

# TRUENO TROPICAL FAITITILI A MOTU TROPICAL THUNDER

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**T**HE FOLLOWING IS A CONVERSATION that took place in Melbourne on 23 August 2013 between Léuli Eshraghi and Lucreccia Quintanilla.

Ua ou iloa lelei ma ofoina atu le agaga fa'aaloalo i augā-Tamā o Bunjil ma Waa, le 'ele'ele ma le suāvai aemaise o tua'ā ma le au matutua o aso ua tuana'i, nei ma taeao auā le lumana'i ole nu'u o Kulin. Oute matuā fa'afetaia le fa'aauauina o la'u sa'iliga fa'a-le-aganu'u ile nei vāega matagofie ole lalolagi.

Lucreccia: We have been having these discussions informally for quite some time now in which we have talked about ideas around complexity, and difference in terms of artistic strategies and institutional approaches to 'difference'. Before we begin should we start off by talking about our backgrounds, after all, they have led us to having this very conversation.

Léuli: My family has a dual Sāmoan and Persian cultural inheritance as well as access to neighbouring traditions through living here. My upbringing was mainly in Yuwi and Bundjalung countries and on our 'āiga lands in the Sāmoan archipelago. I've always felt grounded and able to relate to different peoples.

My 88-year old tinā has always opened her home to our many extended family members and adopted children left aside by society. She now has a limited radius, but is as active as ever, coordinating the āiga economic activities, cultural responsibilities, craft production, and homework/church schedules. We are the only family amongst the overseas branches to have lived a few years in the homeland, to connect to this cultural framework for a quality period.

We've always maintained particular Persian cultural traits as well, even, as you know, the only kabob, pizza and bistrot fare in Āpia in the mid 90s. The strong role my

