

# The tongue to them

## Darcell Apelu, Martha Atienza, Heidi Brickell, Buck Nin, Yee I-Lann

### 26 July – 4 October 2025

The family of Austronesian languages encompasses a huge geographic spread that is spoken across Southeast Asia, Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, and Madagascar. A family of languages is determined by a common ancestor language and enough shared particulars that give form to a dialect, such as its structures, semantics, and vocabularies. In the particular constellation of languages present in this exhibition, there is a common translation for ear—Malay's *telinga*, Tagalog's *tainga*, and *taringa* in Te Reo Māori. If language shapes how meaning is heard and made legible, this exhibition asks what conversations can be had when a root tongue is shared?

*The tongue to them* brings together artworks from Aotearoa, Malaysia, and the Philippines that articulate experiences of colonial impact from the vantage points of Oceania and Southeast Asia. These two regions have a particular experience of establishing the collective self in the face of a hostile other and contend with the continued ramifications this has for these respective locales. The exhibition title is taken from the poem *Our Mother Tongue* by Filipino nationalist and writer José Rizal, whose writing and ultimately execution by the Spanish colonial government is considered to have inspired the Philippine Revolution of the late 1890s. Although not directly involved in the planning or conduct of the revolution, Rizal is considered a national hero of the Philippines and speaks to the power of a people's language as a tool for resistance and a symbol for freedom.

Encircling the left wing of the gallery is Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann's *TIKAR/MEJA* (2019–2020). In this configuration it consists of 30 woven tikar, or mats, each depicting a single table. The tikar are woven by women of the historically nomadic and sea-based Bajau Sama Dilaut people, the traditional makers and knowledge holders of this craft. For Yee, the table represents the administrative violence of colonial control. It speaks to the authority of the pen in deals done

Artspace Aotearoa is a public contemporary art gallery, founded in 1987 by artists and arts workers. We platform contemporary art practice, develop discourse, provide resources for artists, and connect the Aotearoa context with international conversations. Our mission is to critically explore contemporary life, led by artists.

Artspace Aotearoa  
292 Karangahape Road  
Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

artspace-aotearoa.nz  
+64 9 303 4965

Artspace Aotearoa

and land carved across treaties and maps under the guise of gentlemanly negotiation. The tikar themselves counter this, retaining the open community platform of the mat. *TIKAR/MEJA* also assert the table's status as foreigner—*meja* originates from the Portuguese *mesa*, which remains untranslated in the Philippines from its Spanish origins. Similarly it is a transliteration in Te Reo as *tēpu*.

The work of Martha Atienza and Darcell Apelu in this exhibition operate in a mode of satire and subversion as resistance against hostile forces. In *Anito 1* (2011–2015) and *Anito 2* (2017), Atienza documents a Christianised animist festival held on Bantayan Island where she lives. In the Ati-Atihan festival, the local community respond to often contentious current events in the form of parody. They dress up and perform reenactments relating to issues of climate change, Catholic imperatives, migratory labour, and President Rodrigo Duterte's violent war on drugs. In Apelu's *Ingress/Egress* (2025), she takes the form of a Pā waharoa or gateway and inverts its sense of welcome. In this work, her waharoa is built as an obstruction rather than a passageway, a reminder that a warm welcome has contingencies.

One linguistic trait that exists across almost all Austronesian languages is the distinct forms of *we*, *you* and *them*. In particular, there are usually at least two differentiations for *we*: an inclusive (listener included) and an exclusive (listener excluded). In Te Reo the inclusive and exclusive pronouns are *tātou* and *mātou*, respectively. These languages' ability to immediately establish which collective is being spoken to and about lends itself to the acts of subversion in Atienza and Apelu's works. If language has an ability to establish shared cultural understanding, then tone and nuance for native speaking audiences are able to more quickly pick up who's in on the "joke" and who's out.

