Luke Willis Thompson in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry

An interview with Contemporary HUM

by

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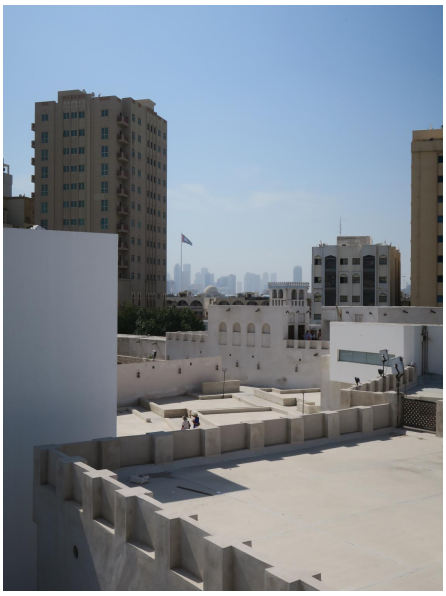
Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, February 2025. Photo: Contempoary HUM.



Tu Neill, Te Ataraiti Waretini, Luke Willis Thompson, Oriini Kaipara and Jim Speers (left to right). Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Luke Willis Thompson, *Whakamoemoeā*, 2024. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation and produced by Ordinary Films and Kura Productions. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Ivan Erofeev.



Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, February 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Megan Tamati-Quennell and Luke Willis Thompson in conversation. Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, February 2025.



Luke Willis Thompson, *Whakamoemoeā*, 2024. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation and produced by Ordinary Films and Kura Productions. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Ivan Erofeev.

In February 2025, Contemporary HUM was on the ground at the opening week of Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, *speaking with the Aotearoa artists who were present.*

In this interview, Aotearoa artist Luke Willis Thompson discusses his newly commissioned moving image work Whakamoemoeā *(2024), which imagines the announcement of a transformative constitutional model in Aotearoa New Zealand on the bicentennial of the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) in 2040. Speaking to the impact of the Matike Mai Aotearoa report, on which the work is based, Thompson discusses the making of the work and the power of giving form to an Indigenous-focused vision of the future.*

This interview has been supported by individual donors and Creative New Zealand. With generous thanks to Sharjah Art Foundation for the press invitation to Sharjah, which enabled HUM to cover this significant event for Aotearoa artists.

CONTEMPORARY HUM You were invited by Aotearoa-based co-curator Megan Tamati-Quennell to participate in the Sharjah Biennial and make a new film work, *Whakamoemoe*ā. When did Megan first approach you and how did those conversations lead to making this work?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON The work was something that I'd been carrying around in my mind for quite a while, and Megan has been a long-time supporter of my work and of me as an artist. She approached me very early, perhaps even before the theme for the Biennial was set. When she approached me, I had really been struggling to get this work off the ground. Part of that was knowing that conversations were paramount to making the piece correctly, and that was going to require some significant pūtea (financing).

I also wasn't getting it off the ground because the idea is really hard and complicated to conceptualise. When I first started saying to people, "I'm going to go home to New Zealand, I'm going to make a TV show about Matike Mai, and that TV show is going to attempt to not just explain the movement or the kaupapa, but attempt to try and participate in its realisation," immediately you have to explain what the kaupapa is, and it becomes so speculative my audience would usually look at me a little lost. I think Megan's deep trust was what allowed it to become real.

HUM Your work takes as its starting point Matike Mai Aotearoa, a working group on constitutional transformation in Aotearoa New Zealand that was convened by the late Moana Jackson. The resulting report proposes several different models for constitutional change, and you chose one to depict within your work. How did you choose one?

LWT There are six proposed models. The model I'm talking about is not necessarily the one I most attach to. It's the model that Margaret Mutu has talked the most about. There would be many more details to be fleshed out, but the simple idea is splitting the governance of Māori and tauiwi (non-Māori), and having a relational sphere by which the two houses would come back together to then deal with the national political questions. But it doesn't go into how complicated or simple that could be. That's partially because I wanted to focus on the day of—not to say the day of liberation—but this day that I yearn for. I wanted to focus on just trying to imagine that feeling, and imagining what it might be like to hear that, and to make something that would help other people to be able to imagine that day too.

