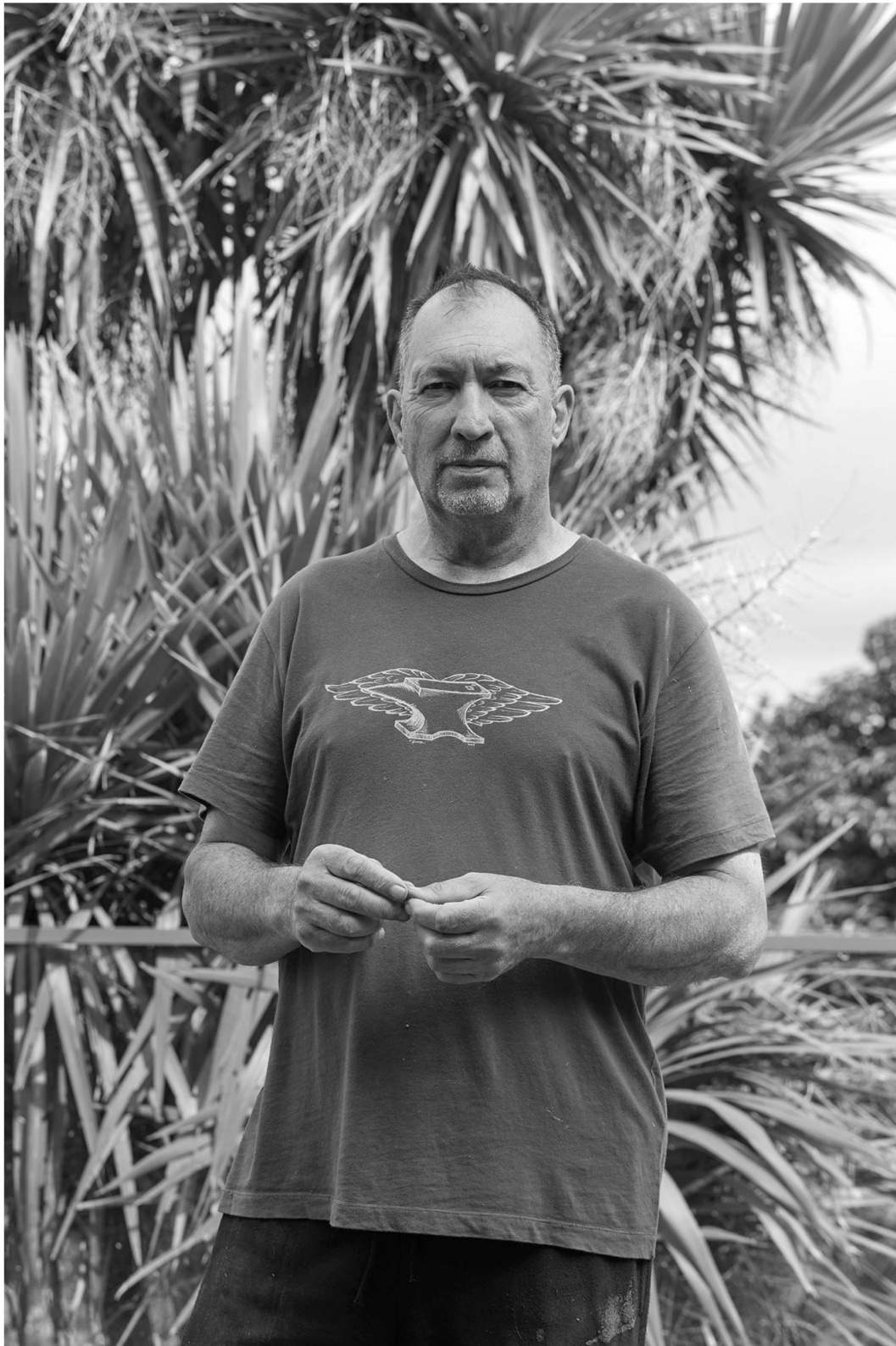


## The Interview: Lyonel Grant & Tim Gruchy

Interview by Jeremy Hansen



Lyonel Grant (Ngāti Pīkīa, Te Arawa) is often described as a carver, but his work is always pushing boundaries. For Toi Tū Toi Ora's satellite exhibition at Britomart, he collaborated with artist Tim Gruchy, the creator of SCOUT, the 2012 work in Takutai Square that takes a range of environmental data and uses artificial intelligence paradigms to translate that into ever-changing images on a vertical LED screen. Together, they devised SCOUT: Wawata Hōhonu, a process that introduced images of Lyonel's carvings as the foundations of SCOUT's deep dreaming process. Here, Lyonel and Tim talk to Britomart's Jeremy Hansen about their collaboration.