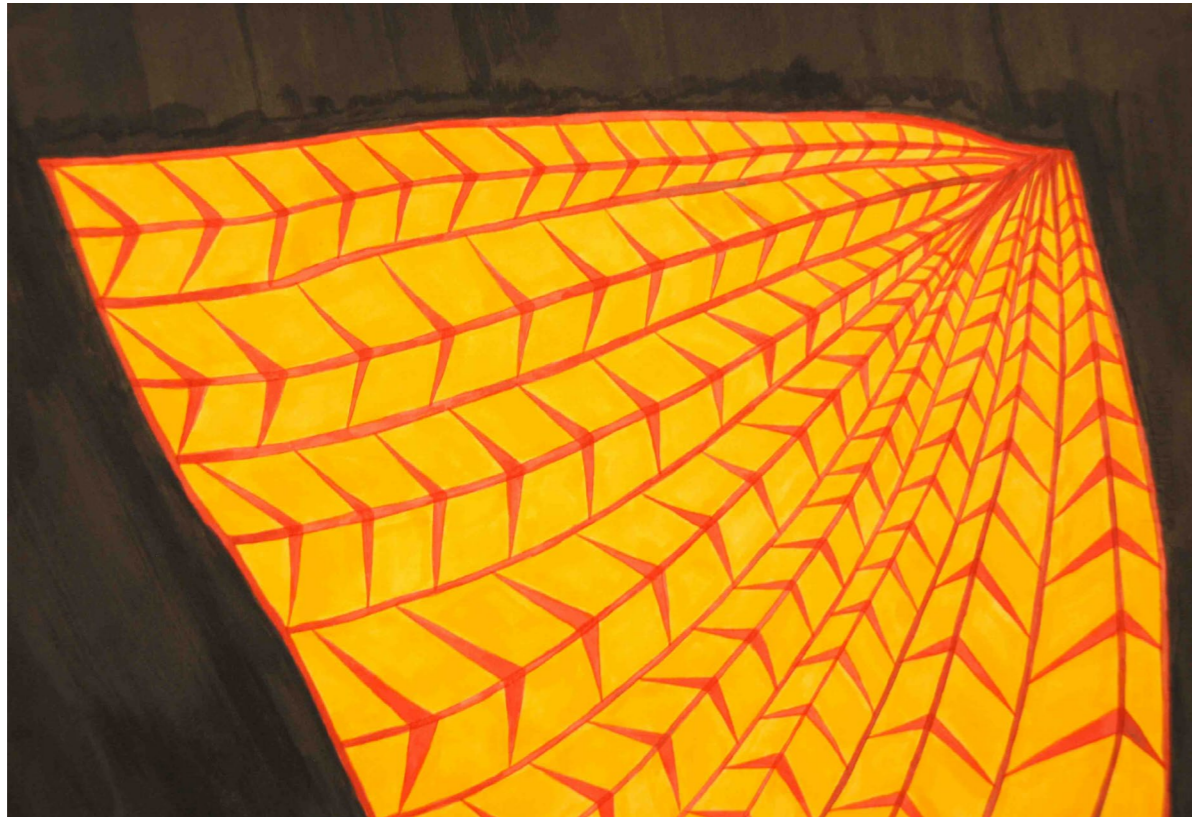


matriarch tinā plays has always been an anchor through our changing circumstances in Australia, compared to our Persian relations scattered around the world due to state-sanctioned persecution and cultural genocide. Living in Kulin country today, I'm aware of the weight of cultural and political genocide enacted here, and my place as a guest in unceded country.

Lucreccia: My family is from El Salvador, but like many Central Americans we did our stint in the U.S. for a few years. We lived in Hempstead, New York in a mainly African-American community and at that time in the 80s there was a large influx of migrants from Central America and so at school we were taught mainly in Spanish. My teacher was terrific at identifying student's interests and this is how I learnt African dancing and was taken on excursions to MOMA and the Guggenheim, which in turn introduced me to modern and conceptual art.

After a few years we moved back to El Salvador. My grandmother is now a centenarian! She had a traditional craft business and like your grandmother she was the matriarch when she was more up and about. The house was always full of extra people, employing and providing a place for some of the local queer community to work. This, when you think about it, is a big deal in such a macho culture. Part of the reason for this was pragmatic as my grandfather was a bit of a womaniser and having women in the house other than family members was asking for trouble.

I became really close to one particular man, Danny. He was amazing, made the best huevos rancheros and was the best dancer. James Brown had nothing on Danny! My grandmother would protect him during the war, as he was constantly being



detained and abused by the military. Danny moved on to dance in the city. For me, he was a talented creative, an artist in a difficult time and place.

Léuli: It's interesting you talk about artistry in a difficult time and place. Same-sex attracted and transgendered people in Sāmoa have survived very trying times in the last two hundred years. The nurturing and housekeeping role of fa'afafine and fa'atama in village performance (fa'afafine usually enact the primary role of taupou in our many group dances) and in each family's daily life hasn't shifted thankfully. Although the missionaries and German, American and New Zealander colonial administrators did try. We are a proud people.

The ultimate evangelical success and the acute cultural brainwashing by the missionaries have created a sexually self-censoring culture. As same-sex attracted cisgender and also as transgendered islanders, we continue to struggle to regain acceptance and respect in our homelands.

Lucreccia: It's like starting from the beginning again when you had such an advanced culture.

Léuli: Our bodies continue to be controlled by the Christian God-fearing discourse of Victorian England, now by our own class of pastors, deacons and priests.

Lucreccia: Yeah so much judgement! It's predatory and insidious, this missionary business in Central America as well.

Léuli: It's like we are nominally economically and politically independent, in both El Salvador and Sāmoa, but we are yet to regain sovereignty over our cultures, spirits and bodies. Let's get back to your story of getting here.

Lucreccia: Ok, in the 90s we migrated to Australia when I was in my teens. By this stage I had already developed a sense of self that was about to be shaken yet again. I found myself in Brisbane speaking jive and wearing tight jeans with big hair and in a very different cultural space altogether.

So Léuli, considering our backgrounds as just two examples of how this complex yet very common migratory experience is, how do we begin to position ourselves? Or is this idea of positioning a superfluous one?

Léuli: I think any positioning depends on what is granted to you by your socio-political context. There's a measure of agency in our access to cultural contexts. We don't necessarily have to 'represent', to 'translate' our work and/or cultural/linguistic background to a broader Australian audience. This country should be used to, and comfortable with, the idea and reality of thousands of cultures, languages and worldviews by now! Australia has always been a multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic continent (even during the White Australia policy's heyday).

