B42040A1A1A

18 April 2026

[This text is a conversation between our Director, James Tapsell-Kururangi (**JTK**) and artist Luke Willis Thompson (**LWT**). The artist talk occurred in the gallery which is 7m x 6m. James and Luke are sitting at the front of the space, next to the work. B42040A1A1A is presented in partnership with Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Thank you to Stephen Cleland for supporting the realisation of Thompson's work, for the first time, here in Ōtautahi. The text has been slightly edited for clarity and readability.]

[Mihi, introductions]

JTK:

Kia ora, I wanted to do a ko wai koe? Who are you? But I thought we could do this through a work that we were thinking of presenting last year, which was *Mouvement des Malades*. That could be a way to talk about your whakapapa and who you are. Can you just start telling me a bit about that work?

LWT:

Yeah, who do I think I am? That work, *Mouvement des Malades*, made with the help of Stephen Cleland again, is a work with three components. The first component is a mural that Jean Charlot – a French-born muralist who worked a lot in Mexico – painted. He ended up moving to Hawai'i and became quite well known for depicting native life in this

social realist tradition. He trained with [Diego] Riviera and worked in this quite incredible way and was sent to Hawai'i after the Vatican II reforms, which was a moment for the Catholic Church when there were quite big theological questions at play. You can also read it as a moment when the Church was trying to catch up to the globalised world that was largely seeking independence.

One of things brought about by the reforms was that you could depict Christ in your own peoples' likeness and so Charlot was commissioned to go to an area of Fiji called Naiserelagi.I'm from Fiji, an island called Beqa, that's my ancestral land. Charlot painted this mural and it's beautiful and complicated in many ways and it depicts Christ as a Fijian man and it has this scene composed around him. What really interested me about that scene is the kind of colonial order of power. On one side of the mural are the Fijian-Indian people and on one side are the native Fijian, and then the mixed-race children are on either edge and the first priest of Fiji is in the painting. So it depicts this kind of submission to Christ, and Christ obviously stands, in some ways, for the Western world, or that idea of enlightenment as tied to colonialism. And so this work is just the camera on each panel of the mural. Then we recorded that during a cyclone, well actually after a cyclone. It was the worst flooding in 20 years when we recorded it. So we mic'd the church up, which sits above this hill and then we kind of made this portrait of the rain. The rain, of course, is this symptom of the climate catastrophe.

I had been kind of inspired to make a portrait of the rain because of the poet Dionne Brand, who features really heavily in these works. There's this conversation Dionne has, where she talks about how the natural world has been penetrated, to use an ugly word, by capitalism in every

regard. She says “but maybe I could just still have the rain” and she’s implying maybe the rain is still free, but of course, in a place like Fiji, the rain is very much a symptom. So you watch this mural that doesn’t really change, but we film it for six hours. You listen to the day as this storm comes and the men get ready in the morning and something gets built and a baby and a dog have this long argument and the myna birds scream and the storm comes in and it’s like death metal for a couple hours and it passes and it ends with this prayer, so it has this sonic displacement going on.

Then the last element is maybe a long story but I woke up one day and I was in a hospital. I had the last line of [Frantz] Fanon’s book *Black Skin, White Masks* the line “O my body, make me always a man who questions!”, I had that tattooed all over my legs. I had received that tattoo when I was insane and I had to live on from that moment, and part of that living on was coming to learn that Fanon was this – I didn’t really know anything about him – but I came to learn how he was a kind of radical anti-psychiatrist and he ran a psychiatric hospital for the French regime during the Algerian war, but when he was there he treated the colonial oppressors in the day and then he would sneak in the Algerian rebels at night and so he would treat both the colonised and the coloniser, and he wrote his famous text on decolonisation after going through that process.

As part of this pilgrimage to kind of better understand Fanon, because I felt like I had received his work almost like a tohu, I then went to read his archive in France in Caen**.** It was in that archive that I found this story, this fragment of a story he wrote called ‘Les Anges’ (‘The Angels’) and it’s this description of what an angel is in Islamic culture. He’s writing, I

think, to kind of understand and educate his colleagues that the messengers that the patients might be being visited by aren't necessarily bad. So that's the last element of this work, it's this copy of this Fanon letter which I kind of smuggled out of the archive. I copied it, but you're not allowed to copy anything, and snuck it out, so that is the third element along with the rain. There's this idea in that piece that there are these two sides, these two examples, where people are trying to put things in the local idiom to make – I love Fanon right, I obviously do – but that letter is still a kind of act of putting his thinking as a psychiatrist into a native discourse in order to kind of make the medicine go down better and that's similar to the painting in the church, so I was thinking about that process of indigenising as a way to recolonise in some ways.

JTK:

I think of Mason Durie and Te Whare Tapa Whā as the Māori equivalent and approach to medicine that is through an indigenous, a Māori way, really inducing those moments, I see a slight resonance. I can see the way that you're making that work and you're researching and I was wondering, as we shift over to these two major works that you're presenting here today, could you tell me about the title of *Mouvement des Malades*? And was the approach similar when making *Soro* and *Whakamoemoeā*, is it the same question that you're asking?

LWT:

The title, it's just from a ledger from a hospital, and it describes the 'mouvement des malades' which is a very old-fashioned way of saying 'the coming of goings of the sick'. It's like a patient ledger, but in antiquated language. I thought it was a bit like a dance, sounded a bit

like movement, a choreography, and then ‘malades’ like the afflicted. I guess I thought it could pertain to not being let out of the hospital, and think of many places as doing this dance. To come to these works, I don’t think they had a similar process, in that work I was following a path and I think it’s quite a beautiful work because of the way it just sits together quite lightly. These works don’t exactly have that same lightness to them. What should I say?

JTK:

What’s the show title reference?

LWT:

It’s a bit stupid actually but the B4A1A1A is what’s called the Polynesian motif and it's a kind of genetic tag that is present in the genetic map of everybody from Madagascar to Aotearoa. It's this thing that shows up in DNA that pertains to Polynesian people, largely Pacific people. Then 2040 is the date this work is set, but it’s set in 2040 because Moana Jackson really wanted for the 200th anniversary of the signing of Te Tiriti to be a kind of landmark event. A really formative moment in making this film for me, was watching an interview, when he [Jackson] is asked “when should Matike Mai get started?” and then he suggests 2040, but he’s really talking about a significant step and he doesn’t comment on what that step would be, to kind of go down the legislative path. So then I wanted to think about what it would be to rush forward to that date. Imagining having it done by 2040 and in the title, I thought of putting the day in the DNA, a little bit like an activation date, that might wake up inside, genetically coded.

JTK:

For those who might not be familiar with Matike Mai, what was the work that Jackson did?

LWT:

So that's what this work is based on. Jackson was asked by Margaret Mutu, who was the Working Group Chair for Matike Mai, at that time, to consider what a written constitution for Aotearoa could be. He went away and spent five years, I think 2012-2017, something like that, and he conducted over 300 hui around the country, him and his working group which included people like Mutu and Veronica Tawhai, who both assisted on this film. He went around the country holding these hui and then taking in these conversations, really wanting to hear from the people how they were governed and how they felt this day in their life etc. Then he took these conversations back and synthesised a report, mediated on this report and came up with a suggestion for a recommendation for constitutional transformation. In that transformation, as the film explains, the governance of the country is split and non-Māori or the Kāwanatanga sphere continue as a liberal democracy, if that's what it wants. Then Māori would govern themselves through iwi and hapū. The two sides would have a relational sphere where things were worked out that were kind of relevant to a national scale of things. Essentially this breakdown of peoples would share parliamentary sovereignty, so what is really critical is that the non-Māori side couldn't tell Māori how to live.

JTK:

Why is it important for you to make this work, especially now?

LWT:

That’s a hard one because I think this government's assault on Māori rights and the funding of the Māori world, in some ways, there is this incredible antagonism that I can see between this government and the biopolitical world. So this artwork has a kind of kick now, but it sort of precedes it. I began working at this, in I don’t know if a more optimistic time, in Jacinda Ardern's Prime Ministership. It began with this idea that I had, but I was really unwell and crazy at the time, but I was trying to work with Jacinda Ardern and I was trying to make a film with her. I can’t really remember why, and in that time, I basically started to prepare for this interview that wasn’t even happening, and in the preparation, found Matike Mai and became quite obsessed with this document. I teach a little bit at an art school at Elam and in the class that I’ve taught, I've taught Matike Mai for three years and you know, overwhelmingly people just feel like they’re reading something that gives them hope. We are all in this country, socialised from a very early age to think that inequalities in this country are intractable and somehow natural. It’s horrible to even say that, but we’re sort of socialised to think that you can’t do anything about radical disparities and health outcomes, that they must be slow-moving processes. We basically just get talked out of the idea that there's any revolutionary potential in this country our whole lives, and Matike Mai doesn’t do that, it just very clearly shows you that the systems the problem, the systems all of these things that we survive are by design and it just suggests a just way to do that, and not a perfect way to do that. I have respect for an anarchist’s sentiment; this proposition is still governance. I guess what appeals to me about Matike Mai is trying to imagine living in a just world.

JTK:

What are we seeing behind us?

LWT:

This is the star of the film Oriini Kaipara, MP for Tāmaki Makaurau, but wasn't a member of parliament when we shot this. She is in front of Te Whare Rūnanga, which is the wharenui on the top of the hill at the Waitangi Treaty grounds. And I hope, or wonder, this whare is recognisable to everyone from television. Everyone, I think, remembers this from Waitangi Day on TV, so that was part of my thinking.

JTK:

Yes, I remember from childhood, all of the politicians going out, from things getting thrown at them to [laughs] wondering whose going to run out crying or whose going to get cancelled on the marae. This approach of using media, when I was looking through the longer history of the works you've made, there's a particular method or way of framing your works. I think back to _*Human* (2018) – that was constructed following the same passage as helicopter footage – why did you want to present this as a television announcement at Waitangi? When we were speaking yesterday, I really enjoyed the point where you were talking about it being a familiar place and format that would be able to, almost ground it, or make it relatable to people in Aotearoa.

LWT:

You know, I don't know. It's such a good question. I really do come back to the television as this sort of site, you don't want to say trauma but the television is this… my friend Tavia Nyong'o once talked about how it's only after the end of the ubiquity of television that we could see how

ghostly it was. How haunting it is that this image is beamed into everybody's living room and that tells you what the world is. I think for Māori and Pacific people, the television, when I was growing up, was programmed to hate us. The depictions were awful, and then also it's this place of extreme violence. You see violence on the news, you see the reality of the world or something, and so I have been, in a number of works, thinking about that site, thinking about that haunting, thinking about what my relationship could be to the actual lives of people behind the screen. It's funny you talk about _*Human*, there's a scene in a film I made which is a recording of an artwork by Donald Rodney, which is a small very fragile house made of his skin. In the course of that film, I record using camera movements around it, like an architectural study but it's only got a footprint of two square centimetres. It's a really tiny object, but I shot it with a kind of set-up that made it a very large projection. One of the things the camera does, when I learnt how to use the motion control camera rig, was that actually his wife – Donald has passed on – his widow, she talked about how she saw this shooting, this viral police video, it was of the police killing a young black man Stephon Clark in Sacramento, and the helicopter flies around the house and she just told me that the house in that, the infrared or thermal imaging looked like Donald's skin house artwork, and so I took that from Youtube and realised that the helicopter data was in the coordinates. So I just put them into my camera, and we reenacted that. Nobody knows that in the watching of the film, and I think with these works, I'm not trying to remediate television. I'm interested in what kids watch and I'm interested in TikTok and I'm interested in image-making, which is considered low-brow quite honestly. I thought it would be interesting with these works to break the rules that we get used to in the art world.Video art or

cinema within a gallery tends to want to address duration and attention. These are ideas that I am interested in as well: what would it be to try to match the democratic nature of Matike Mai? That's kind of complicated because it's not strictly democracy that's being advocated in that document but I mean it's really accessible, it really cares about people power, and couldn't that as a mode of filmmaking come into the image? Like a sort of taste-be-damned? I like how these films look but I don't think they look like art films in any kind of way.

JTK:

Oh they so do! [laughs] I'm going to call you out on that.

LWT:

[Laughs] Well whatever, you can't get rid of your own thumbprint but that was kind of where television came in. Also little things, like I find it really interesting that people like Leon Narbey, like Elam grads, started filming the land march and making experimental footage of protest. I think that's quite cool. There's also quite a lot of experimental TV from the States, like Black television or Native television that came out of free channels, free cable channels and so there is a kind of history of decolonial TV.

JTK:

Māori TV.

LWT:

Yeah, which was also a protest, right? Like came directly out of that so,

yeah, it seemed like the right language for the subject.

JTK:

I think you'd said it's the absence of the protagonist that's in the media. Why hasn't a Māori artist made this work? Why are you making this work instead of a Māori artist making this work?

LWT:

Well, it is actually a question I've been asked many times in my career. I think I am kind of like a cultural imposter [laughs], in lots of ways. I don't really know how to answer that, like I don't really have an alibi to that type of question. No one really knows why they are the ones holding the camera, like I think as an artist you go to what is the most pressing, like I don't even think you have that much control over it, you go to something that feels alive to you, that has a magnetic quality to you. I don't really feel like you get to choose what that is and then often that can be not exactly who you are, you might have some kind of adjacent relationship to it. I don't really feel like it is for me to say, like Nathan Pōhio when I talked to him about this series, once said "yeah it's great, you can do it man, you don't have any… if I was to do it, it would be like Ngāi Tahu is doing it. Like I don't have a horse in the immediate race, is that the metaphor I'm going for, I don't have a dog in the fight, I don't have those allegiances. I actually have this different type of allegiance which is I basically think if Matike Mai doesn't occur then the Pacific is done for. There will be so much mass dispossession from the Pacific, I can already see in Fiji how much land is lost, going to those areas and being there through a climate event. I think I've talked about it before but we used to, as a family, send money to Fiji. I remember it because it was a

fight between my parents, but it used to happen every three years and now cyclones happen nine times a year and so the relocation will be massive. Look at the state of the political world today, like do you think it's credible that if large numbers of Pacific people began arriving in boats to this country [they'd be welcomed]? The country would let us drown. It's already letting us drown, so I do think in some ways we have, Māori and Pacific people again have this shared fate. I would say my entry into having a claim to talk about Matike Mai, I don't think I have a right to make this work, I think I have a claim perhaps, a kind of establishment of something, and that is through that shared fate. Also this system, there are absolutely components that are for Māori alone to do and think about but it's a system that would never work without everybody thinking about and operating, it actually can't be only the question of Māori artists to imagine this work.

JTK:

Yeah the real key is Matike Mai, it's not talking about Māori doing it alone it's about everyone and to use the term, to be a good Treaty partner, to really do co-governance, to really remember that the whakapapa of Māori is Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa and that it isn't Māori and Pasifika as two distinct indigenous groups fighting for our rights, it's together. These works are speaking to that and for me it's a really strong reminder and I can see the importance of why you're holding the rākau and making these two seminal works. The second work is *Soro*, it was commissioned by Ngutu Kākā. What I really liked when we talked yesterday was two stories you told. One was this image of your father swimming back into Aotearoa and the second one was you telling me a little bit about where *Soro* came from.

LWT:

Yeah the second film, the second chapter, *Soro* is a kind of reimagining or imagining a fictitious event where on the anniversary of Jacinda Ardern's Dawn Raid apology, a second apology would be made that attempts to make up for the shortcomings of the first, is more or less the premise. I think in some ways just continuing the thinking around Matike Mai, it's kind of a meditation on the foreign policy of Matike Mai, that was how my co-writer of the script kind of began the project. He's a lawyer and I commissioned him to make a set of recommendations, to write a draft that was sort of like, we're thinking about reorientating the foreign policy of Aotearoa and the future towards something more Matike Mai, what would our relationship to the wider Pacific be. The work comes out of this more personal place where I received money from, it's called the 'Niu Dawn Funding Initiative' but it was literally a part of Jacinda Ardern's reparations package for the Dawn Raids. That's quite a burden to receive that kind of funding. I had to go for that money, I felt, because I didn't know any other artist who had parents who lived through that time, like my Dad was quite old, like relatively old to my age, and he lived through that period and he was arrested, or nearly arrested, a number of times. He wasn't deported but he left under that threat or under that shadow. Then he came back into Aotearoa by getting a job on a fishing boat or stowing away and then swimming into the country so he lived undocumented for like ten years. He didn't really talk about that, he didn't really talk about his life anyway, and he was a difficult person and that was not the only trauma that he endured, when I then about a work like *Soro* I think about the need to, for the Pacific community, to be free of the Dawn Raids but also to be free of the cops in their heads and the

militaries in their heads. My dad went to a Native boarding school, that colonial mentality, and anyway he swam into the country and for ten years lived undocumented and I always wanted to know how they all worked, how they all survived, everyone else who was doing that. As children we knew about the Dawn Raids and we were raised to really hate the police – which I think was quite good parenting [laughs]. We were raised with the Dawn Raids, but it was very much like one's own private red zone. Other people around me as a kid didn't know what they were and the Dawn Raids were this thing that felt like they were only known by Pacific people who refused to speak about this event. I think it's different now, but back then, people didn't know about that historical event. Then when Jacinda apologised it was like this searchlight that was placed again onto everybody because suddenly something changes, at some level, because of that. One way I've been talking about it is, I was in London and I was making work about police violence and it would have been so useful to say "oh the Prime Minister apologised to my family for the racial violence we endured", but I could only say that because government magic made it true. I could only say that because that changed it, but why couldn't I say that before? Why didn't I say that before? Why could I not articulate this quite important biographical fact of my father's but also my own, to understand my relationship to state violence or state control and why did it take Jacinda apologising to make it audible, speakable? So this work is a kind of grappling with those things. *Soro*: in her speech [Ardern's] she uses the term 'sorrow' a lot. The speech is very Christian inflected and sorrow, you know, the weeping of the saints or whatever. 'Soro' in Fijian, in Vosa Vakaviti, the I Soro is the part of a traditional justice system where you account for your wrongdoing, when you make your address to your

community and it begins a process of repair and reciprocity on behalf of the offended parties. So there's a way that this work is a pun and it's thinking about that idea of sorrow. I think Alan's [Alan Wendt, the NZSL interpreter in *Soro*] performance is full of grace and full of sorrow, but also I'm apologising too, for something in this work somehow.

JTK:

I'm getting up to the final question and I thought we could take it two ways. Is this work finished for you? Has reconciliation been found with *Soro*, with *Whakamoemoeā,* or what's upcoming?

LWT:

Yeah, no I really think there's another chapter. It's quite useful to drum up enthusiasm by saying it's a trilogy but sometimes I think you could keep making these episodes for each Pacific nation. Edith [Amitunai] was like "are you going to do a Samoan one?" [laughs] and I was like "yeah maybe", so I think there's one more chapter and I guess the strong feeling I've had with that chapter is that it should go to a place in the Pacific that the, you know, Matike Mai somewhat depends, to go back to co-governance, it depends on the 'co-', it depends on the moral growth of the either side, only somewhat, but I think it's worth commenting on. So I wanted to see what Matike Mai might mean in a part of the Pacific where that moral growth is never ever going to happen like Kanaky or West Papua or places that have really been, whose military occupation, as opposed to their settler occupation, has been sort of perpetual. I became really aware in the case of making *Soro*, that we kind of forget our cousins across the colonial language lines or divisions, so that's where I feel like this sci-fi trilogy could go.

The other thing I’m doing which is difficult to talk about in case it all falls over is I’m making an election ad for Te Pati Māori. In a way, what I’m thinking about with that work, is how do you make them come true? As an artist, to just believe your work is going to become true is a useful way to draw energy from it and it’s part of how I keep going.

JTK:

Well, kia ora Luke. If you have a question, you can walk up to Luke and ask him. Thank you for being so generous and it is once again a real privilege to have these two works here. Ngā mihi!