Jeremy Hansen: Kia ora Tim and Lyonel. Thanks for coming on this Zoom call. You've been working together on *SCOUT: Wawata Hōhonu* for a few months now. Did you know of each other before this collaboration began?

Tim Gruchy: Not really. But as soon as the invitation came and I looked at Lyonel's work, I realised I knew it, without knowing Lyonel specifically.

Lyonel Grant: For me it was more visceral than that. Being part of the big column at Takutai Square – I'd always wondered about it. That was my main interface with Tim's work.

Tim, I'm conscious that some people reading this might not know about SCOUT, which has been generating ever-changing imagery on a stack of LED screens in Takutai Square since 2012. Can you provide a little context about the work to get us started?

Tim Gruchy: SCOUT stands for Sentient Co-realtor of Urban Transaction. The programme that I wrote that happens inside SCOUT was partly inspired by Sentinel, a short story written in 1946 by Arthur C. Clarke, which he rewrote as *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It's the idea that off-world intelligence is monitoring the development of human intelligence and cultural evolution. The intention was creating something that had a sense of change all the time, not only daily but monthly and yearly too. SCOUT has an array of environmental sensors for rain and temperature and it also knows the time of day, days of the week and seasons of the year. The AI programme interprets this data and generates imagery and sound based on it. I wanted to try and create this sense that SCOUT was learning about the activities of the Square.



Lyonel, you're often described as a carver, but how would you describe the artwork that you normally create?

Lyonel Grant: The artwork that I produce has its genesis in classical Māori art, although my aspirations are to take what is considered the norm in terms of cultural iconography and endeavour to develop it with new technologies and approaches. But if, for whatever reason, I have to go back and wield a chisel, I'll do so. Every foray away from the classical makes you come back to it with new eyes.

What makes you want to shift the norm?

Lyonel Grant: It's an innate thing artists have: One desires to make one's mark. It's what the old people did, it's what we should do. You need to take on board the stimuli around you – and hopefully those forces manifest into something unique and original that both you and the audience are happy with.

So you don't see it as a break with tradition, but a continuation of a tradition of breaking the norm that extends back through Māori art history.

Lyonel Grant: If you've had classical training, you can be so enamored with the tradition that you get subsumed by it. You end up becoming an imitator. The trick is to be an innovator because tradition is very powerful. You can easily be overwhelmed by it. Every trip to the museum underpins that sense of awe of what's been left. It really is a battle to go beyond that and find your space in respect of that.

How do you weigh up the risk of being disrespectful to that tradition?

Lyonel Grant: That risk ebbs and flows, but the older you get the more 'disrespectful' you get. Of course, I say that with tongue in cheek. I've created four meeting houses now, so hopefully I've done the hard yards regarding the classical language. Perhaps now it's OK to move wherever I want to move. But hopefully what's produced has got that innate respect for what the old people left us. There's this perception of what a client wants, and you're duty-bound to produce what they want to honour that contract or commission, but you also have a duty to yourself to innovate within the confines of that brief. And then you may have to go into bat and tell them why you're doing that. A faithful copy of what the old people left isn't good enough anymore.

Were you always like this?

Lyonel Grant: My training was classical. We weren't really encouraged to go and look out at other stimuli around us. It was all right to look at books of old carvings but not to look at modern art books or attend exhibitions as I recall. I was always interested in other stuff, and inquisitive. I'll always use classicism as a fallback position. If I'm called upon to do something that people perceive to be classical, I'll do it. But hopefully all the subsequent influences I've had since graduating are brought to bear on what I will make in the future. The 3D printing of stereo-lithographic files intrigues me, for example. My grandfather on the European side of our family was a mechanic and boat builder; sometimes I'd help him fix cars. That sort of mechanisation intrigues me as well. I'm into automation and mechanical gearing and things like that, so much so that I've built a car and restored it from the ground up at the same time as I was building Ngākau Mahaki [the whareniui at Unitec]. That was my recreation.

I introduced the two of you by email at the start of this process. Tim, you now live in Adelaide, and Lyonel, you're in Rotorua, so you haven't met in person. So how did you begin this collaboration after that? Because I didn't provide you with much of a brief at all.

Lyonel Grant: For me it was a pretty scrappy start because we both had stuff that was going on. It was like poking and prodding at the possibilities, really. I wasn't quite sure what raw materials were needed to start the process off. And you'd park it for a while because it was in the too-hard basket, and then cold sweat breaks out and you think, "Oh jeez, what am I going to send?" And it all just happened quite organically, really, for me.

Tim Gruchy: Same for me, and it was a peculiar time, wasn't it? Because of course, here we were having lockdown and all of that stuff as well, at the same time. It was very organic. And having those gaps between our communication was good to just let stuff tick away in the back of my mind. And I spent a lot of time looking at your things online, Lyonel. And thinking about what was possible. Then the other thing that has made it easy is that because SCOUT has its conceptual framework so, for me, it was always about finding the way forward that fitted with that. It gave us a boundary in a funny way. And certainly, our communication has been very easy and relaxed. I just think it's unfortunate that we've never been able to get in the same room together.