Spatial orientation systems in Austronesian languages sit on two axes: a monsoon axis and a land-sea axis. Within a pepeha, alongside establishing one's whakapapa and iwi, the speaker will also announce their maunga and awa. Pragmatically, a listener can make a close approximation of the speaker's geographic coordinates within Aotearoa. Buck Nin and Heidi Brickell's practices can be situated on this land-sea axis. Brickell's installation *Either Way Ka Mate* (2023–2025) consists of rimurapa forms that can be interpreted as a hammerhead shark and a deep sea squid. This references the whakatauki "Ka mate wheke, kei mate ururoa", which translates to "Die like a shark, lest you die like a squid" and seems to prioritise the tenacity of the shark over the floundering of a squid. Yet the wheke in Te Ao Māori, and through other parts of the Pacific, is a symbol of curiosity, exploration, and discovery.

Nin's *The Polluted Land* (1993) is also included in the exhibition and will remain offsite at its home at the head office of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa Te Puna Manaaki in Te Awamutu. The four panel painting portrays a group of figures walking away

from a smokey cityscape and into the arms of their tupuna, which speaks directly to its site's history—that the land Te Wānanga o Aotearoa was built on was once a dump site and now hosts one of the largest tertiary education providers in Aotearoa. Nin was instrumental in the institution's foundation and Māori art education at large and framed his work as bringing Māori and Pākehā worldviews together. This position speaks to Nin's navigation of Te Ao Māori in Western systems, that of formal education and the art world of the time. Brickell is also motivated to resist binaries by bringing worlds together; embracing the characteristics of the shark and the squid to hold many wisdoms at once. In these practices, their land-sea directionalities don't prescribe territories or prioritise one mode over another but rather orients them to the world at large.

Resisting power often demands collective action. Through the various and nuanced *we*, the artists in this exhibition seek to define the borders of who makes up these collectives. In bringing these practices and artworks into orientation with each other, a constellation of locales is connected by shared linguistic and cultural understanding. Can the proximity of language establish neighbourhoods based on dialogue rather than shared boundaries?

1

Buck Nin

*The First Arrivals To Aotearoa*, 1996

*Forever Buck Nin*, 1998

*The Polluted Land*, 1993 [offsite]

Lithograph print on paper, framed, 71 x 90.5 cm, edition 37/200; publication on the occasion of a major retrospective of the same name originated by the Porirua Museum of Arts and Cultures; acrylic on hardboard, 4 panels: 2 of 240 x 120 cm, 2 or 60 x 240 cm.

A framed lithograph print and a publication sit in the gallery, while *The Polluted Land* remains offsite at the Te Wānanga o Aotearoa Te Puna Manaaki head office in Te Awamutu. This is viewable during their opening hours Monday to Friday, 9.30am-4.30pm. Courtesy of the collection of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, Te Kōpuni Kura

2

Darcell Apelu

*Ingress/Egress*, 2025

Cut perspex in Cherry Satin, 230 x 262 x 110 cm; floor vinyl with matt laminate, 130 x 1330 cm.

The form of this perspex structure takes its shape from waharoa, a gateway or entrance, commonly found at marae or pā. The floor vinyl acts as a pathway while referencing visual warning systems.

Courtesy the artist, commissioned by Artspace Aotearoa.

3

Yee I-Lann

*TIKAR/MEJA*, 2018–2023

Bajau Sama DiLaut pandanus weave, commercial chemical dye, dimensions variable.

Weaving by the nomadic sea-based Bajau Sama DiLaut people: Sanah Belasani, Kinnohung Gundasali, Noraidah Jabarah (Kak Budi), Kak Leleng, Kak Horma, Maccik Bilung, Roziah Binti Jalalid, Dela Binti Annerati, Erna Binti Tekki, Abang Bobby, Adik Alini, Adik Aisha, Darwisa Binti Omar, Adik Marsha, Dayang Binti Tularan, Tasya Binti Tularan, Shima Binti Manan, Adik Umaira, Abang Tularan Sabtuhari.

Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery.

4

Heidi Brickell

*Either Way Ka Mate*, 2023–2025

Rimurapa, rākau, cotton twine hand-dyed with acrylic, ply, shellac, adhesive, dimensions variable.

