind her. And I thought that was an incredible, humble act that was more than symbolic.

TG We had the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins attending the Biennale—those are the legacy moments when you know that now every Member of Parliament and TD in Ireland knows what the Venice Biennale is. Every journalist that follows the President's movements knows what the Venice Biennale is. I think these are the moves that you need to make when you're working on these projects to elevate awareness of the visual arts for the future. President Higgins is also something of a national treasure, so from the philosophical perspective is was just so wonderful to have him there.

And it was interesting to hear Alastair talk about et.al: I invigilated the New Zealand Pavilion in 2005 and I totally agree that this was an absolutely fantastic installation. He's not exaggerating at all when he talks about the furore at home either, but I do think that it all comes out in the wash, because I think that the Venice Biennale is now in the consciousness of New Zealand people in a way it might never have been had that whole saga not happened.

EB This question points out the difference between documenta and the Venice Biennale. You guys have worked really hard, Creative New Zealand and everyone who gets New Zealand artists to Venice, to get more exposure and recognition in Aotearoa. But this being the first time New Zealand artists were shown at documenta , there wasn't really much support or recognition from home. We were okay with that, we just do our thing, we made the art, that's what we were there to do.

Similarly to what Alastair mentioned in the beginning, we weren't really there setting off like a sporting team to represent our

country; we were just doing what we do which is make art with our friends and talk about things that are important to us and what we want to see in the world.

BR I want to add something about NZ at Venice. 2007 was when Rachel Rakena and Brett Graham went, which we haven't mentioned yet, and they were part of the curated section of the Biennale. So that was the one year where New Zealand didn't send a representative artist, and for them I think the trajectory after Venice has been vastly different compared to the artists that New Zealand has chosen to present.

The work Aniwaniwa was beautiful, and from the reports that I've heard, related to Venetian culture and the Venetian people. It was an underwater scene of a small town in Waikato that used to have a power plant and then got flooded and I think is now Lake Karapiro. I believe the National Art Gallery of Canada has acquired this work. So, vastly different to what New Zealand chooses to represent and to put a wide, embracing fold around with a comms and media person and people to support it in a wider ecological sense than these two amazing artists could do. These artists mortgaged their house to get the work to Venice, both their houses. They did it and it was amazing, but not a lot of ripple effects. So I think that, yes, Venice is amazing, but it's amazing for what New Zealand chooses to be defined as amazing for everyone.

TG Something I'd add in there is to acknowledge that Venice is the oddity: it's the only Biennale I can think of that that includes national representation. The Biennale is a fantastic event with artists also exhibiting in the main exhibition and collateral projects alongside the National Pavilions and their somewhat ambassadorial role, so Venice is really the outlier to begin with.

AC I was a little political with this Biennale because I'm sick of it being a kicking ball in New Zealand and I'm no longer in the funding game, this is a voluntary role, I thought 'how do I make this as safe as possible for future Biennales.' So I asked the

Head of State to attend as that will create lasting memories inside Venice with a lot of people that will pave the way for us in the future.

But the thing that I'm currently most pleased about is that last week Te Papa released online five teaching modules associated with New Zealand's presence at the Venice Biennale and the 2017 exhibition. They are going to be taught in the curriculum for over 400 000 students as an NCEA course. You can find these Te Papa Teaching Resources online. That will hopefully secure a generation of kids coming through school who have a knowledge of Venice and why it matters.

PA All your responses seem to point to the question of what value is given to arts and culture in New Zealand and consequently the way resources are allocated. I think it's also important to note that New Zealand geographical isolation means it's more difficult for New Zealand-based artists to make their own way to places like Venice or documenta without official backing, because the costs involved are much greater than for example a French artist who could drive over the border and perhaps find their own opportunity.

Turning to the future, who are the New Zealand artists that you would like to see presented overseas, maybe in Venice, maybe in other international group or solo exhibitions on the world stage?

AC I can't say but nearly everybody who was considered very seriously in this round of applications I believe will end up in Venice at some point, life is long for all of them.