Lyonel Grant: Yeah. I would like to have had that as well. But that underpins the whole thing for me, the possibilities of the electronic realm. I had a kaumatua a way back, and he said, "You know you've just got to work smarter and not harder." I've always been enamored with 3D printing and how it might interface with what I do. Using technology is almost like the next iteration for carving, in a way.





So how did it work? Lyonel, do you want to talk about the process a bit? You sent some imagery of your carvings to Tim. Is that the first step you made?

Lyonel Grant: Fortuitously, I had these beautiful high-res photos of the surfaces of some of my work that had been taken recently, so I sent a selection of those as a kick-off. And some of the stuff that was coming back from Tim was just bloody wild. Because you think it started there and it just becomes this crazy interplanetary stuff. I just loved it.

Tim Gruchy: I'm so pleased to hear you say that and see the smile on your face when you say that.

Lyonel Grant: It's up my alley. What you see is what you get when you have a carved figure. But if you can take that work to another place, then it's got another life, it's got a whole other spiritual realm it can go to. I love it.

Tim Gruchy: We had to end up with moving image, because that's the technical form that SCOUT delivers, aside from the conceptual stuff. Lyonel and I talked about using the AI in SCOUT to do some deep dreaming with his material. The whole conceptual proposition is that SCOUT is now thinking and dreaming about Māori culture, which it hasn't done up until now. And it was always clear to me that it was going to work better from high-res stills, because if you start pointing video cameras at the carvings, it's too prescriptive of whatever's happening with the camera. So when I started receiving those really high-quality stills, it sparked what could work and what couldn't work. And a lot of it was about in that realm of motion graphics, essentially. Complex motion graphics. We were also constrained by SCOUT's vertical aspect ratio. Lyonel and I were grading through material deciding what was going to work. There was so much great material that it was very quick for me to put together a set of absolutely suitable material, both in terms of the point of view, the aspect ratio, the resolution, those sort of things.

With the AI it can get pretty wild, pretty quickly. But I think that's good. In these processes that I'm doing now, I've gotten more and more complicated. I'm actually layering things and creating even more sense of depth, so you've got this sense that there are multiple 3D layers. I've kept it all very slow. I've thought a lot about the way SCOUT should think about this. So for the audience, when you look at it, if you look quickly and look away, you might not even think that it's moving. But then if you look back, you'll notice that it's changed. It's sense that these things, our lives, the world, culture, are all in a constant state of evolution and change.

I was just wondering if the AI aspect felt like a third collaborator in this. How does that element come into play?

Lyonel Grant: That's a fair comment. You're just letting it loose and letting it do what it does. Wawata hōhonu would be the term. Deep dreaming. But it's a bit like that with a meeting house. When you've carved the house and you walk away from it, and the people that come and interact with that house, their relationships become that energy for me in that it's not my house anymore, it's the people's. And you just feel happy that you've created something that's got these other iterations to it. And at the time it was your baby, but it's gone to a better place.

I wanted to ask if you felt that the influence of SCOUT's AI in this process was benign, or possibly colonial, or did you think about it in those ways at all?

Lyonel Grant: I didn't care. But I was confident I was giving it to someone who was going to point it in the right direction. I was reasonably confident that it was going to a good launchpad, shall we say. The genus of the work is Māori, so whatever iteration it becomes, it's of Māori stock. It's out of a culture that's been in this land for 1500

years.

Tim Gruchy: As a Pākehā artist I did a lot of homework about the cultural history of that site and I thought a lot about those issues when I first conceptualised SCOUT. Growing up in Australia, one understands that if one is to be ethical there are a whole lot of places you cannot go creatively. Given the opportunity to work with Lyonel, it's about Scout expanding its community transaction directly into Māori culture. That was the conceptual framework.

*SCOUT: Wawata Hōhonu* was commissioned by the Britomart Arts Foundation in collaboration with Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki as part of Toi Tū Toi Ora, the landmark exhibition of contemporary Māori art.

More about Toi Tū Toi Ora Britomart Satellite: To read about Charlotte Graham's work *Te Hau Whakaora* (the healing winds), [click here](#); to read about Lonnie Hutchinson's work *Aroha ki te Ora* (Lover of Life), [click here](#); and to read about Shane Cotton's work *Maunga*, [click here](#). Toi Tū Toi Ora Satellite is the first event of Auckland Unlimited's Summernova festival series, designed to wrap around Auckland's hosting of the 36th America's Cup and bring the entire region to life from December to March. Learn more at [Summernova.co.nz](http://Summernova.co.nz)

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