This installation brings together works previously exhibited separately at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū in 2023 and Hasting Art Gallery Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga in 2025. In this presentation they form a wheke, ururoa, and pou.

Courtesy the artist.

5

Martha Atienza

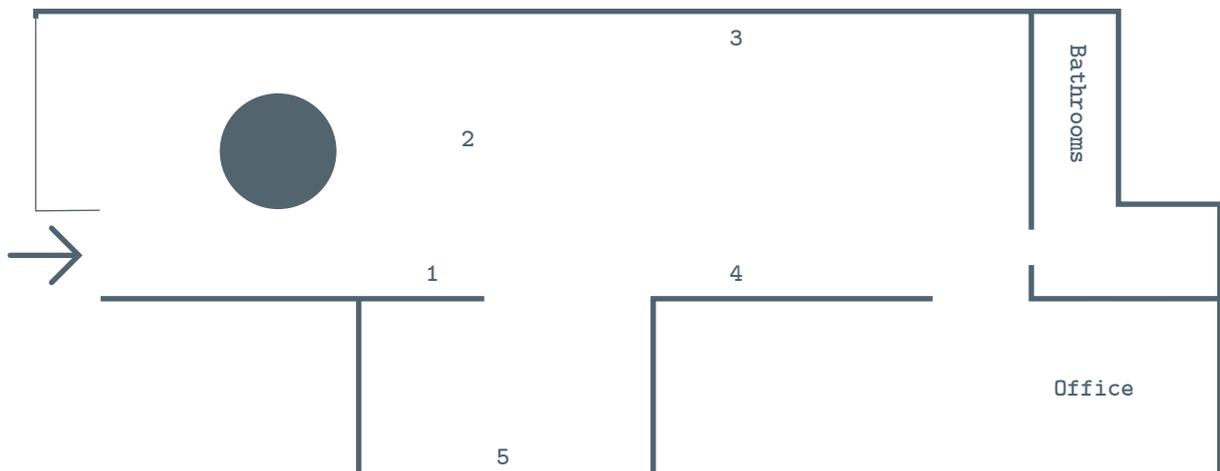
*Anito 1*, 2011–2015

*Anito 2*, 2017

Single channel HD video, colour, audio on speakers. 8:08 minutes, looped; single channel HD video, colour, audio on speakers 7:18 minutes, looped.

These works were shot over several years and document the annual Ati-Atihan festival on Bantayan Island in Visayas Philippines. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery.

Karangahape Rd



East St

Darcell Apelu of Niue, Pākehā and Te Atiawa is an artist based in Tauranga Moana. Her practice investigates social and cultural ideologies within Aotearoa with reference to themes of legacy and embedded ancestry. In 2019, Apelu was the inaugural recipient of the Te Tuhi/Yorkshire Sculpture Park Residency in the UK and in 2017 the recipient of the BC Collective Lafaiki residency in Niue. Notable exhibitions include *Carry Me With You* (2024-Current), SCAPE, Christchurch (2023-2024), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; *The Death of Prosperity* (2020-2022), Te Tuhi and Tauranga Art Gallery Toi Tauranga; and *Ocean Memories* (2021) at the Kunsthalle Faust Germany.

Yee I-Lann lives and works in Kota Kinabalu. Yee is a leading contemporary artist recognised for her ongoing research into the evolving intersection of power, colonialism, and neo-colonialism in Southeast Asia. Often centering on counter-narratives or ‘histories from below,’ she has recently begun collaborative work with sea-based and land-based communities, as well as indigenous mediums in Sabah, Malaysia. Yee has exhibited widely in museums in Asia, Europe, Australia, and the United States. Notable retrospectives include *Fluid World* (2011), Adelaide’s Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, and *Yee I-Lann: 2005-2016* (2016) Ayala Museum in Manila, Philippines.