Lucreccia: I guess rather than negotiating or explaining our identity all the time the focus should be more of an awareness of the ever-changing nature of culture, and our role in changing and continuing it, at the very least just by living and as artists, actively shaping it by creating.

Léuli: There isn't a single Art History, there are many, beyond a colonial-era canon where New York, Berlin, London and Paris dominate a network of post-colonies.

Lucreccia: Definitely. Cultures outside this canon aren't advantaged or more valued because of continuing social, political, and geographic imbalances.

Léuli: Some of us feel and act on a heightened sense of cultural responsibility, to depict, represent, challenge, reference and advance, multiple contexts and aesthetic traditions. These reflect the complexity of our lived and imagined lives, from here and 'far' across the ocean. Like any structure, there is an old guard in contemporary visual and performing culture in Australia. These heavyweights can act and speak from positions of free choice, privilege and institutional backing.

Lucreccia: Mi madre organiza un grupo de mujeres latinoamericanas, fueron invitados a tomar parte de un proyecto artístico. The community had to present 'traditional' stories for the artist to work with. The artist was not a Latin American artist but an Anglo-Saxon artist whom they had never met. The assumption is always that 'diverse' communities are not able to represent themselves and need mediation. An assumption that is completely wrong as there are of course, many artists living and working within Australia of all backgrounds. Whether or not they make work about their communities directly, I would argue that they are, by default, still engaging with their culture. El grupo negó la invitación. Se sentía ofendido – ya que hay muchos artistas latinoamericanas de quién escoger. Para los organizadores del evento, no había una reflexión propia sobre la comunidad y su desarrollo cultural contemporáneo.

Léuli: Sí, entiendo. Creo que también, el fondo del problema, es que nuestra sociedad no pierde tiempo a pensar en su diversidad de manera activa (televisión, diarios, parlamento, cine, teatro, museos, galerías). El discurso público sobre la autoridad y la representación de voces diferentes no ocupa un lugar. Hay demasiado ejemplos de proyectos recibidos con un modelo de acción y de presión indirecta.

Lucreccia: It should not be the case that our words hitting paper here unwittingly become some kind of political act. It should be a given that as human beings we are entitled to multiplicity, to understanding that cultures are living organisms. Not unlike the culture you find in yoghurt. We're not only driving home the point of our freedom of movement, expression, thought, but also to participate in, and continue

culture. Our languages, verbal and non-verbal, our aesthetics, our ways, are our living cultural inheritance, they are not italicised Other. Nor are they static.

Léuli: Absolutely. I can't stand that some people still subscribe to outdated, romanticised stereotypes of the exotic/erotic Other. We are made up of the places we grow up in, and where we live now, as human beings have always been. We hold many cultural memories, and more, in us, just like Anglo-Australians still hold dear their European ancestry and values.

Many 'multicultural' and 'culturally and linguistically diverse' structures (as if the British Isles were ever populated by a single dialect and a single people!?) cater for a superficial 'understanding' and limited connection for 'mainstream' consumption. This assumes that representation follows demographics of majority and minorities. I think audiences expect complexity and diversity on walls, stages, and screens. We are all suffering a dumbing-down of cultural content and delivery.

Lucreccia: My friend has a story of when she was working in the Australian Embassy in Tokyo and finding out that the classic Aussie saying 'fair dinkum' has Chinese linguistic provenance. There's complexity right there!

### Ways of knowing

Léuli: My work as a contemporary artist means exploring and depicting transnational cultural memories, family histories, spirituality and connection to place in Oceania and the Middle East. I'm islander and Persian, but not a Pacific or exotic artist. My plural cultural inheritance grounds me to know and live beyond the surface detail of identity politics, beyond stereotypes and nationalisms. We create and maintain in-between or liminal spatial relationships in the ways that we know and make artwork, interplaying languages and cultural practices. I prefer the term Oceanian to Pacific, as a new and reclaimed term. For me, Pacific is a politically, religiously and culturally biased term, due to colonial impositions, ever since our ocean was first named Mar Pacífico by Fernão de Magalhães.