Part of that is just cultivating a desire and a belief that yes, there is a viable alternative to the system we have. It would have cons, there would be things that would be less efficient. There are all sorts of ways you could critique the system that I advocate for. But the fundamental point is that it would be a more just system. That's what really appeals to me. I'm quite a student of Moana Jackson, and the concept of justice was so important to him.

HUM The Sharjah Biennial is well known both for being quite political, as well as for commissioning new artworks, which is one of the great things about participating in it. Was your work commissioned fully by the Sharjah Biennial?

LWT Yeah, and the context of Sharjah is significant to me because the system that this video advocates for is not a democracy in a strict sense. It is more of a consensual democracy, like the type they have in Lebanon. It would require different iwi (extended kinship groups, tribes, nations) and hapū (kinship groups, subtribes) to choose whatever political system they want, and to get everyone to govern themselves. What you see in the United Arab Emirates, what you see in Lebanon, what you see across the region, are all alternatives in some ways to those Western ideas of a nation state. It felt appropriate to almost look to non-aligned sources for support to produce something like this.

HUM It's an interesting connection to the political systems in this region. One of the other things about exhibiting work to Sharjah is that, while the Biennial is quite political and inclusive, it's also in a state that imposes some limitations on people. Is this something you thought about too?

LWT My focus is entirely on attempting to think about one version, one dream of Matike Mai. A principle, I think, of that kaupapa is that the West doesn't have the right to tell the rest of the world how to live. So while there are all sorts of legitimate criticisms to be made about every government, it feels true to the project to leave that to someone else. My work is really focusing on that dream in Aotearoa.

HUM You have an international career, yet your work is also very much rooted in the histories, questions and identities that are of the Moana (Pacific Ocean), of the particular region where you're from. What's the significance of international presentation and activity for you as an artist?

LWT I'm really interested in the way problems and ideas can be looked at from another angle, perhaps an internationalist angle, perhaps from another country with a different political system. This kind of adjacent mode of looking at any given situation can itself be this really good thing.



Luke Willis Thompson, *Whakamoemoeā*, 2024. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation and produced by Ordinary Films and Kura Productions. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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HUM How did you go from the initial idea behind the work to the final script, which is set in 2040 and delivered as a powerful monologue in Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) by a single woman appearing in the film?

LWT The first thing was assembling the team of Tu Neill and Jim Speers to help to begin the process, and we partnered early with the production house Kura, run by Te Ataraiti Waretini. One of the very early steps was to reach out to Margaret Mutu and Veronica Tawhai, who had conducted most of the hui (gatherings, meetings) with Moana Jackson. Margaret is a very close friend of Moana's and worked for a long time with him. I wasn't going to make this work without—I won't say permission–but without a green light from them. It was also clear to me that neither would anyone who worked on the film—neither would Oriini Kaipara—so we all had to make sure we came correct, and told the people who needed to know what we hoped to do.

I feel very grateful that they spent many, many hours with us talking about the idea, offering suggestions, some critique, always checking that we were working in a way that was consistent with tikanga (correct procedure, custom), keeping ourselves safe with this kind of work, and approaching others, via this kaupapa, in a way that was principled.

That was, let's say, the initial stage. Then it was a lot of research. In the process of actually writing Oriini's monologue, it went something like this: I wrote an English version, and that version was sort of me, plus my friends and Jim and Tu, and the advice of many people—actually my whole social world would read it and offer lines and suggestions. Then that speech was given to the writer, Aniwa Nicholas, who only writes in Te Reo Māori. We went through the speech line by line over an entire day, and she went and rewrote it from scratch so that it's written in reo.

Once she wrote that, it again moved through other advisors. Quinton Hita offered many suggestions. Oriini herself was invited to collaborate with Aniwa to add lines or rewrite things. She took a section out and replaced it with that pao (song), which I think is a very beautiful moment in the first quarter of the work.