Martha Atienza lives and works in Bantayan Island, Philippines. Atienza is a Dutch-Filipino video artist exploring the format’s ability to document and question issues related to the environment, community, and development. Her video is rooted in both ecological and sociological concerns as she studies the intricate interplay between local traditions, human subjectivity, and the natural world. Atienza won the Baloise Art Prize in Art Basel in 2017 for her seminal work *Our Islands* (2017). Recent biennales and triennials include the 17th Istanbul Biennial (2022), Istanbul; Bangkok Art Biennale: *Escape Routes* (2020), BACC, Bangkok Honolulu Biennial: *To Make Wrong / Right / Now* (2019), Oahu, Hawaii ; and the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2018), QAGOMA, Brisbane.

Heidi Brickell is of Te Hika o Pāpāuma, Ngāti Kahungunu, Rongomaiwahine, Ngāi Tara, Rangitāne, Ngāti Apakura, Airihi, Kotirana, Ingarihi, Tiamana and based in Ōtaki. Brickell has a background in Kura Kaupapa Māori education and Te Reo Māori revitalisation. Her practice embraces experimental materials, processes and forms as means to dovetail and mātauranga tuku iho as a fluidly evolving continuum. Recent solo exhibitions include *Wā We Can’t Afford* (2025) Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga Hastings Art Gallery; *A Koru is a Trajectory* (2024), Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, Te Whānganui-a-Tara Wellington; and *PĀKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL* (2022), Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, The Physics Room, Ōtautahi Christchurch and The Engine Room Te Whānganui-a-Tara Wellington. Brickell was also included in *Aotearoa Contemporary* (2024) Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery and *Springtime is Heartbreak* (2023), Te Puna o Waiwhetū Christchurch Art Gallery.

Buck Nin (1942-1996) of Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Toa, and Chinese descent, was an artist, educator, and curator who was at the forefront of the Māori art movement in the 1960s. Nin contributed to the revitalisation and promotion of Māori art practice in museums, art galleries, and the education system. He exhibited extensively in solo and group shows within New Zealand and overseas from 1963 onwards, including *Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake - Artists Construct New Directions* (1990), National Art Gallery, Wellington, and *Te Waka Toi - Contemporary Māori Art from NZ* (1992), which toured throughout North America. Nin was a key figure in establishing tertiary status for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa.

## Events

Wednesday 30 July, 6pm

Deep dive: Martha Aienza and Yee I-Lann in conversation

Saturday 2 August, 2–3pm

FAM Art Tour

Thursday 7 August, 6pm

Question time: Billy Tang

Saturday 9 August, 9am–5pm

Visit to Te Wānanga o Aotearoa in Te Awamutu

Saturday 13 September

Audio Described Tour, 11am–12pm

Wednesday 17 September, 6pm

Performance lecture: Songs of Peoplehood with Balamohan Shingade

Saturday 4 October, 2pm

Artist talk with Darcell Apelu and Heidi Brickell

Thursday 31 July – Thursday 2 October, 5–6pm

Thursday Date Night Tours

Reading Room

Each river every word, Gregory Kan

To learn more about these events, visit [artspace-aotearoa.nz](http://artspace-aotearoa.nz)

To read the text by Gregory Kan, visit [artspace-aotearoa.nz/reading-room](http://artspace-aotearoa.nz/reading-room)

To request a tour for your group contact [info@artspace.org.nz](mailto:info@artspace.org.nz)

### Acknowledgements

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To support our work and enjoy additional events consider joining a Supporters Circle.

To learn more about this programme, visit [artspace-aotearoa.nz/tautoko](http://artspace-aotearoa.nz/tautoko)

## The annual question

Each year Artspace Aotearoa sets one question which our exhibitions and events orbit in the company of artists and audiences. Across the year, we explore what this question offers us and what artworks and their authors can weave together. In 2025, we ask “is language large enough?”