I'd like to see develop an art critical framework within English and other global languages that empowers our communities, reframes our work with integrity and voice, and strengthens our multiple sensibilities of the self and of the shared.

Lucreccia: Yes there is a prevailing approach to reading art with assumptions based on cultural clichés. Which of course many artists have tried to challenge though the use of those very clichés. I am thinking of artists such as Juan Davila here in Australia and other artists internationally of that generation who used deconstruction as an approach to art making. I would say that with this conversation here, you and I are trying to find another approach to work with.

Because, I guess the act of presenting art in whichever form has as an implicit generosity within it. Perhaps we are suggesting that a reciprocal act of generosity from a viewer would be to expect complexity from their art experience. Something you would never find in advertising for example.

Léuli: Yes I think tempering the generosity within an artwork is key to an alternative way of doing things. I take inspiration from the Yolŋu, Ngan'gikurrungurr and Gija contemporary-customary art presence in Australia, in that works are often understood to an extent based solely on their conveniently named 'abstract' or 'stylised' qualities, across artforms. The un-initiated audience does not have access to, nor can it aspire to know, the spiritual and cultural complexity of the artworks. Beyond romanticism, I'm thinking about works made primarily for external consumption that don't 'give away' their essence, that don't 'package' their knowledge and cultural content. These are still read and appreciated within a Western art setting, but require legitimate cultural engagement to understand.

Lucreccia: I completely agree. A layered approach to experiencing culture, with the understanding that there are aspects of works that we are not ever going fully understand and that this is ok. I am reminded here of works by artists at Arts Project Australia where I worked as an arts worker a few years back. In particular I am thinking of artists who are non-verbal and as viewers we have little cues as to how to read the works in terms of artist statements, which can be quite liberating.

### Undoing 'other'

Lucreccia: A large part of my research is based on sound and is heavily influenced by the Jamaican sound system culture and other music movements more familiar to me such as cumbia. Having never been to Jamaica, my experience of dancehall culture has not necessarily been acquired through lived experience in-situ. I sense that is how culture naturally develops. There is the approach of superficially 'lifting' motifs because they are aesthetically interesting and then repeating them or re-contextualising them. Although much can be learnt through this way it does have its limits. As an outsider, careful knowledge of protocols and your position in an often-implicit power dynamic is important if you're working with another culture's visual language. Personally, I find it quite a problematic approach if these things are not considered. I am thinking more and more that engaging with meaning on a deeper, more complex level is the best way to go.

Léuli: Yes! I feel like there is a certain solidarity with, and an appeal towards Other narratives and perspectives in our globalised world, but the deeper engagement that brings authentic work isn't always the norm. Language and motif use is

important to me artistically, meaning engagement, deconstruction and choice. Oceanian writers 'Epeli Hau'ofa, Chantal Spitz, Nicholas Kurtovitch, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Marcel Melthérorong showed me early on, that multiple ways of being can be voiced, that our palate of humanity is thankfully diverse.

Lucreccia: I am reminded of Rebecca Ann Hobbs' work, an artist from an Anglo-Saxon background deeply engaged in the South Auckland Māori/Islander dancehall culture, which she directly references in her video works. If we were to stick to the idea that one should not touch someone else's culture in fear of being criticised or labelled apparently imperialist or even worse that as artists we could only reference 'our' own stories, culture would truly be in a very static and moribund state. Rebecca's work is more so linked to a strong position of authenticity, integrity and acceptance in the South Auckland context. She makes work based on what she knows, her partner's world and the surrounding network of her peers.

Léuli: I really enjoy the quietly playful spirit, to me, of the actions in her works, just like the nonchalant environment she makes work within. I have a number of relatives, artists, and family visits in mind when I think of South Auckland. It's funny when you think that our ease and comfort with saudade, salsa, dancehall, différence, and more, can be seen as strange. These are our normal, as they are for many others, just not necessarily with pride of place in our main socio-political and cultural spaces. These are our everyday, concurrent with everything else.

Lucreccia: Well yes, our genealogies, our inherited cultures are still very much alive within us. We converse with this cultural genealogy on a daily basis as well as the new ones that we adopt as we resettle elsewhere. No culture is perfect after all so we take some things from one and leave some others behind. I also think it's also about articulation. For example I went to see Steve Reich last year and was blown away by his conceptual approach to his minimal style of composition. He references, many things, from life in New York to the Holocaust. I have been known to go crazy over Sonic Youth, I am still getting over the fact that I sat down on the same seat in a car as Kim Gordon once - It was still warm! At the same time listening to cumbia feels like home, even while this may seem a little culturally romantic for some, especially in an academic environment. It's all part of the complexity inherent in my experience and the major driver for me being an artist. I find it particularly difficult to apologise for this sort of 'transgression'.

Léuli: It's incredible, isn't it, the weight of the desire to prescribe the ways you can be! Genealogy is a foundational one for me. My practice in writing, painting and printmaking is based on personally significant ancestral figures and sites of cultural memory. But there is nothing to do with identity politics or a search for self. It's ridiculous that we sometimes have to make this disclaimer. There's no need to

project one's desire for possession of exotic/erotic alterity onto artistic expressions. In upcoming works, I'm needing to communicate a lengthened sense of mourning and grief relating to Persian family figures and sites of cultural amnesia/murder. These things are so universal and specific at the same time, we all have these bricks of gleaned culture and experience.

### Responsive places

Lucreccia: In terms of potential models that are culturally productive and reflective, without sounding utopian here, I would say that we have a few already and there should be more. I am thinking we should all have artist-run spaces in our sheds and lounge rooms! Institutionally as well, we need more curators like you around! Curators who aren't afraid to touch cultural complexity, with all its potential miscommunications that this might bring.

When I was younger I really loved the Chicano art movements of the 1970s but this approach of working with a label can be very limiting and reductive, there are many artist run spaces being set up to create important interstitial spaces. Spaces between – that reify that liminal space – rebut against the prescriptive, stiff mode of some more established institutions and spaces.

Léuli: Fresh Gallery Ōtara, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, The Ownership Project, Ondru, El Tarro, Papakura Art Gallery, 4A Gallery, Burji Arts, RISE, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, INIVA, and Blak Dot Gallery are some interstitial or liminal spaces that are responsible and responsive to aesthetic traditions outside of the canonised Western framework, while still relating to it. Some choose to debunk or challenge established ways of viewing, creating and curating, while others subscribe to these.

Lucreccia: The key has to be diversity of spaces and approaches, for a healthy cultural ecology.

Léuli: Why can't all sorts of makers who aren't aware of the discourse and conversation in places like art schools be accepted and taken seriously? Do their artistic acts unsettle the Eurocentrist focus of our curricula and investments too much? There are multiple fields of study leading to inward approaches to art criticism, making and curating.

Lucreccia: There needs to be less fear on both sides. There is the anxiety that you need to fit in with Western art historical frameworks but this can be a dead-end road when there is a more dynamic dialogue to be had.

Léuli: I think it's also a paucity of openness, and a lack of humility towards

established cultural traditions from here and elsewhere. As a wealthy country, I think it's incredible that we don't have really strong collections and blockbuster exhibitions of historical and contemporary art made in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. The movements in-part driven by artists that led to the development of progressive, democratic societies in the 1980s and 1990s in South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa, Chile and Argentina are highly significant for us as a composite country on the way to growth from a mixed bag of injustice and inequality. In our neighbourhood, these remain major defining moments that influence our own contemporary culture, slowly engaging across our self-harming tyranny of distance.

Lucreccia: I do agree that we should be able to see the world in its multiplicity as audiences here within Australian arts institutions. But more broadly I think that as we highlight this multiplicity we will be able to become more comfortable with these complex spaces, which we naturally inhabit anyway. This should help do away with the need to expect cardboard cutout representations of who we are.

### Biographies

LÉULI ESHRAGHI is an artist and arts manager based at The Ownership Project and The Wilin Centre, VCA and MCM, University of Melbourne. Léuli was on the organising board of the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival launched in 2013.

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LUCRECCIA QUINTANILLA is a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts at Monash University. She has exhibited both nationally and internationally. Léuli and Lucreccia both worked on the publication Mapping South edited by Dr Anthony Gardner.

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