HUM I imagine a hard part of the process was also editing it down to that final form, which creates this really powerful outcome.

LWT We also translated that version back into English, so the English version is also rewritten. It's this almost constant process of moving back and forth between the languages. There are times when the English might be doing something adjacent to what the reo is doing, and vice versa. So while it's only 21 minutes, there's almost two scripts operating simultaneously within the film.

We were lucky enough to be allowed to shoot in front of Te Whare Rūnanga on the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, which is a site of political theatre that every New Zealander knows. It is also a whare that was constructed for that purpose and to always keep Te Tiriti o Waitangi central to life in New Zealand. I spent some time with Apirana Ngata's speech from Waitangi in 1940. Many things are significant about that speech, but one of the things he did that was unexpected at the time was to go into the grievances. He really challenged the expectations of Pākehā (European New Zealanders) present that day by going to that place of mamae (pain, injury).

We used Ngata's speech to give the speech in the work its form, so it has these two halves. The first half of the speech looks back and tries to make a case for the need for change, and to prove that it is a system problem; it's not a question of human nature or human failure. It's a question of what a system does. It seemed believable that at least one of those speeches on Waitangi Day in 2040 would acknowledge the work of everyone who under the system kept Māori and Māoritanga (Māori culture, Māori practices and beliefs, Māoriness, Māori way of life) alive, and so we have this roll call in the middle but that also allows the film to do some educational work and to create a road map that international audiences or kids or young people or anyone can learn from. Then the second half is dedicated to the future and explaining how the new system will work. Because of my positionality as tangata Moana (people of the Pacific), there's a small moment to think about what would be a likely crisis in 2040, which is what politically happens to Pacific

people, who would be very likely arriving on our shores as climate refugees.

HUM Do you think of the work as a proposal or a utopian vision for the future? Did you imagine an international audience, that may already have a utopian idea of Aotearoa New Zealand, seeing this? How were you imagining viewers might receive the work?

LWT I started to really imagine that this scene would be the broadcast, perhaps recorded before the day, on a day that is going to have many more speeches. This speech is the one that is being made and shot to be packaged and distributed globally. This was the moment during the project when I realised how much of an internationalist Moana Jackson was. He looked at the decolonial movements in Africa in the 1960s, he was incredibly influenced by Bolivia during Evo Morales' revolution. He played a significant role in the drafting of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There is a planetary focus. Those are the footsteps I was walking in with this work.

Every part of the work was made with collaborators, and we were always thinking what it would mean for Māori. If it wouldn't work for a Māori audience and a New Zealand audience first, it wouldn't really be worth keeping in the work. But I care about the planet and I think about the ways that this system could be this viable alternative and could be, as it says in the film, a kind of model for others.

HUM The work is extremely moving. There are a lot of significant messages in there that are important for the world to know. Are you hoping to show it in Aotearoa?

LWT I had been mentally working on it for a number of years, and so it feels like today is that new day for me. How it travels home is important. That's something we as a whole team

continue to deeply consider. Of course, we are looking at where to show it.

One thing I'll say is that the work is an imagining and it's a dream and I realised at one point it didn't need to get everything right, because the purpose is to provoke people to continue to investigate Matike Mai for themselves, and to continue to hold on to the dream that this can occur, that a just system is possible, and that political mana motuhake (self-determination, independence, sovereignty) is achievable. I think Moana was really clear that it's going to take this large collective dreaming movement, and so this is one attempt at popularising the dream.

Biographies



Luke Willis Thompson is a graduate of both the Städelschule Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Frankfurt am Main and the Elam school of Fine Arts University of Auckland MFA program. Recent solo exhibitions include; *autoportrait*, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2017, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin, and *Sucu Mate / Born Dead*, Hopkinson Mossman Auckland, both 2016. Recent group exhibitions include *Live Uncertainty*, 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, and *Le Grand Balcon*, Montreal Biennale, both 2016, and *Surround Audience,* New Museum Triennial, New York, 2015. He was the 2014 winner of New Zealand's Walters Prize.

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