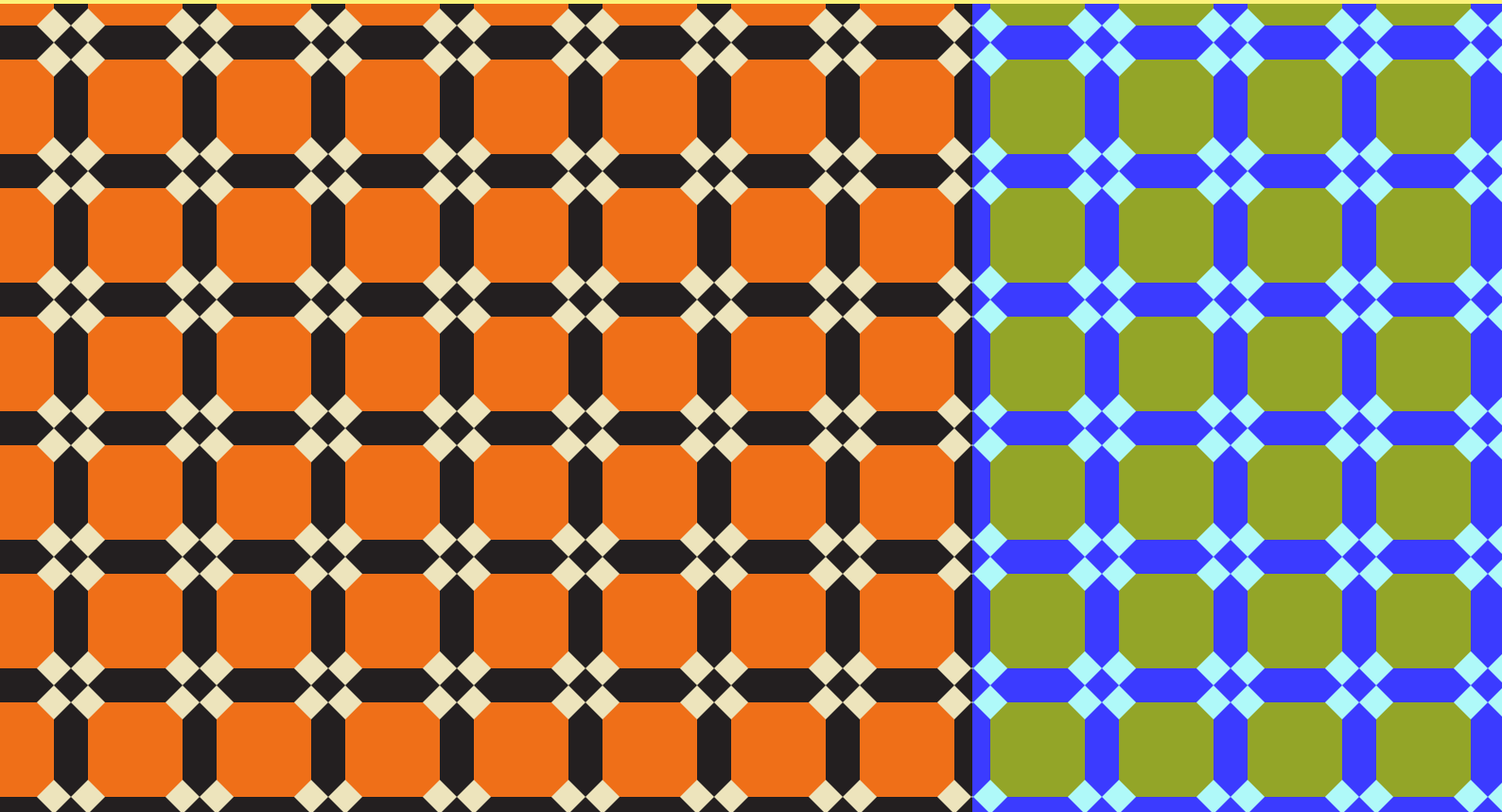
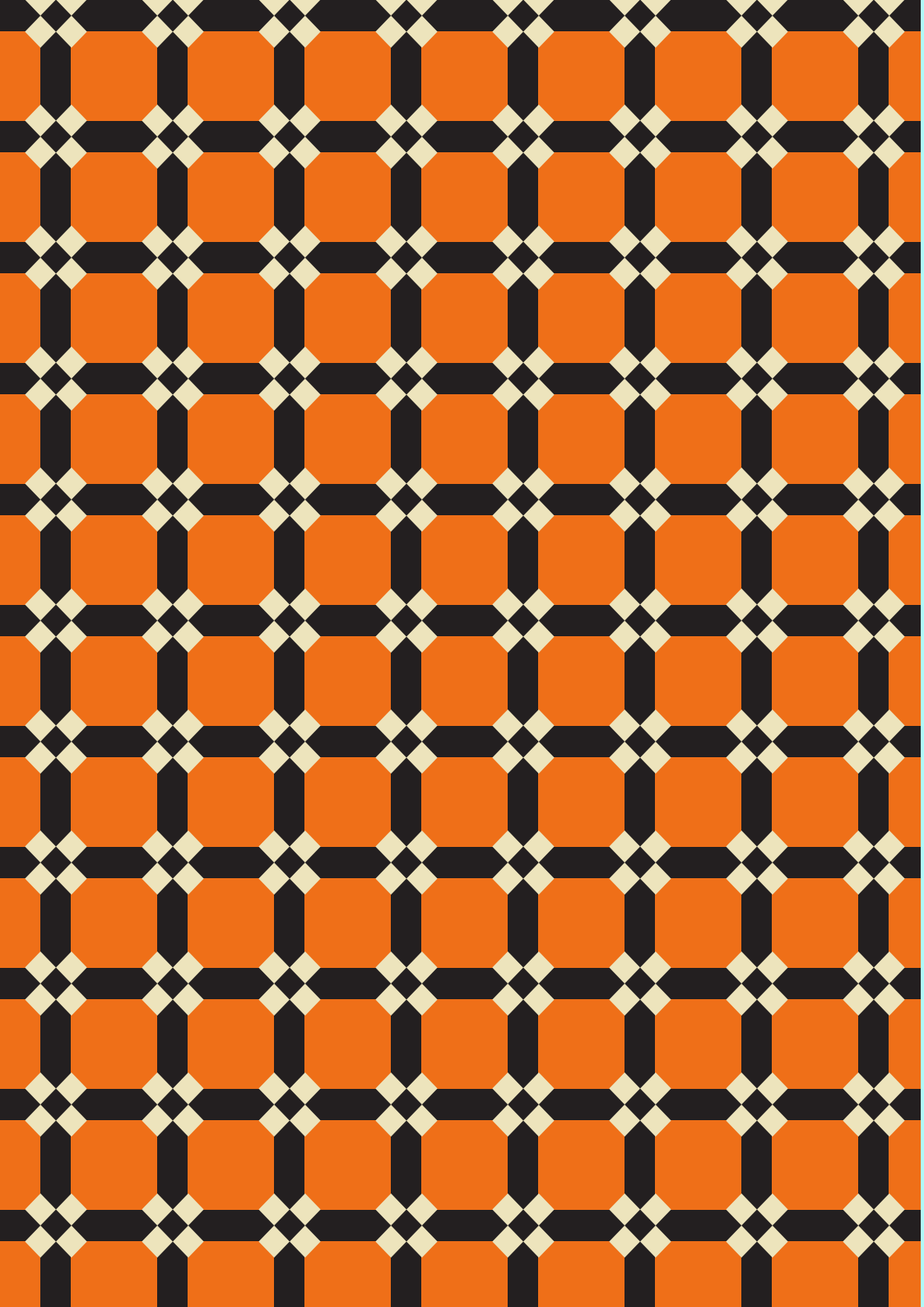
CULTURE MAKERS





AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURE MAKERS

GURMEET KAUR

From 2023 to 2026, the Culture Makers program invited artists from across Victoria to collaborate with Museums Victoria and rethink how stories are told in its galleries. Over four seasons, artists brought their practices, perspectives and community connections into the museum, working alongside curators and staff to create exhibitions, events and workshops that asked new questions of both the museum's collections and the spaces in which they are held.

For some, the program was a chance to experiment and to see how their ideas could reshape audiences experiences in the museum. For Museums Victoria, it was an opportunity to listen, to learn from the knowledge artists carry, and to make room for forms of storytelling that extend beyond traditional museum displays. The program platformed Victoria's creatives, particularly those from communities that are historically underrepresented in museums. Through the work of these creatives, galleries were activated with perspectives, journeys and ways of seeing that were new to museum audiences. Museums Victoria and its audiences were the beneficiary of the creativity, vision and lived experiences of these artists.

This publication emerges from the Culture Makers program, bringing writers and artists into dialogue and extending the work into a digital space. Its aim is opening room for reflection, critique and imagination—documenting what happens when creative practice meets institutional collections and spaces, and why those encounters matter. Across these projects, culture is not only displayed; it is made, shared and grown through participation.

Tara Kenny's essay on *Threads* explores how Maria Birch-Morunga and Kate Robinson transform ordinary objects—wheatgrass, polaroids, playlists and scraps from their homes—into a stop motion, four-walled world. Seen through this lens, everyday life becomes remarkable. Through intimate narration and playful DIY aesthetics, Maria and Kate share biracial lived experiences in Naarm's western suburbs. Tara's essay reflects on this, showing how heritage can be lived and experienced in small, everyday gestures.

Michelle Chen's *Mini Melbourne* takes a similar approach, but with a gamified cityscape. Characters created by workshop participants populate streets and landmarks, telling stories of arriving in Australia, learning a new home and discovering belonging. Jaie Mudgerikar's interview with Michelle draws on their friendship as international students, reflecting on both the process of creation and the conversations that shaped the *Mini Melbourne* project.

Olana Janfa's paintings offer another window into diaspora. Based in Melbourne and drawing on his multiple migrations, Olana works with colour, irony and humour to explore identity, privilege and diasporic life. His paintings are vivid, irreverent and witty, but beneath the humour lies a deep engagement with social realities. Cher Tan's writing traces how Olana negotiates humour, social critique and personal history, showing that art can critique, imagine and entertain all at once.

WALA, a Ga-Dangme dance and drum ensemble from Ghana, bring the performative side of culture to life. Through music, dance and storytelling, they translate centuries of history and social knowledge for Australian audiences. In her essay on WALA, Rosie Ofori Ward explores how drumming becomes conversation, songs become lessons and performance becomes a bridge across difference. She situates WALA's practice within broader cultural systems, highlighting how their work challenges Western-centric understandings of music, identity and community.

Maleik Njoroge shows that chess gatherings can also become sites of cultural exchange. Across tables, quiet games unfold into moments of mentorship, storytelling and connection. Every interaction, every story told across the board, becomes part of a shared cultural experience. Juliet Miranda Rowe's conversation with Maleik captures these dynamics, showing how structured play at the *Chess Without Borders* Culture Makers event opened doors to conversation, cultural expression and community building.

Veisinia Tonga reflects on Irihipeti Waretini's *Māreikura: Ka rere te rongoā*, an exhibition that centred healing mechanisms of Māori culture. Large-scale portraits of Māori women portrayed traditional Māori cultural ways of being and asserted sovereignty within a colonial institution. Veisinia's powerful essay explores how this work activates the museum as a site of spiritual presence, deep recognition and exchange between Indigenous peoples, demonstrating how art can honour tradition while challenging historical narratives.

Across all of the Culture Makers projects, some threads remain constant. Play, humour and everyday experience are central; First Nations sovereignty is asserted and diasporic and historically underrepresented perspectives are foregrounded; and museum galleries, workshops and digital platforms are transformed into spaces of co-creation. Across these projects, and the writing that has emerged in response to them, culture is active as something we do, share and sustain together.

CULTURE MAKERS: SEASON 1

HOME FOR ME IS CHESS

MALEIK NJOROGE IN CONVERSATION WITH WRITER & ILLUSTRATOR JULIET MIRANDA ROWE

Curated by Kenyan-born Culture Maker Maleik Njoroge, *Chess Without Borders* was a two-day celebration of the diverse history and community of chess, which was held at the Immigration Museum in May 2023. A chess enthusiast and creative, Maleik is the founder of All Tribes Are Beautiful Lab (ATAB.Lab), a project which saw him design the chess dhurrie. A woven cotton rug with fringed edges and the 64 squares of a chessboard wood-block printed onto its center. The chess dhurrie acts as a soft, rollable surface to play on, rather than a stiff, wooden chess board.

When Maleik and I first met at a mutual friend's pop-up shop, just weeks after Chess Without Borders took place, he was wearing a jacket fashioned out of one of these dhurries. The vibrant blue-and-white chessboard was emblazoned on his back. Having seen posts all over social media about the Culture Makers program, I put two and two together: 'Oh, you're the Chess guy?'

With a mutual love of playful yet functional design, as well as a similar balance of caution and curiosity about the rise of technology, we quickly became friends. So when he asked me to write and illustrate this piece, I knew it would be hard for us to stay on topic. And I was right.

This is a trimmed-down conversation between the two of us on a hot, humid February evening. I found Maleik by my front gate. He's talking on the phone to his father in Kenya, and his soft, low voice weaves from Swahili to English as he greets me. Our conversation flows from code-switching accents to Masaru Emoto's water experiments. Maleik is a wealth of seemingly random facts that he pulls together effortlessly.

Left: An illustrated imagining of Maleik's *Chess Without Borders* event in the Immigration Museum courtyard, with Maleik in the center playing on the chess dhurrie board. Artist: Juliet Miranda Rowe.

MN: Something that strikes me within this Culture Makers experience is that call to welcome from the museum. I felt like this migrant who was welcomed into this space and given reign to make a home there. Home for me is chess.

JMR: When did you first start playing?

MN: I remember being at a chess club at school in Kenya when I was around 7 or 8. Not playing, just watching. I remember the set would come out and things would happen that I didn't understand. People playing this game. Chaos, a dance. Then when I came to Australia, I saw a set in an op-shop. I bought it and I fell back into it.

JMR: Wait, so you started here in Australia? That's really fascinating in regards to what you said earlier about chess being home. I played as a child, but often ended up using the pieces as dolls, where the queen would run off with the knight and I'd stage wedding ceremonies down the board. I guess I assumed you also played in childhood, but is it more that chess reminds you of that memory of home?

MN: Well, when I first got that set, I had no-one to play with. So I carried it around for a long, long time re-learning how to play by myself at coffee shops. Then my best friend was like, 'Teach me'. So that got me playing regularly with others. It taught me how to become better friends with people. Then that grew into a community outside of our small immediate circle. Just sharing that feeling of play, friendship and time spent together.

JMR: Right, so home as a sense of belonging rather than a location.

MN: That was the basis of starting ATAB. Lab: the coolness of chess, the art, the visuals, the musicality, and kind of sharing that with a community.

JMR: Is the musicality for you the actual sound of pieces on the board?

MN: Maybe not the moving of pieces, but the moving of the two people as a dance. *The sound of chess is silence*. Most games—unless there's a tie break, when things are happening—almost everything is silent. That silence holds all this frustration and potential and hope and everything. The only other sound is that analogue ticking clock. Although for Chess Without Borders, we also had some of my friends DJing throughout.

JMR: Walk me through the Chess Without Borders weekend.

MN: The Culture Makers process had this framework of 'Play, Make, Learn'. Our event really centered on the 'play' component. We took over the Immigration Museum's atrium with chess tables pushed up next to each other, like a long-ass table. As if food was spread across ready for everyone to just eat together.

Above: Moments from *Chess Without Borders*: a community-focused chess experience for players and nonplayers alike.

JMR: Like a banquet?

MN: Yes, but with chess in place of the food. The tournament stuff was at certain times, but there was space for free play in between. So there was something for the people who play seriously, something for the people who play for fun and something for the people who are just watching. Something really cool that happened were these simuls ...

JMR: A civil?

MN: SIMUL: it means simultaneous exhibition. It's where one person would play multiple people across the tables. So we had Cassandra, Jody and Nick, who were representing local chess clubs, walking around playing against 10 people each at a time.

JMR: Was there any trash-talk across the tables?

Above: Maleik Njoroge, creator of *Chess Without Borders*: a community-focused chess experience for players and nonplayers alike.

‘Masquerade provides an escape from reality, where you symbolically transform into a different persona. Chess is similar. King, queen, rook, bishop, knight, pawn. You assume the different roles for each of the pieces to move them uniquely across the board.’

MN: There was no trash talk at simul level. I guess … it’s sort of a proper gentleman, gentle woman, gentle person experience where someone’s hosting you. We did have someone in the children’s competition saying, ‘I don’t want to be put with the kids, put me with the adults.’ But mostly there was a buzz in the room. People were waiting for the players to come back around, and in the meantime they would talk to each other, freaking out about what the next move was gonna be. We were seeing neurodivergent kids playing with their parents behind them like, ‘Oh my God, I’ve never seen my child so excited to be outside.’ Even when they were losing, and nervously watching the clocks, people were really engaged. It was amazing to see.

JMR: Were people playing with your ATAB. Lab dhurrie chess sets?

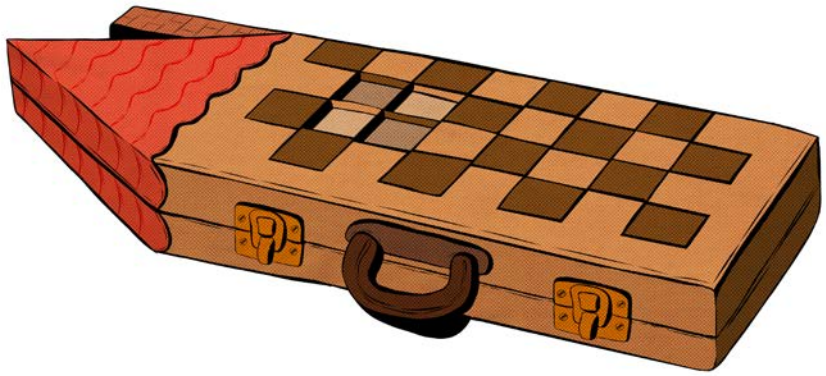
MN: They were scattered on tables all over the space, and as the ‘make’ component of the Culture Makers program we displayed photographs of them being made. The dhurries are developed in partnership with Studio Bagru. We worked with traditional artisans in Bagru, India, which is a region known for its textile and block printing heritage. We utilised the centuries-old ‘dabu’, or mud resist technique, to create these unique prints. The images showcased the fabric being dyed and Jim Coady crafting the geometric rubberwood pieces.

JMR: So the photos were hanging in the museum’s atrium?

MN: Yes, and we also commissioned a large woodblock mural by local artist A.KID titled ‘The Great Migration’, which stood on display at one end of the atrium. The DJ booth was at the other.

JMR: Nothing in the courtyard?

MN: We wanted to use the space outside but couldn’t because of the weather. At first I wanted to 3D-print massive chess pieces and have the courtyard set up as a chess board, but it didn’t pan out.



MN: For the 'learn' aspect of the Culture Makers program, there's already a kind of library in the Immigration Museum—the Discovery Center. So I filled it with artifacts. I brought in my own books and records and masks and little analogue chess clocks. Spending time in this room, the idea was that you would sort of understand the history of chess. The making of chess, not chess in the competitive way ... more the community, the culture. First off, there was a section of shelves focused on India—paying homage to the roots of chess in the Indian game 'Chaturanga'. Then there were all these things from my own collection that helped me on my design journey of creating the dhurrie set. The next shelves were dedicated to the modern design language of chess, with vinyl record covers featuring chess boards (like 'E2-E4' by Manuel Göttsching), a bunch of design books and a BAUHAUS x Josef Hartwig chess set that demonstrates the design principles of functionality over aesthetics. The next section was focused more on the influence chess has had on pop culture, featuring things like a Keith Haring chess set. Then the last shelves focused on my African-ness. My design roots. My African masks, a raw, undyed dhurrie, a photo of my grandma that I always carry with me. Then on the opposite side we had a selection of children's books on chess and a Simpsons chess set, as well as a LEGO chess set that kids and parents were building throughout the days.

JMR: How do the masks connect to chess for you?

MN: Masquerade provides an escape from reality, where you symbolically transform into a different persona. Chess is similar. King, queen, rook, bishop, knight, pawn. You assume the different roles for each of the pieces to move them uniquely across the board.

MN: The team I worked with at the museum really encouraged me to do a Q&A as part of the program. I thought it would be hard to organise—like, who am I going to get to talk? But in the end it was great. The panel was Benji from Acid Chess Club, Cassandra Lim and Jody Middleton, who are coaches from Dark Horse Chess, Nick Ilic from Northern Star Chess and me. Although I kind of wish I wasn't ON the panel and was in the audience instead. I learned so much from the panelists' unique perspectives. On how they overcome losing, some of their chess highlights and favourite players, mindfulness, friendship, travelling for comps. Nick told this story about going back to his homeland and seeing a chess board set up in a coffee shop. He said, 'I didn't know my language, but I could play chess,' then beat this old guy, who became very frustrated and stormed off. So Nick was just left there going, 'What have I done?' Then the guy came back with drinks and said, 'Another?' and they spent hours playing. Hearing stories like that was pretty cool.

Left and below:
Illustrations of Maleik's chess set, and a chess game depicted on smart Ray-Ban glasses. Artist: Juliet Miranda Rowe.

JMR: I wish we had more chess sets in coffee shops. It's so common to dissociate into devices, but gameplay is such a nice tool for connection. You're doing something meaningful together without the pressure of conversation.

MN: Back in the day, you would get dressed up to see people playing chess. If the wave passed through your city, it'd be a big thing. Obviously there is a caveat, because leisure time was a luxury that 'common' people couldn't afford. So chess a lot of the time was for fine and dandy English people with nothing to do but challenge each other. It was this long, drawn-out affair until the first chess clock was invented. Timed games could be a lot shorter, so more people could actually play.

JMR: Do you think chess still has some elitism, even when public chess sets and events are free?

MN: It's about the invitation. Just because it's there, if there's no invitation to engage or participate people don't. They think *Why is this thing here?* I don't think chess in itself is elitist, but elitist things might rise up within it. And it's a good place for those things to play out, because the game is about having conflict and coming to some resolution.

JMR: I suppose it doesn't matter where people come from—what matters is if they can beat you.

MN: It's also HOW they beat you that matters. There's a science and logic to it, but also like this weird dancing.

Back in the day it could be five years before opponents would meet, but they wrote letters to each other to come up with a kind of agreement. They'd be saying stuff like, 'How dare you. Don't you know I am the champion? You should come here!'

JMR: Like they're having a Twitter feud?

MN: Yes.

JMR: This was the biggest event that you've ever hosted, right? And the most well-attended event the Immigration Museum had ever held?

MN: Yeah, it was a really good experience. And the Migrant Chess Club came out of it, which is me understanding myself as my brand who can move around the world, take chess with me and transform different places. This was my first experience being able to do that with a really wonderful team. The weird thing for me is that it went from these sketches I had made for the application to photos of the actual event, and it was exactly what I had envisioned.

JMR: Wow, that's some impressive manifesting! Was there anything else that didn't go as planned?

MN: I wanted some smart glasses to shoot chess from my point of view playing. But because they're made by Meta, Luxottica and Ray Ban it was hard to work out who to ask. So I just sent this generic email and I never heard back.

JMR: One day you'll get them, but I feel like people have forgotten how to be in community so maybe using analogue methods of play was good.

MN: When I was getting into this world of chess design, I was very attached to the over the board, physical playing experience. How tactile pieces feel very different. I kind of shunned the digital world of chess. But during lockdown, my bestie had to go to New Zealand, and playing online brought us together regardless of that distance. So I learned to be gentle with not hating on the digital part. A lot of other people really got into playing chess online during COVID and are now looking to connect with people offline in chess clubs. I see people actively finding friendships around it and buying chess gifts for people. It is now something that's more in the collective consciousness, and that maybe wouldn't have happened without the online part of it.

JMR: Someone suggested to me that if I wanted to get better at chess, it's quicker to play online rather than at an in-person club where people are doing it more socially.

MN: So, you can run on a treadmill, but it's very numbers specific. If I'm running outside, today could be a rainy day, then tomorrow it's not rainy, then the next day I run with a group along the same route, or I run the same distance but in a different country. The running remains the same, but the experience is so different. However with treadmill running, the experience is always the same. There is improvement from a numbers perspective, but it's focused on competition. Once you turn the competition down, I think that chess allows you to experience a lot more. There will still be a winner or loser, but that's not a primary thing, because it goes to the bottom. You realise, *I didn't win because I played really well. The other person just made a mistake.* So we play again, and maybe I win, but this time I barely got through it, so I know this person made me work for it. It's less about winning, and more about seeing all the good things that the other person did that made me a better player.

JMR: Surely the social element of being in a physical space also alters gameplay. You're going to make different decisions in person—there's different pressures.

MN: Some people might think that they wouldn't, but yeah, they're fooling themselves. There is logic with chess, but also beauty.

Right: Maleik Njoroge, creator of *Chess Without Borders*, plays a game of chess in the Long Room at the Immigration Museum.

Left: Artists Maria Birch-Morunga and Kate Robinson, creators of *Threads*: a stop-motion animation exploring race, identity and belonging.

THREADS: A JOYFUL JOURNEY

BY TARA KENNY

When Maria Birch-Morunga and Kate Robinson were invited to create a digital installation for the Melbourne Museum, they wanted to subvert the notion that sad or 'serious' narratives and historically significant artefacts are the only way to represent culture, identity and race in a museum setting. *Threads*, the pair's stop motion animation artwork, incorporates their voices, handwriting and visual likenesses, along with objects borrowed from their daily lives, to reflect on what they describe as all of the 'silly, funny, joyful' ways that they engage with their respective cultures while living in the western suburbs of Naarm.

Kate—an Iranian/Australian artist and podcaster—and Maria—a Māori/Pakehā artist, trainer and podcaster—are the creators and co-hosts of *Being Biracial*, a podcast about the specific experience of being mixed-race, which they felt was frequently left out of conversations about race in Australia and Aotearoa. Many of their podcast guests spoke about facing direct or subtle pressure to perform their identities in easily understandable, palatable ways, or to share stories of trauma and hardship in predominantly white spaces. The challenges that come with being mixed-race in Australia deserve critical attention, and Kate and Maria have not shied away from interrogating them on *Being Biracial*. However, through *Threads* they sought to celebrate some of the small, nourishing experiences that come out of their explorations of culture and identity, to affirm that while being biracial can be hard, it's also frequently delightful.

Growing up, Kate's perception of her Iranian heritage was shaped and mediated by museums.

'Persia is this very big, amorphous concept that museums and art galleries will often have exhibitions about, with artefacts from Iran or Persepolis. As a kid, I definitely went to the National Gallery of Victoria, for example, and was shown 'an ancient Persian carpet'. Now that I'm an adult, it's interesting to think about how these very white institutions framed how I connect to something that is inherently part of me and my culture.'

While a 19th century Persian carpet or the Māori artefacts in Melbourne Museum's *Te Pasifika* exhibition are important cultural objects, they may not feel immediately relevant to a young biracial Iranian or Māori person in Naarm who is negotiating their identity. With the aim of capturing and sharing the everyday but meaningful ways that they each relate to their heritage, Kate and Maria began work on *Threads* by drafting separate scripts about their experiences. Having developed a near-telepathic connection over hours spent researching, interviewing and editing for *Being Biracial*, they came back together to find multiple overlapping themes in their individual scripts.

'We'd both talked about New Year's traditions. Kate had talked about Nowruz and I had a seed of an idea about Matariki in mine. And then the other thing was that we'd both accidentally used thread metaphors.'

While the process of participating in your culture's New Year's traditions as a member of the diaspora might conjure complex rituals dutifully handed down over generations, these practices can also be low stakes, self-directed and facilitated by technology and local environments. In *Threads*, Kate explains how she learned to grow wheatgrass for her Haft-sin table for Nowruz on YouTube, from 'people who make a LOT of smoothies', before throwing her somewhat mouldy wheatgrass into the Maribyrnong River as a symbol of renewal. Unable to gather at dawn to sing and spot the stars with other Māori people for Matiriki celebrations in Aotearoa, Maria talks about how she makes her own traditions by dancing around her house in Footscray to her waiata Māori playlist, cooking 'a mean boil up with pork bones, greens and kumara', reciting karakia and setting intentions for the year ahead.

Above: Artists Maria Birch-Morunga and Kate Robinson, creators of *Threads*.

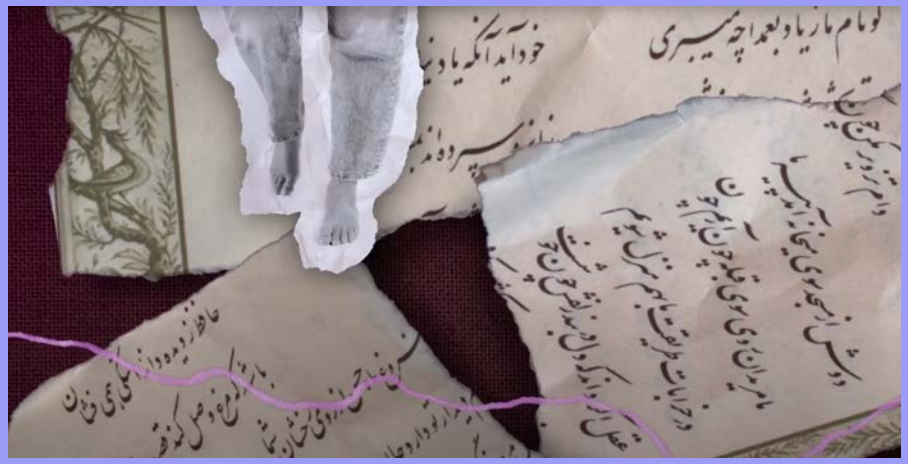
Accompanying this narration are field recordings from Footscray Station, polaroid shots taken in the Flinders Street Station photobooth and scans of photos, prints, scraps of fabric and other objects from Maria and Kate's homes. These disparate fragments of life are woven into a stop motion animation that unspools across the four walls of the museum's Learning Lab immersive space and escapes onto the floor, creating a warm, enveloping cocoon. While *Threads* is a digital animation work, its handcrafted, DIY aesthetic evokes the nostalgic, highly intimate sensation of flicking through an old scrapbook or diary. By bringing these everyday items—some ripped off the fridge or with Blu Tack still on them—into the museum, Kate hoped to broaden the scope of what kind of artefacts are typically valued in institutional settings.

'It was important to bring elements of our home into it, to show that even though I'm not a museum curator telling you that this piece of fabric is very valuable because it's ancient, it's valuable to me and where I come from and that's just as important.'

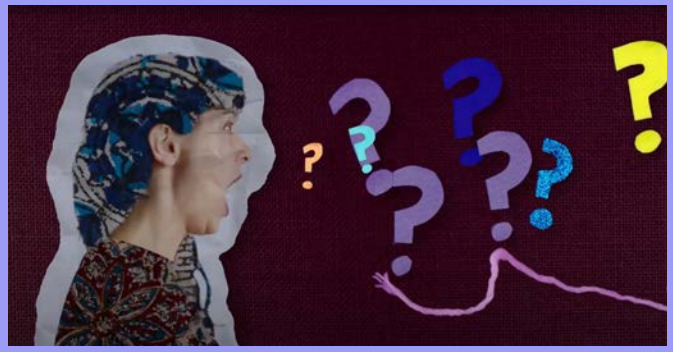
At times, seeing the museum's archivists give one of their scrappy items the white-glove treatment by carefully taking it away and preserving it as a high-resolution scan elevated its significance in Kate's eyes too.

'It's funny how when someone else puts so much reverence into something that you just throw around, you're like, "Oh, maybe I should value this."'

Alongside *Threads*, Maria and Kate were invited to lead Culture Makers Lab: a series of creative workshops for high school students exploring identity and belonging through self-expression.



‘It was important to bring elements of our home into it, to show that even though I’m not a museum curator telling you that this piece of fabric is very valuable because it’s ancient, it’s valuable to me and where I come from and that’s just as important.’



Above: Stills from stop motion animation *Threads*.

As they conceptualised these workshops, they reflected on how education shaped their own identity-formation in both positive and detrimental ways as young people. As one of the only Māori girls at her primary school, Maria was often tokenised in ways that she didn't understand at the time. For example, as a nine-year-old, she was chosen to sing the Māori section of the national anthem in a choir, despite having little familiarity with the Māori language as a result of being raised by her single white mother.

'I was really confused about how I had been picked. Those kinds of experiences made me realise that I was different, and then feel really insecure because people would assume a level of knowledge of Māori culture that I didn't have.'

With that formative experience in mind, Maria was careful not to be overly prescriptive in how she and Kate asked students to consider and present their identities and histories.

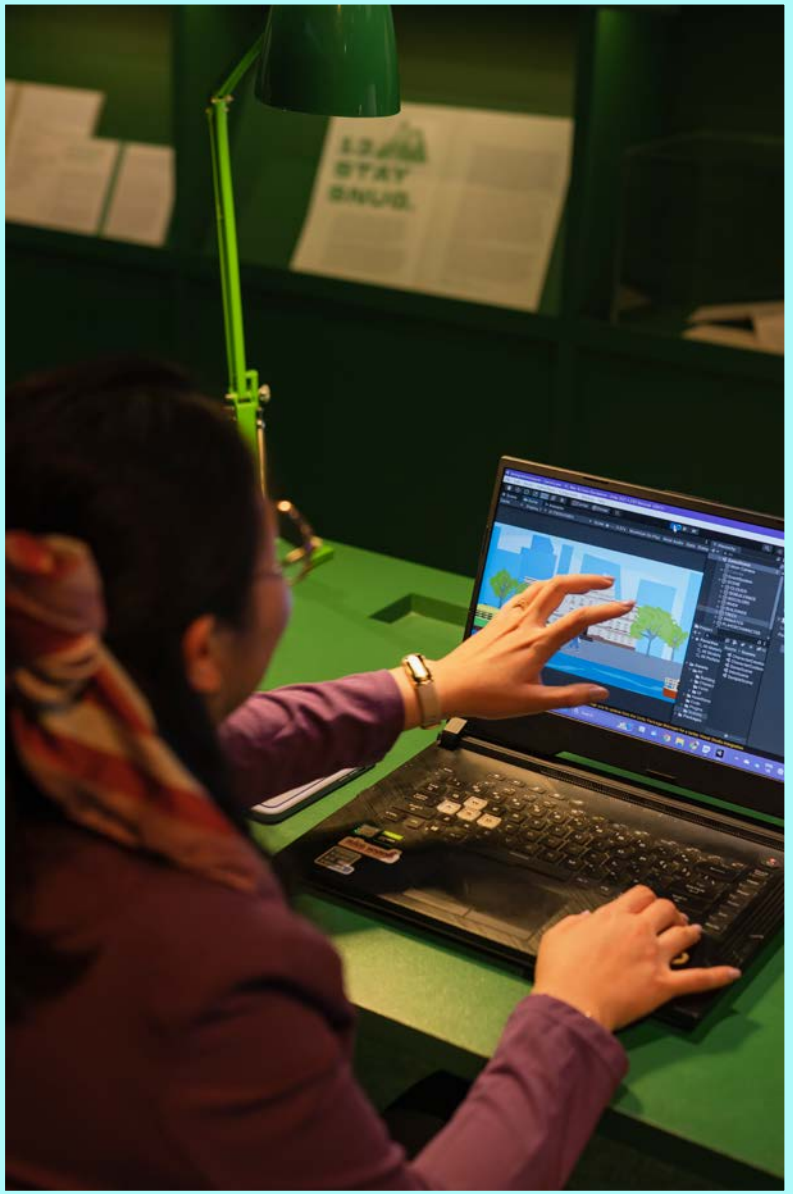
'At that age, their identity is a tiny little flickering flame that they're trying to build in different ways.'

They began the workshops by screening Threads and explaining their inspirations and processes, before instructing the group to make collages reflecting their own journeys. By providing the students with the kind of simple craft materials they had used to make *Threads*—paper, coloured pencils, rhinestones, magazines and a portable printer to print photos of themselves—Maria and Kate emphasised that personal, DIY projects have a place in museums. The workshop prompt opened the door for students grappling with different aspects of their identity to reflect or explore it in their work, while allowing for broad and conceptual interpretation.

As young people, Maria and Kate would have loved to see an exhibit like Threads that encouraged them to reflect on and own their cultural identities. As a Sri Lankan-Australian viewer who grew up outside of an immediate Sri Lankan community, I recognised my own desire to connect with my heritage from afar in Kate and Maria's stories. While their lineages and journeys are distinct, in *Threads*, I saw my fumbling attempts to learn broken Sinhala online and cook mediocre curries from my Achi Amma's handwritten recipes sent over Whatsapp reflected and affirmed. For Kate, harvesting mouldy wheatgrass proves that 'even mould is growth'; for me, cooking gluggy lentils can be just as nourishing as perfect dhal.

At the same time, Maria and Kate are aware that not everyone who sees *Threads* will be in the midst of a biracial identity crisis. They're just as happy for people to engage with the work as part of the background tapestry of the museum, like when a mum comes in and lets her kids chase the animated olives and question marks around the room while she has a moment of reprieve on her phone. Like the artists themselves, *Threads* is both playful and serious at once.

Right: Stills from stop motion animation *Threads*. Top depicting Maria and bottom showing Kate.



MINI MELBOURNE: A CITY REIMAGINED

BY JAIE MUDGERIKAR

I met Michelle at RMIT in the autumn of 2022. She was my gateway to Melbourne and to university life, driving my involvement with Kirrip, first as a volunteer and then as a coworker. We would eventually transform this little fledgling community into a true place of gathering.

Michelle was halfway through her PhD at that point, co-creating video games about mental health through a platform that she called Mental Jam. Before that, she had studied computer science in the Philippines and had worked for nearly a decade as a video game developer there and in Taiwan. She enjoyed the multidisciplinary aspect of her practice, and the collaborations it offered with artists, designers, writers and other creatives.

When the Culture Makers project was launched in 2023, Michelle felt herself drawn to it because of her experiences as an immigrant and an international student. The project focused on diversity and belonging, objectives that were driving forces in much of the work she had done in her own practice, as well as our work at the university. She identified with the project very strongly, and knew that this was an opportunity she could utilise to its full potential.

Left: Michelle Chen, creator of *Mini Melbourne* and host of video game workshops where participants of all backgrounds and abilities co-created a video game.

She developed Mini Melbourne for the project, an animated version of Melbourne's iconic Flinders Street, complete with a little Immigration Museum, Federation Square and Flinders Street Station.

Above: Michelle Chen, creator of *Mini Melbourne*.

Michelle's gamified Melbourne is populated by her friends, her colleagues, and people of all kinds, including students, teachers, tourists, locals and other immigrants like herself. They all talk to each other, exchanging information, sharing anecdotes and telling stories. The objective is to bring diverse people together, to share their stories of living in Melbourne and of coming to Australia for the first time—to create a community of scattered people in this one place of assembly.

As someone who has watched Michelle's work progress, and as an international student myself, Mini Melbourne resonates with me on the same frequency that it does for her. It also gave us the opportunity to have this conversation about her work, and it was on a lovely February morning when we sat down at a local cafe and I asked her to tell me more.

MC: I was drawn to the Immigration Museum's Culture Makers project because I've spent my whole life as an immigrant. It resonated with me, and I wanted to create a game for the Immigration Museum about Melbourne, bringing diverse people together to share their stories.

Unless you're First Nations, most people in Australia are immigrants, which creates a very unique and diverse fabric. As a third-culture kid from China and Taiwan living in the Philippines, I grew up in a culture that was and wasn't my own, and I always felt like I didn't really belong anywhere. Coming to Australia, I expected to again feel like a foreigner, like this is a place I just can't belong, but I was faced with the opposite: there are so many people here who look like me and have similar backgrounds as mine.

Very few of us are really from Australia—we are from scattered places and backgrounds. Very few of us really belong, which is why the idea of assembly resonates. We come from scattered places.

JM: This dedication to reflecting people's experiences is derived from your experiences in the UK, when you had what you consider a 'midlife crisis' through the realisation that the video games you had created didn't contribute anything positive to the world. What came out of this crisis?

MC: I wanted to make something not for the market, but for myself. I made a game about depression, but I didn't want it to be just about my experiences. I gathered contributions from strangers online, including personal stories, music, writing and art. All of these experiences shaped that video game, even though it was a game I made by myself, for myself. It inspired me, leading to my PhD here in Melbourne, where I co-create games with people based on lived experiences of anxiety and depression. I'm aiming to make games that are authentic and representative of what people actually feel, rather than just perpetuating stereotypes.

JM: You view your video games and creative practice as a way of bringing people of different backgrounds together. How does that factor into Mini Melbourne? What do you really intend to create here?

MC: Mini Melbourne is populated by characters created by its audience. In the beginning, it was just me and another character that I had created having conversations. But the essence of the game lies in having all these characters created by workshop participants, who are bringing the contents of the game to life. Each character's responses are based on their interactions with other characters. That's how they connect. I maintain a database of everyone's answers, leading to a collaborative storytelling experience.

The real gain here is all of these characters, created by real people, sharing real stories that you can interact with. It's creating an exchange and a connection.

I created Mini Melbourne as a way for people to share their stories about coming to Melbourne as an immigrant. It's a way of sharing things that they love, but also sharing challenges they faced. In this story exchange, I hope they find something in common with someone else, showing that even though we come from different places, we aren't that different.

JM: What do you want to gain out of this? What's your personal vision?

MC: I view my video games and creative practice as a way to bring people from different backgrounds together to create something meaningful. The Mini Melbourne workshops were very rewarding, as we had visitors from various backgrounds, including tourists, students and even a few school groups. It's all about exchanging stories and discovering commonalities, even with people from vastly different backgrounds. It's a combination of collaboration and personal contribution, and then being physically and digitally together in a shared space. I was surprised by the diverse perspectives of participants. The kids really astonished me with their creativity and tech-savviness, contributing stories and perspectives I hadn't even thought of. The stories of my own friends and colleagues who participated that I didn't know about … it's moments like these that highlight the value of exchanging these real-life experiences.

JM: It can't have been easy during COVID-19, which is when you were conducting most of your research. I can imagine you alone in a small room, with only your laptop for company as you worked on a platform that was ironically based on communication and community. How does it feel then, to watch Mini Melbourne come alive through these workshops and interactions?

MC: My motivation for Mini Melbourne stemmed from a desire to engage with people in real life after COVID-19. Prior to this, my workshops were primarily conducted online and I craved the dynamic of physical interaction. In the game, participants engage in both physical and digital spaces simultaneously. The characters they interact with are curated from previous workshops, creating a bridge between the physical and virtual realms, which is a unique sort of interaction in my opinion.

JM: How do you think this bridge between the physical and digital realm affects the game?

MC: The physical workshop space allows for face-to-face interactions and collaboration, similar to what I experienced in the pre-COVID video game industry. Being in proximity to others sparks creativity and camaraderie, like the collaborative environment you see in an office setting. Participants draw inspiration from each other and talk to each other, not just digitally but also physically. This enriches Mini Melbourne, blending collaboration and immersion together into one beautiful community.

JM: Let's talk about the museum workshops. Why did you choose to work with the Immigration Museum?

MC: I am an immigrant, and I've always been an immigrant—first in the Philippines, then in the UK and now here in Melbourne. Cultural identity is something that I've always struggled with. Immigration leads to diversity, and diversity leads to shared experiences, despite sometimes not having anything else in common. This combination of diversity with the similarity of shared experiences is the key to Mini Melbourne's objectives, and the Immigration Museum, with its potential visitors, was the perfect platform.

The game and the workshop at the museum brought different people together in the same physical space, as well as in the virtual game space, to learn from one another through their own unique lived experiences.

JM: How do you think the museum setting affected the game development?

MC: Working with diverse groups of visitors at the museum was much more enriching than my previous experiences in the game industry. Working with a fresh set of people, many of whom were digital natives and avid gamers, brought new perspectives and ideas. We had participants as young as four years old, all the way to school groups and individuals with learning difficulties. Engaging with such a diverse range of people has been eye-opening. Their creativity and unique perspectives contribute to the richness of the game. I aim to continue showcasing Mini Melbourne at different places and hosting more workshops to involve more participants. The goal is to include as many characters as possible, representing various cultural backgrounds and age groups, to truly capture the essence of Melbourne's diversity.

JM: When you speak about diversity, it always takes me back to uni and the work we did there. I wonder if you were thinking of that too—if that perspective of a freshly arrived international student inspired some elements of Mini Melbourne?

MC: Absolutely.

I interact with hundreds of students every semester at RMIT, and I witness their excitement and curiosity about exploring the city. We run 'Melbourne in the Morning' walks, where we bring people around Melbourne. We're teaching them about this city, but we're also learning about their stories, their backgrounds, the places

that that they grew up in, the way they see and interpret things based on their backgrounds and their experiences. These interactions provided valuable insights and stories that I've incorporated into the game. For me, the sights we see on these tours are familiar and so nothing special, but at the beginning of every semester, you're seeing the same places through new and different eyes. So that was definitely in the back of my mind when I was creating the game, because there's so much that you can get from people you talk to.

JM: I remember these 'Melbourne in the Morning' walks vividly, especially as it was during one that we first met. It was my introduction to the city—its colours and personalities—and an introduction that I would go on to share with more students in due course. I remember walking through Hosier Lane with you and talking about art and design, and learning about you and your fascination with video games for the first time. It makes me think, are those walks the reason you picked Flinders Street?

MC: 'Melbourne in the Morning' does walk us through Flinders Street, down from Hosier Lane to Federation Square and then the station, where we disperse. In a way, Mini Melbourne does feel representative of that.

Flinders Street is iconic, representing the starting point of Mini Melbourne's journey at the Immigration Museum. It's also a significant landmark for me personally, as I lived in Southbank for a long time, so it was part of my daily walk route. The area around Flinders Street Station and Federation Square is also where people meet, making it a real-life gathering place. Plus its where ACMI is, and apart from being a pretty significant cultural institution, it also happens to be one of my favourite places in the city.

