

The background is a complex abstract composition. It features a large, semi-transparent pink rectangular area that serves as a backdrop for the text. To the right of this rectangle, there are bold, diagonal stripes in shades of blue, teal, and black. The top left corner shows a textured, torn-paper effect with yellow and brown tones. The bottom right corner has a bright orange and red section. On the left side, partially obscured by the pink rectangle, is a stylized illustration of a person's face with a wide, toothy grin. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic, with a focus on color and texture.

EAST

URBAN CONTEMPORARY ART
FROM HERE AND ABROAD

UXBRIDGE
**MALCOLM
SMITH
GALLERY**

Cath Love, Oscar Low and Elliot Francis Stewart bring unique backgrounds and layered histories to EAST, each arriving at the exhibition by varying circumstances but united through an enduring connection to the markers of urban contemporary art and a continued focus on image making as a means to explore heritage, family and place.

Malcolm Smith Gallery has partnered with Aotearoa Urban Arts Trust (AUAT) to devise and produce this exhibition. Aotearoa Urban Arts Trust specialises in the advancement of urban contemporary arts education amongst practitioners, youth and the wider community.

Urban contemporary art can be defined as an arts practice where an artist exhibits contemporary works in both indoor settings (temporary or permanent) as well as outdoors in public spaces (with the intention of being permanent). The indoor/outdoor relationship is the defining factor of urban contemporary art, as both spaces inform each other.

With a PhD background in Organic Chemistry, AUAT CEO and co-curator of EAST, Olivia Laita transitioned into freelance urban contemporary arts management and production in 2011. Having been part of the journey of this art movement in Aotearoa from its significant and early stages, Olivia's curatorial and arts management experience has led her to critique aspects of the art form. These observations stimulated the establishment of AUAT as an arts trust in 2017. AUAT uses events and projects to enhance and improve key aspects of urban contemporary arts practice including environmental sustainability, safe cultural practice and arts commerce. AUAT aims to make Aotearoa the leading international example for developing and improving better practices in urban contemporary art.



CATH LOVE

Cath Love arrived in Howick on Thursday 16 August and was introduced to this place through a hikoi led by Amiria Puia-Taylor (AUAT). Visiting Te Tuhi ō Manawatore (Cockle Bay) and Te Naupata (Musick Point) gave Cath visual reference points to the area. The stories shared over this day and subsequent time working at Malcolm Smith Gallery have helped shape the four panel mural Cath has created for EAST.

In these works Cath reflects on the idiosyncratic similarities she has seen between life in Aotearoa and Hong Kong, as well as incorporating ideas that relate to familiar places around Asia Pacific and her own personal heritage. Fundamental acts, such as trade, are referenced through traditional New Zealand icons (kumara) and products (honey, face masks and a particular canned meat a Hong Kong friend requested she bring to Auckland) – showing the importance and lasting effect of cross-cultural exchange in the past and the present. The great squatting figures relate Cath's interest in what she describes as our Asia Pacific 'superpower' – this physical action being something people from this part of the world find easy but is near impossible for others.

Playing with her third culture identity, Cath inscribes a raft of motif drawn from Thai, Chinese and European places. She also plays heavily with colour and shape, using layered simple geometric forms to convey expression and movement – harking to her love of comics and cartoons. As an artist and illustrator her practice continuously switches between aerosol art, design and fine art painting and these panels show her ability to seamlessly bring together these disciplines. The mural will be installed around UXBRIDGE Arts and Culture following the exhibition.

OSCAR LOW

I know I am Chinese by birth. Half Chinese in fact. I know my father’s dialect is Hakka. He is a Serdang boy born to Chinese immigrants secured within a “New Village” as part of the colonial British forces war against the guerrilla communist Chinese forces during the Malaya Emergency.

*What does this mean? It means that any presence of Chinese “culture” in my house as a kid was odd on reflection. The wall hangings, the ornaments, the paintings etc.. What did they have to do with anything relating to my family and their story and origin?** In hindsight my father seemed to have disconnected within himself from being Chinese. The only clear indicators were his Chinese friends and his ongoing preference to eat rice, noodles and pasta (it’s still noodles lol). Being Chinese to me seemed important, it still does but I’m not sure it did to him.

**I think on reflection that my mother actually bought most of these things when visiting Malaysia.*

The story of my father and of his parents is one of upheaval, hardship, violence and dislocation. Of existing between spaces, between cultures, between countries. These are the hallmarks of my family’s presence in Malaysia and to a lesser extent, my father’s in New Zealand.

That story suggests that despite being born there, he was never going to find a place in Malaysia, that his parents always intended for him to leave. It appears that it had been decided that as Chinese they were locked out of Malaysian society to some degree. My father attended the local village primary school. A Chinese school of course that would have included “traditional Chinese values”, Confucian and Mao. These schools were typically frugal and modest, and funded by private Chinese associations. They taught Chinese classics with some more modern Chinese literature. The schools were seen as the best way of keeping young Chinese in touch with the ancestral homeland of the shopkeepers, hawkers and labourers whose kids went there. These schools gave the kids a sense of Chinese nationalism and identity. The consumption of media, literature and entertainment all influenced directly by China. However my father attended an English Methodist high school, signalling a pathway that was unlikely to stay in Malaysia. The students at the English schools did not receive this Chinese lens to their education and upbringing and were more socialised with Sunday School and English literary classics. They were in effect more about Elvis and less about Mao.

It’s an odd thing to ascribe wholesale cultural characteristics to people like they are immune to the foibles, issues and personal idiosyncrasies that we all suffer from.

The idea that time is wasted if there is no clear outcome is pervasive for me and one that I contest regularly. In part it stems from my previous experiences that demonstrate that prolificacy has worked for me before. But there is also a cultural instinct at play, I might call it “my Chinese” kicking in. The classic Confucian dogma and Mao led ideology that characterises a popular image of Chinese values and beliefs are familiar, but really has no presence in my family for a number of reasons. It isn’t “being Chinese” that dictates my instinctual value of work ethic, financial independence, family or hor fun. It’s a reflection of my upbringing and all its contributing factors, including the between space of my Eurasian ethnicity.

Yes “being Chinese” can be a fun game to play and when with Chinese friends the familiarity with the hallmarks of “being Chinese” are comforting. However, it’s too reductive to ascribe behavioural traits to people based so heavily on nothing but their ethnic heritage. Even if loosely correct for a large swathe of that group it discounts the individual and the richness, variety and value of their often counter-cultural experience or story. And it’s those personal stories that provide the ability for us to recognise the universal themes we all know and experience. They enable us to move past the unfamiliar and misunderstood, the spectacle of “culture”. Through these stories we can identify, recognise and empathise. We can look beyond ethnicity and see the individual.

Oscar Low aka Ross Liew recently completed an Asia New Zealand Foundation artist residency, hosted by Rimbun Dahan in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



ELLIOT FRANCIS STEWART

Born and raised in East Auckland until he was 14 years old, here, Elliot Francis Stewart shares fond memories of childhood landmarks from around Pakuranga and Howick. His more formative creative years were spent living in the central suburb of Grey Lynn so EAST provides him the opportunity to come back to the place he grew up in and pay homage to his original stomping ground, a first in his urban contemporary art career. Embracing nostalgic recollections, Elliot has used materials sourced from around the area to create these works, including the palette he has chosen that incorporates colours synonymous with a stalwart local company, Howick and Eastern buses.

Elliot’s witty and wry observations of suburban life have solidified his reputation as one of New Zealand’s most talented and well-respected urban contemporary artists. Specialising more these days as a cartoon artist and story teller, he is most recognised for his work over the past 20 years as an illustrator, painter and key member of New Zealand’s world-renowned graffiti crew TMD. His murals can be found across Aotearoa and he has exhibited extensively over the past two decades, including as part of *Post-Graffiti Pacific* in 2017.



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