In Lubaina Himid’s 2022 drawing made directly onto the wall of London’s Tate Modern she asks, but also states: “we live in clothes, we live in buildings – do they fit us?” When I encountered this prompt, it turned my attention to the essential infrastructures of daily life: places in which we shelter and what covers our bodies. It struck me how each part of this prompt straddles the technical and the erotic frameworks for forming our world. In asking her question, Himid draws a diagram arcing the zones of the technical and the erotic, subsequently highlighting the friction existing between them. This same friction is activated when language shuttles between the organisation of bodies, space, and culture as a crucial instrument in shaping and scaling our lived experiences. In asking this necessary question “is language large enough?” Artspace Aotearoa invites its audiences to consider contemporary society—from the public to the private, the artistic to the bureaucratic—and language’s charged role in defining these domains.

Language—whether written, aural, somatic, or otherwise—is not a fixed object but is highly unpredictable,

fluid, and consequently evolving. Despite this fluidity it can be wielded to establish and entrench what Audre Lorde has described as the “mythical norm”.<sup>1</sup> In this scenario, a certain type of subjecthood is established as standard and subsequently prioritised, often at the cost of another kind of subjecthood.<sup>2</sup> If territory is the outline that defines the differentiated but interconnected zones of life (the public, private, artistic, and bureaucratic), then language forms or flattens the contours of these zones as it determines possible ways of relating. In other words, through repetitive use, language constitutes individual subjects by providing frameworks for sets of behaviours that are normalised. This becomes a feedback loop: we relate to one another through and within the languages we have received or accessed. The often invisible impact of contextual access also describes the limit of language.

While this analysis might sound discouraging, encountering the limit of language and its capacity to capture the wholeness of life may propel precedent-setting opportunities. The limit then acts as the enabling context where the capacity for language to become a vital force in any process of transformation is underscored, whether at the scale of the individual, organisation, or community.

1 Audre Lorde. “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. (London: Silver Press, 2017), pg 96.

2 Audre Lorde expands: “In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure. It is within this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.”

In his article “Rethinking Free Speech” Moana Jackson describes spoken language on the marae where two forces are activated: the force of the atua Rongo (deity associated with peace) and the force of the atua Tūmatauenga (deity associated with war). Each atua plays a specific role in establishing points of contact between speakers which cover the gamut of expressive capacity, from confrontation to reflection to nourishment. Jackson states: “In that situation, both the right to speak freely and the exercise of the right itself are ideals to be protected because the marae exists to nurture relationships.”<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from Jackson’s description of marae oration that requires relationships to be at the foreground and the establishing of a specific argument in the background, this year’s programme considers relating in the capacity of being in relation with one another and with the world. “Is language large enough?” therefore also asks how to construct a condition for life flexible enough to contain the span of the technical to the erotic? How can a condition for life be built that deviates from the entrenched “mythical norm” that Lorde so starkly warns us of? What languages are required to conjure deviations from the standards of form, of thought, of body, of desire?

Tenuous political, social, economic, and environmental terrains might adrenalise our current moment but they also expose the hegemonies

allowing these conditions to develop at alarming rate and scale. Artworks and their makers, however, wield scale with other tempos in play: the intimate, the critical, the imaginary. Rather than exploding at exponential pace, these tempos enable the emergence of a beat that is varied and compensatory. Across 2025, the programme at Artspace Aotearoa activates artwork and artistic positions from multiple contexts, diverse mediums, and between generations to consider the potential of forging an otherwise, a deviation—however provisional—through the potency of communicating in the language of contemporary art.

Ruth Buchanan, Kaitohu Director  
January 2025

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- Ali Smith. *Artful*. (London: Penguin Books, 2012).
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<sup>3</sup> Moana Jackson. “Moana Jackson: Rethinking free speech.” E-tangata, August 19, 2018, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/moana-jackson-rethinking-free-speech/>.

Each year we set one question which our exhibitions and events orbit in the company of artists and audiences. Across the year, we explore what this question offers us and what artworks and their authors can weave together. In 2025, we ask “is language large enough?” You can think of this as one exhibition in four parts, as a score played across a calendar, or maybe even as a forest. Join us.

2025

Is language large enough?