TG I'd like to see Mataaho Collective in Venice, I think that would be great. I have nothing to do with it though so I don't really get to say but that sounds like a good idea to me.

EB I don't think I can comment on this.

BR There's lots of amazing Māori and Pacific collectives in New Zealand at the moment, from FAFSWAG to the D.A.N.C.E Art Club, SaVage K'lub, they're an amazing force to reckon with and when you work with them or go to their shows you're stepping into that community, and I think that that is an amazing thing that we can continue to focus on, foster and support.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Produced and published in partnership with The New Zealand Studies Network (UK & Ireland).

Biographies



Lisa Reihana (b. 1964) is a multi-disciplinary artist from Aotearoa New Zealand (of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Tū tribal descent) whose practice explores how identity and history are represented, and how these intersect with concepts of place and community. The subjects of Reihana's portraiture inhabit a world in which the boundaries of past, present, and future are mutable; their identities are likewise unfixed and transgress everyday expectations of cultural and social norms.

She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland University, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1987, and recently completed her Master of Design through the Unitec Institute of Technology. Reihana has an extensive exhibition history in New Zealand and abroad and in 2014 she was awarded an Arts Laureate Award by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand. Her works are held in private and public collections including Te Papa Tongarewa; Auckland Art Gallery; Australia National Gallery; Staatliche Museum, Berlin; Susan O'Connor Foundation, Texas and Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Mataaho Collective is a collaboration between four Māori women who produce large-scale textile-based work, commenting on the complexity of Māori lives. Their conceptual framework is founded within the contemporary realities of mātauranga Māori and together they produce works with single collective authorship that are bigger than their individual capabilities. Members are Erena Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) and Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne ki Wairarapa).

Recent exhibitions include *Océanie*, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France (2019); *Oceania*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK (2018); *Signature Art Prize* Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, (2018); *documenta 14*, Kassel, Germany (2017); *Making Space*, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, NZ (2017); *Noho 16*, Whau Art Centre, Auckland NZ (2016); *Disrupting the Narrative*, Thistle Hall, Wellington NZ (2015); and *International Artist Initiated*, David Dale Gallery, Glasgow UK (2014).



Alastair Carruthers is Commissioner for New Zealand's presentation at the Venice Biennale 2017, *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*. He has longstanding interests in the arts. He was Chairman of the Arts Council (Creative New Zealand) from 2007 to 2012, and was an Arts Board member and then Arts Board Chair from 2001 - 2006. He was a member of the 2010 Ministerial Task Force on philanthropy. He coproduced the rock musical film *Romeo and Juliet: A Love Song* which premiered in 2013. He is a Council member of Unitec, a Board member of the Royal NZ Ballet, and a Trustee of the Te Papa Foundation. He has held several previous governance and executive roles in the private and public sectors. In the 2014 New Year Honours he was appointed a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to arts governance.

Contemporary HUM is the first centralised platform dedicated to documenting New Zealand projects abroad. HUM publishes conversations, reviews and essays on the international projects of New Zealand creative practitioners.



Tessa Giblin is Director of Talbot Rice Gallery at the University of Edinburgh, a position she assumed in November 2016. She is also Commissioner and Curator of Ireland at the Venice Biennale 2017, with the artist Jesse Jones. From 2006-2016 Giblin was Curator of Visual Arts at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, where she curated and led the visual arts program within a busy multidisciplinary arts centre, consisting of two theatres and a gallery. At Project Arts Centre she curated numerous solo and group exhibitions, including *Riddle of the Burial Grounds* which toured to Extra City Kunsthal, Antwerp in 2016, and she made commissioning new work a hallmark of her exhibitions. In 2015 she was Guest Curator of the steirischer herbst festival exhibition in Graz, Austria, where she presented the group exhibition *Hall of Half-Life* over four venues. Giblin was raised in Christchurch, New Zealand, where she attended the Canterbury University School of Fine Arts, and began her curatorial formation through the network of artist-run spaces across Aotearoa. She lives and works in Edinburgh with her family.

HUM

creativenz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa