Making a Truce With the Voices in Your Head

Tess McClure
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Inside New Zealand voice hearers' fight to reclaim autonomy in mental health.
meeting room, with a whiteboard in the corner, a large, polished wood table. On the table there are salt and vinegar chips, two carafes of water, a plate of ginger kisses, peppermint tea.

Sarah’s* voices simply arrived one day, she says. For a long time they weren’t there, and then one day they were.

The way she describes their arrival sounds like the discovery of a sudden intruder: like being home alone, and walking down the stairs to find an unfamiliar man standing in the lobby. Who is he? How did he make an entry? Does he mean you harm? Is there any way to make him leave?

“I think one of the big things at first is the fear: who is it? Who are you?” she says. “It took me a while to realise, some of them are me.”

For a while, Sarah’s voices went through a phase of waking her up at all hours of the night. “They’d wake me up, complaining, saying there’s no bloody food in the fridge, nothing to eat. I’d say, ‘go down the road and get a takeaway”
they leave small offerings of food out for their ancestors.” She started leaving out small plates of vegetables. Her voices let her sleep through the night. “I thought, maybe my ancestors are just bloody hungry.”

Sarah has a decade learning to live with her voices, and a gift for metaphor and comic timing.

At one point, she tells the group, she called the marae, to tell them what was happening. “And they said ‘you’ve got a gift!’ and I was like, ‘ok, well can I return it?’”

The room dissolves into laughter.

This is the Hearing Voices network, a long-standing group of New Zealanders who hear voices. Some have a schizophrenia diagnosis, some are sectioned under the Mental Health Act, and subject to compulsory treatment. Some have developed a kind of companionable truce with the voices they hear, others are battling to tug back autonomy from a cast of characters who are controlling or cruel. They meet in this small room, once a month or so, to support each other and discuss their voices: what they’ve been saying, whether they’ve been listening, how they’re coping with the various personalities clamouring for attention. They share the latest information on treatments, the possible side-effects of drugs they might be prescribed.

People use different frameworks to describe their voices. Some might be an especially rowdy subconscious, drawing attention to particular fears or buried secrets. Others hear from ancestors or old passed away friends.
"Sometimes I hear them and think, I’m not going to let you tell me what to do! Because if they’re not going to treat me properly, I’m not going to trust them.”

Sarah, the group’s facilitator, looks around. “How many of you are currently under the Mental Health Act?”

A few hands raise.

“You know, Samantha isn't here tonight, but she just got off the Mental Health Act after five years,” Tracy says.

“Oh she must be so pleased,” says Annabel. She’s wearing a blue beanie, a worried expression, and her support worker is here accompanying her. She raised her hand earlier—Annabel is still under the Act herself. Her voices can be cruel and controlling, and she’s been struggling for some time to keep them under control. This week she’s been making some progress at resisting their instructions.

“Sometimes I hear them and think, I’m not going to let you tell me what to do!” she says. “Because if they’re not going to treat me properly, I’m not going to trust them.”

Her knee jiggles as she speaks. The water in the glasses on the table trembles.

“Other times I think God, I’m a bit scared.”
The group is quietly encouraging. “Well that’s good then, that means you're standing up to them a bit?”

“Hmmm,” Annabel says. “Well, you know,” she looks up. “If they’re not going to behave properly then I can’t trust them with my life. If they tell me to do something and my life is in danger. Then I don't know what to do.”

“Seems like you're really finding your own strength. And how are your voices reacting to that, do they like that? Do they leave you alone, or?”

“Sometimes they just won't be quiet.” She sighs. “It’s just minor things I don’t do what they tell me. I heard a voice on the radio saying, ‘You’re always gonna do what we say, baby.’ And I thought, no I’m not. I’m staying at home.”

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Hearing things isn’t such an unusual experience, really. Between five and 13 percent of adults will have an ‘auditory verbal hallucination’ at some stage in their lives.

But despite this, voice hearers—who most often receive a diagnosis of schizophrenia—still live at the sharp end of New Zealand’s mental health sector. While conditions like depression and anxiety are the subject of extensive ‘talk about it’ campaigns, relatable internet cartoons, and first-person essays, those experiencing the less palatable symptoms of mental illness are still often alienated.
In 2015, the NZ Health Promotion Agency surveyed a representative sample of 2500 New Zealanders about their attitudes toward mental illness, especially those who hear voices. Asked about a scenario of a young man who heard voices joining their local sports club, only 51 percent were comfortable with socialising with him, and less than half - just 41 percent would be comfortable having him for a meal. When given a hiring scenario, nearly one-third, or 29 percent of respondents agreed they’d hire the less experienced candidate with no experience of mental illness instead of a more experienced candidate who had experienced mental illness. 46 percent said they would be uncomfortable with a mental health centre opening next door to them.

On top of the stigma, treatment for schizophrenia, the diagnosis most commonly associated with voice-hearing, carries its own set of difficulties. Those who have schizophrenia on average die around 15 years earlier than those without the disease—an early mortality attributed partly to high rates of heart disease, a possible side-effect from antipsychotic drugs. Those with a schizophrenia diagnosis are 2.5 times more to likely die a premature death, even when deaths by suicide - another health risk for those with the condition—are accounted for. This year data was released to show 13 New Zealand deaths from ‘slow-gut’—bowel obstructions as a side effect of Clozapine, one of the most-commonly prescribed treatments for schizophrenia.

But despite the risks, and the challenges, and the stigma, an increasing number of New Zealanders living with voices are sharing their experiences, taking back some control of their treatment from the medical system, and reclaiming the labels that were once used to stigmatise and dismiss them.
It’s Thursday night at Biddy Mulligan’s Irish Pub. The front bar is quiet, almost empty, bar a few locals who have taken over a booth down the back. They look up briefly at the doors to the back bar. The stained glass panels are shaking with bass thump. Someone is sound-checking a distorted guitar. Through the doors, the noise is ear-splitting, the place is crowded. MAD PRIDE, MAD TO THE MAX, one poster proclaims. “A celebration of mental health recovery, post-apocalyptic party fun,” says another.

Around 100 people are here tonight, for a party put on by Mad Pride Aotearoa. The Mad Pride movement started in Canada, a kickback at community prejudice when people with history in the psychiatric system moved into the boarding houses around Toronto and Ontario. They aimed to reclaim terms like “nutter” and “mad” from the tabloid newspaper headlines, and make them their own. The old crowds used to hold bed runs, where they’d push hospital gurneys through cities to raise awareness about the lack of choices in psychiatric treatment.
Arana Pearson has been here from the beginning. He was one of the originals who started Mad Pride in New Zealand around a decade ago, he has a shock of white hair, and a broad, trouble-maker's grin.

“I think madness is an authentic human experience,” he says, leaning back into an armchair in the pub's smoking courtyard. “People have been going mad since day one. Anyone who's got a mind knows that it could malfunction at some time. We just hope it's not me.”

He chuckles gently.

“The thing is, it was me.”
demonstrate.

“What is it? Maybe it's a cat scratching at the door or it's a possum in the ceiling. Could be a branch scraping on the glass.”

Imagine, he says, if you'd heard the sound, but his fingers weren't there at the table, making it.

When it happened to him, he decided there were rats in the walls. He heard them often, in different places. The sound followed him around. One time, he was talking to a psychologist who asked, “So what do the rats say?”

“I said, they don't say anything, they're rats!” He laughs. “Like, you must be mad, thinking these things talk. It's not Mickey Mouse.”

But even if they weren't talking, the rats won't be quiet. Eventually Pearson starts drinking, to try and shut them up. For a time, it works.

“But after a while of that you end up with two problems,” he says. “A drinking problem as well as a rat problem.”

The more he attempted to ignore them, the more the voices built up. The rats were especially persistent. “At the height of all that stuff for some reason I couldn't get them out of my head and I decided they were in my head, eating my brains. I looked at my arm one day and it burst with rat fur, it was terrifying.”

After some time hospitalised, and getting professional help, Arana eventually learned to cope with what he was hearing and seeing. Some of it was a matter of reframing the voices, of listening to them, seeing them as guests who were persistent for a reason: possibly with important matters to raise. He now has eight voices, and the conversation is ongoing. Several are negative. They say awful things, terrifying things, things he doesn't want to repeat on tape. But others are friendly, gentler companions.

“One's a mate of mine that died when I was a teenager. He was in my rock and roll band, wanted to be a rock and roll singer. We were in a band but he got cancer and died. Then blow me down, later on, after all these distressing voices, he starts talking to me in a quiet voice. He was a very positive voice; it wasn't a negative. Some of the others were terrifying.”
Today, he and his voices simply co-exist. “They don't go away, but they don't impact me the same today. We've got an understanding,” he says. “Part of it was me working things out and changing some meanings. Part of it was me actually engaging with the voices and talking about them. Once I started doing that it helped.”

The silence surrounding voices is the worst thing, he says. “We teach people don't talk about voices, don't talk about that rubbish,” he says. “You end up with people with these really lonely internal experiences that aren't shared and a behaviour modification programme: look better, do better, don't annoy us when you're mentally ill.”

Mad Pride does the opposite. “I really like the idea of reclaiming the word mad. It has been used over the years to put us down, to marginalise people, to minimise our experiences”

Tonight, he says, “instead of it being a put down, a discriminated label, we're elevating it. We're changing its meaning to something to celebrate.”
Ana Jakeman points to a small face on the family photo wall. “That’s me there,” she says.

“That’s me with a mullet.” And there: she points to a small, grinning face, about six years old pulling cross-eyes.

“That’s me there.”

Ana has heard voices since she was a small child—some of her first memories are of seeing or hearing things that weren’t there. Maybe the child in the picture was already hearing and seeing things when it was taken. Back then, her voices were gentle, ephemeral, comforting.
She puts out a plate of Oreo biscuits and makes cups of tea. Her voices are now a constant presence in her life. They’re talking to her now, she says, sharing about the journalist who has come to visit.

“They’re saying, she seems all right, she speaks a little bit of te reo. She’s got a nice colour.”

A colour?

“You’ve got a nice light blue colour.”

As well as hearing voices, Ana has frequent visions—colours, floating lights, large birds and creatures.

Later, as I focus the camera to shoot her portrait, she startles slightly, distracted.

“Oh you’ve just changed from blue, to having these amber sparks around you,” she murmurs. “Lovely.”

The first time she told someone about what she was hearing and seeing, Ana was 11 years old. She told a school-friend, she remembers, and the girl just looked at her. “She just gave me the look like—are you for real? Are you all there? Are you serious? That sort of thing. Then she sort of distanced herself away from me and then started talking behind my back about me.”

She didn’t have a language for it then, but it was her first experience of the stigma surrounding mental health, and from then on she vowed not to tell others. “I realised, okay this is what I’m gonna get. Shut your mouth, don’t say nothing, act like it’s not even happening. Don’t share, don’t tell anybody.”

As she got older, her voices stuck around, and not all stayed positive, she says. She also has a group of negative voices that emerged as she introduced her mind to more adult concepts—sex, drugs, rock n roll, an abusive relationship. “I call them the mob,” she says. “Because either they come in a mob and...”
“In the past, they had taken me a really, really dark place where I ran to a psychiatric ward, I’d run to respite care, residential care, anywhere I could try and help, get some help to get them away from me.”
“But I don’t allow them to do that now.”

Ana was institutionalised for the first time after the birth of her daughter. She was experiencing extreme sleep deprivation, experienced a psychotic episode, and was hospitalised. It was the first time she'd told anyone about her voices since she was a child. She was diagnosed as bipolar schizo-affective.

But since then, she's learned not just to live with her voices, but to thrive. An accomplished painter, sculptor and art teacher, she's now managing her symptoms happily, with a mixture of medication, psychiatric system help, art therapy, and embracing her Te Ao Māori heritage.
Ana uses art to help manage her symptoms. IMAGE: Tess McClure

“I found out that you can take as much medication as you like, you can go to as many rehabilitation places and psychiatric wards, at the end of the day it would be up to me to tame those things and control them,” she says.

While she’s learned to tame the mob, there are other, positive voices, who she enjoys, and wants to stay. They’re the opposite to the Mob: warm, gentle, familial, and truthful. It’s hard to articulate what it’s like hearing from them, she says—it’s not so much that they speak, as they share with her.

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At Mad Pride in Hamilton, the show is heating up. A group are singing an adapted version of Jackson Five’s ABC to uproarious laughter.

“It’s easy as ECT [electro-convulsive therapy]
Simple as DHB [District Health Board]
DBT [dialectical behavioural therapy], baby ECT now”
Arana Pearson is moving through the crowd, stopping to have a quiet chat with whoever's having a smoko. Over time, he's gone from patient to provider: he works with an iwi health provider out in Opotiki, and he's driven a crew from there all the way to Hamilton for the concert. One of them is Steven, a gentle-faced, softly-spoken man dressed all in navy blue.

Steve hears voices too. "It's hard to see who's talking, when they're talking and someone else is talking and it's pretty hard. Sometimes when they're talking I answer them and someone goes, 'Who're you talking to bro?'"
Steve unfurls a small piece of paper, crumpled from the centre pocket of his parka. He smooths it, stands straight-backed and reads:

_I saw things that were freaky before the voices started their games,_  
_Legacy of winds, heard with drifting voices surrounding from all angles, to deafening inside their head when hands are over ears and they had no names._  
_Nearly going totally insane in hearing so many at one time._  
_Then all of sudden a big shut up and they were gone._  
_Still today it's hard to be normal with echoed voices._

“I found it quite hard talking to people about it, because they would've thought I was lost, so I would write it in a poem where they would listen and they go 'oh is that what you were talking about!' He gives another small laugh.

“Yeah, everyone gets to listen when it's in poetry but when it's ordinary talk, they don't wanna know. Unless it's written down.”
This is the case for many in the Mad Pride movement: over the years they've turned to the arts as a means to express ideas and experiences that might not come across well when you just flat-out say it.
Today, she has her canvas set up in the living room, and a woman’s face is slowly emerging.
“Using art as a therapeutic way to deal with my mental health issues has been awesomeness,” she says. “It’s the only way I can describe it. Being able to express myself through arts and craft have helped me understand what I’ve been through and what I’m going through.”

She lays out her larger canvases, entitled *Nga Whakawhitinga*. It’s the Māori term for schizophrenia, roughly translated to mean standing at the crossroads. “I like this Māori term better,” she says. “Because it’s about choices. I’ve got control. I have choices.”

Ana’s mum, Maria, has seen her through the lows of her illness, but has also taught her the special value that voices can have in Māoridom. Maria teaches her prayers which comfort her and keep ugly voices at bay. She is tiny with age, and sits with Ana at the small kitchen table, whispering a karakia, curtains drawn against the hot Whangarei sun. “Matakite. That’s what we call it. When you hear things.”
Maria Jakeman teaches Ana karakia to help her manage her voices. IMAGE: Tess McClure

Rediscovering te reo, and Māori understandings of voices through her mother has also been key, Ana says.

But more than any label, or term, she wants to reclaim her own identity. “I am who I am and I’ll claim that I am me,” she laughs. “I want to reclaim that because before I wasn’t who I was, you know. I was a shadow of who I was and now I prefer to claim my own identity, not words that describe my identity. It does not define me.”
Ultimately, the conversation needs to change, Arana says. It’s time to move past just attempting to reduce stigma, and start actually embracing the experiences of people with different mental health conditions.

“Let’s find out the value of this experience and let’s have this identity that includes this part of me, don’t keep it aside. It’s not an illness, it’s not something to be ashamed of,” he says.

Steven writes a poem to perform at Mad Pride. IMAGE: Tess McClure
“The experiences are rough, they're real, they're raw, but they're instructive.”

It’s about saying: “I might be mad but I’m not stupid. The thing is I’m not believed often, just because I’ve been diagnosed. People dismiss my own experiences and so tonight at Mad Pride, we're reclaiming our humanness.”

*This series was made with help from Like Minds Like Mine and the Mental Health Foundation.*

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Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Auckland
Suicide Crisis Helpline – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
Healthline – 0800 611 116
Samaritans – 0800 726 666

*Names of Hearing Voices network members have been changed to protect anonymity*
Mad Pride: The Fight to Reclaim Mental Health
I AM MĀORI, I AM MODERN

Building an Urban Marae for Gang Members, Wanderers and the Displaced

By Kahu Kutia; photos by Chevron Hassett
Apr 26 2018, 2:32pm

Pare Sannyasi is continuing the work her dad started in Wellington 40 years ago.

This story is part of VICE NZ’s ongoing series on how Māoritanga is being adapted to thrive in 2018. To read more stories about young Māori breaking new ground and creating a world that is both unconventional and drawing on traditional values, go here.

The people of Tapu Te Ranga Marae in Island Bay, Wellington have a whakatauki for their marae: Ko te tangata i hanga i te whare, engari ko te tuara o te whare i hanga i te tangata—Those that build the house are also built by the house.
Parehinetai (Pare) Sannyasi and her whānau, the marae is home all year round. The whānau care for the marae and through this pay homage to the gang members, wanderers and disenfranchised peoples who found self-identity and a community within its ever-expanding walls. Unlike most marae around New Zealand, which generally have a single storey symmetrical meeting house, Tapu Te Ranga is 11 stories tall and cascades cartoon-like down a hillside.

The idea for Tapu Te Ranga came to Pare's dad, Bruce Stewart in the early 70s.

“My dad did heaps of things in his life, and a lot of them are in the marae,” 24-year-old Pare told VICE. “His trophy hunting, his diving and all that stuff. But all the things that he was doing in life made him eventually go to jail.”

When Pare's dad was in jail—already in his 40s—he was still disconnected from his culture. Jail was the first time he had seen so many Māori who were comfortable with their Māoritanga. Enamoured with the ways these men held himself, Bruce went in search of more knowledge at the library. The only Māori book he could find was an issue of the Department of Maori Affairs journal *Te Ao Hou*, and an article by Cliff Whiting. It read something along the lines of:
It was an idea that eventually led to the creation of Tapu Te Ranga. Before that, Matua Bruce spent most of his time in Pigeon Park, next to Manners Street in Central Wellington. It was a hub of disenfranchised Māori men who had move to the city for greater opportunity, while being cut off from home by their whānau.

“There was a system put in place in this country that drove young Māori out of their homes, out of their iwi lands, because they made it so there were no jobs there. So if they wanted to provide for their whanau they had to go to the big cities.”

They were stranded in the city. Bruce began teaching some of the young boys carpentry from his Newtown shed. Around this time two of the boys got caught late one night with a racist slur from a Pākehā man. The slur resulted in the boys beating the man to death.

The Wellington public and the media were quick to attribute the violence to a serious gang problem within the region. “The boys in the shed...
Sir Michael Fowler, mayor of Wellington at the time, came to Bruce's shed to discuss what the city could do. On Christmas Eve, he brought a loaf of bread and a pound of butter, and over kai they talked about how this situation could be improved.

“People felt there wasn’t a place in the whole of Wellington where people felt comfortable being Māori.”

“People felt there wasn't a place in the whole of Wellington where people felt comfortable being Māori. There wasn't a street they could walk down where they didn't have to look at the ground.”

“My dad went out in search of some land, and the sisters of the Home of Compassion who are our next door neighbours were selling land. They had 52 acres and they sold us 50 and kept two. And I'm not sure why they sold the land to my dad cause I wouldn't have. Because he had a $25 deposit for 50 acres of land but he was also flanked by gang members when they were signing the contracts.”
is like walking into Harry Potter. It is the greatest childhood tree hut you could ever imagine, and then 10 times more bizarre and beautiful than that. She said that at some point, it had originally been planned as a conventional marae. With a wharenui, wharekai, and toilet block.

They said that they just kept going, they built until they felt healed enough to walk away. And it ended up being 11 levels high. And obviously it’s not finished, it’s still going.

The story is in the building. On the front of the building, long panels of red and blue frame the windows. I heard once that this was because rival gang members were in competition to see how they could get the most of their colour on the building. I asked who the purple panels were done by. “The hippies”, she says.

They were displaced Māori and travellers, and nomads, and people who were at absolute breaking point. Tapu Te Ranga was built out of necessity.

Tapu Te Ranga isn’t iwi affiliated, because it was built by people who weren’t from Wellington.

“They needed a place where they could get married and have their children’s birthdays and then be buried. Because they could no longer do that at home.”

Today, Tapu Te Ranga follows along a similar kaupapa—be a self-sustaining community and welcome those who need a home. In a single year they will see thousands of people through its walls, all of whom can take lessons from the many rooms in the marae. However much like the people who occupy it, Tapu Te Ranga Marae is always being built. Wellington is prone to earthquakes, and currently corners of the marae stand unoccupied while they are repaired to meet regulation standards. Pare and her whānau are leading a campaign to raise the substantial sum needed for Tapu Te Ranga’s restoration and upkeep.
house. At opposite ends of the marae, feminine and masculine energy have their own spaces to hold Tapu Te Ranga in balance. There's the wharekai. The whare where children's art is kept. Pare holds the whakapapa of those closest to the marae. Kirihika is the whare where most guests will sleep during their stay. Pare tells me that as a design plan for one of the rooms, Bruce gave his sons a piece of paper with two inverted triangles on it. From that symbol they designed a whole room.

The wharekai is filled with memorabilia left there by guests to the marae. “Most of the time you're in the wharekai, you'll be sitting across from a stranger. So it's important to have things on the wall that create conversation, whether it be controversial, or funny, or really interesting. That's what our wharekai is about. It's about having those awesome pieces that make people want to talk about it.”

The marae itself is built from 99 percent recycled materials. Pare will assure you that that isn't because it is trendy, but because that was the only thing people could get their hands on at the time. Currently they are working on adding tiny homes to the lot, and have just secured two pigs to add to their growing collection of animals within the community. I ask her what it would mean for the marae to be completely self-sustainable.

“A lot of people when they hear self-sustainable they think ‘oh cool, we'll do a vege patch’. But health is being able to take care of your own health, your own people’s health. With your own resources. It’s a part of being self-sustainable. And we have got a long way to go, but that is our goal.”

Follow Kahu Kutia on Twitter and see more photos by Chev Hassett here.

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Kassie Hartendorp is Rewriting the Narrative on Being Queer and Māori
Artist Kauri Hawkins is Bitingly Honest About Māori and Pākehā Today
Artist Kauri Hawkins is Bitingly Honest About Māori and Pākehā Today

By Kahu Kutia; photos by Chevron Hassett
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"If we're going to move forward, we’ve got to look at ourselves."

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When I first saw an exhibition of Kauri Hawkins’ work, I couldn't tell if it was an art exhibition, or a dingy student party that I had walked in to. It was at Playstation Gallery, just off Dixon St in inner city Wellington. There were construction materials all over the ground. A group of young people were sitting on a picnic table in the middle of the room drinking warm beers.
When Kauri was young, he told his parents that he wanted to be a builder. Because builders made things. When he was ten, builder became artist.

“Its the same concept, I just dont want to work for someone”

Kauri is a recent graduate of the Massey University Fine Arts programme. He’s currently working out of a studio at Toi Pōneke, and last year he exhibited his work as part of the Hobart Biennale. When I talk to him, he is unapologetically a realist; he deals with his own lived reality in his work.

His mother is Cook Island and Pākehā, his dad is Māori, from Ngāti Porou.

“I grew up on the East Coast of New Zealand. My whole life was basically just going along state highway two. I used to live in Fielding and like small rural towns, like this place called Paihiatua.”

It’s an upbringing that has shaped the work he chooses to do now. The duality of life in small predominantly Pākehā towns, and Te Tai Rāwhiti, an area that is such a strong hub of Māoritanga. Kauri attended Gisborne Boys High School. It’s one of the few schools in the country where you can do whakairo—carving—through official assessment standards. While he appreciated the whakairo work of his
“When you're like 15 or 16 you don't really care about traditional frameworks to working.”

One of the first actual art works he created is a flag made from bandanas. It's inspired by David Hammons' **African-American Flag**, and patches together a New Zealand flag from paisley bandanas. Among other things, they are a popular motif of New Zealand gangs. The art work received a heavy critique from his lecturers.

“They said, ‘this is so negative, and you're talking about gangs' and I was like yes it is! This is how you perceive us. ... If you look at my work, you would see that it's not exactly all positive, it's not exactly bringing out the best in New Zealand, you know. I don't think that will help us. If we're going to move forward, we've got to look at ourselves. What can we work on? What's holding us back?”
bring out that I know people are going through.”

It reminded me of the story of Tapu Te Ranga marae in Wellington, and how easy it is for a gang narrative to be pasted on to the lives of brown people. Similarly, I think Kauri has an eye focused on the many brown bodies that walk through this city, unnoticed and unrecognized. Kauri talked about coming back to university, after a stint as a kitchenhand. He noticed the construction workers conducting repairs on the university buildings. They were predominantly Māori and Pasifika.

“**When you go into the city in Wellington, the only Māori people you see are the ones in hi vis. They’re sort of invisible.**"

“When you go into the city in Wellington, the only Māori people you see are the ones in hi vis. They’re sort of invisible. I saw that as a subject matter. They don’t live here, but they’re making all the buildings that are around here. They’re just coming in for a job then going back out to the Hutt or Porirua.”

In the post-Treaty of Waitangi era, so much of the efforts of Te Ao Māori are focused on decolonisation. On re-emphasis of a Māori worldview. One that utilises old knowledge and old stories. Connecting to the traditions that anchor us as a people. But Kauri is the third generation in his family not to speak Te Reo. He grew up around his iwi, but pre-colonisation Māoritanga is not his reality.

“I walk down the road and see roadworks, and that’s a reality. That’s what we’re actually doing every day. It’s not caught up in something that has happened 1,000 years ago, or something that’s not real at the moment.”
Like most of his work, it's a viewpoint that invites controversy. It is biting realism, and despite any critique, it's a viewpoint that is relevant to many Māori. I ask him how he feels about decolonisation movements. He takes it with a grain of salt. He cannot see the logic because a lot of decolonisation ideology is spread through social media.

"Mark Zuckerberg bought an island in Hawaii, that's the ironic thing. That's what a coloniser does."

Kauri agrees that his Māoritanga has shaped him at the core. If he was raised somewhere else, it is likely that he would be making different art. As he puts it, "all of the great New Zealand artists are Māori". But Kauri wants to be "more than a Māori artist". I ask him what he means. He doesn't want to be undermined in his success because someone things he is the brown guy.

“Yeah, there's always this underlying racist tone—'You're only a great artist because you deal with Māori things. He doesn't actually have substance in the art world because he's the token Māori guy. He does korus and stuff.'"

He brings up the legacy of artists such as Ralph Hotere. Kauri wants to show his work at the Venice Biennale. I think at the heart of this work, the intention to democratise art. Make it accessible for Māori and Pākehā, curators
“I think it’s a good time to be a Māori artist that’s for sure. It’s become a trend I guess. But like, fuck it, let’s run with that. If you’re going to pay me, I’m going to do some work. Doing art in the 70s and 80s, getting into galleries was a hard thing unless you’re Ralph Hōtere or something like that.”

His goals are practical too. Make enough money to survive, and to set his family up for life. Be an artist and also a curator, so that art spaces can be built on his terms.

“I want to find common ground in between New Zealanders as a whole. I don’t like to separate things.”

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