JM: I was one of the first characters introduced into the game, and I was amazed, and a little frazzled, by the kind of questions you had for me. They were silly, they were strange and then, out of the blue, they were surprisingly deep. And what surprised me even more is that I answered them! And not just answered, but answered with honesty. Why do you think that is?

MC: I think it's the invisibility element that inspires the honesty and keeps it authentic.

It's anonymous if you want it to be, because you don't have to use your real name or real information, which allows participants to express themselves freely. Because the characters are the product of multiple workshops, you don't even know who wrote a particular answer—the person you're talking to in the game might not even be in the same space as you. If it's a digital character in a game, then you don't really know who that person is, and they don't know who you are because you're an avatar. I think that allows people to be more honest than if they were talking to someone person-to-person. You might not be able to comfortably answer a question like, 'What are some of the challenges you faced as an immigrant in Australia?' face-to-face, but with a character ... you can just be your honest and authentic self. You don't have to care what people think, because they don't know it's you. It's kind of inspired by all the real-life stories people shared with me about their depression when I lived in the UK—things they wouldn't always be able to tell someone they know in real life.

The content is diverse, but also contains so many similarities and so many shared experiences. It sparks empathy and connection among players: they realise they're not alone, and it creates a sense of community. This community is unique because it is digital, but it is created in a live workshop space. Ultimately, the game is a platform for sharing and understanding, creating an inclusive space where individuals can express themselves authentically and find solidarity in their journey.

JM: Your commitment to this digital community can spark strong emotions at times—not just for you, but also for us, your participants. It creates the opportunity to connect without ever actually meeting the person you are talking to. I feel like I belong in Mini Melbourne in a way that I may never belong in real-life Melbourne.

Which brings me to my final question. What was the most beautiful thing about this gathering?

MC: All the beautiful people who are now cute characters in Mini Melbourne. I was alone in my little apartment during development, and creating my character and then creating fake characters for my character to talk to was just very empty. Now, after the workshops, as more and more participants come in and create their personas, that's what's populating that world. All these people ... they represent different part of Melbourne. You have visitors, tourists, people who've lived here a long time, people who were born here second-generation, and they all have diverse experiences.

Mini Melbourne is a microcosm of sorts, where people from really varied backgrounds commune to find common ground. An interaction of the physical and digital space where connection thrives and authenticity is fostered. And whether they talk about hidden cafes in the city or their favourite childhood movies, participants are making a connection and joining into a thread of Melbourne's vibrant cultural tapestry.

Below: Melbourne City landmarks depicted in *Mini Melbourne*. Artist: Jaie Mudgerikar

WALA: CULTURAL KEEPERS

BY ROSIE OFORI WARD

For WALA, a Ga-Dangme dance and drum ensemble from Ghana, music is the beginning: 'the root of a culture'. Music, particularly in Africa, is imbued with history; each song is not just a song, but a story of connection holding the keys to the culture.

African music is often seen as fun and bizarre. Music to get people on their feet, dancing and smiling. Exciting colours, beats, and dances. It is seen as something to be enjoyed, admired or even fetishised by white audiences in Australia, but not understood. There is a missing link. These audiences often have little to no understanding of what is occurring in front of them, whether this be the music or the culture behind it.

WALA are on a journey to bring nuance into their music. The band's five members have been performing, dancing and drumming for over 25 years, and they are all determined to share not just Ghanaian music but also Ghanaian culture and stories with their audiences.

WALA's message is clear. 'We want to share our culture with not just Australia, but with the world. Our aim is to communicate with everyone, so they can understand our history and where we come from'.

WALA see themselves as 'cultural keepers', passing down and sharing knowledge, stories and cultural values. They are a cultural bridge. Their act is about more than just music—it's about the story behind it. Through interactive lectures, dance and drumming classes, they are bridging the

Left: Frank Adjei, Dan Hammond and Kofi Nortey from WALA Drum & Dance Ensemble.

gap between the performer and the audience, and translating Ghanaian culture via their performance. At a WALA performance, audiences are compelled to immerse fully—to listen and enjoy. Just as the performer is giving their energy to the audience, the audience must give theirs back. They must be open and willing to learn rather than just watching from the sidelines.

Through Culture Makers, WALA performed a weekend of interactive workshops at the Immigration Museum. This interactive performance of living culture feels antithetical in a traditionally sterile and silent setting like a museum: a space where, traditionally, complex multifaceted cultures are reduced to artefacts or art on the walls. But WALA are challenging that model of teaching, using music to bring lessons and stories to the audience that they cannot turn away from.

Unlike a classic museum experience, WALA share the whole story of their culture. They are generous, sharing all they can. The band are hugely knowledgeable and explain with ease the musical tapestry of what has come before, following the threads of culture sewn into the songs they play.

In their first session at the museum, they explain to the audience how drums are used to communicate in Ghanaian culture, particularly the 'talking drum', which everyone learns to interpret.

Above: Participants dancing at the Kpanlogo Dance Workshop, held in the Long Room of the Immigration Museum.

Above: WALA Drum & Dance Ensemble. Their program *A Journey to Ghana* was celebration of the stories, songs, and dances of the Ga-Dangme people of Ghana.

'WALA see themselves as 'cultural keepers', passing down and sharing knowledge, stories and cultural values. They are a cultural bridge. Their act is about more than just music—it's about the story behind it.'

Above and right: Abli Laryea and Kofi Nortey from WALA Drum & Dance Ensemble.

They perform a classic call and response—the drums speak, the singer repeats, and vice-versa—showing the audience how the drums do talk to the audience and as such it has a language. We can learn to communicate with each other even when we speak such different languages. 'As musicians we understand, but we want to communicate that to all'. WALA take the time to explain the cultural significance of music—how it holds history and stories that pass on values to others.

Just as in Ghana the drums are used as a tool to communicate, WALA are using their music as a tool to communicate with Australian audiences. They feel that 'the best way to understand their people and culture is to understand their music'. WALA are showing that language, as we understand it, is not always the best way to communicate. This is particularly true when the message is uncomfortable or unfamiliar.

Culture is something that we often don't consciously learn—we are born with it all around us. So, when it comes to learning about cultures different from our own, the process can feel unnatural and often difficult. This is particularly true for cultures that Australia has ignored or even stifled, preferencing the far easier ideas of assimilation. But the band stress that 'music makes it easy; it opens you up'. They are determined that allowing the audience to experience culture through the music and dance, rather than just hearing someone speak about it, will work to open people's minds.

WALA believe there is a depth—an aura or spirit—that lives within music and dance. As they play, their music speaks to the soul of the audience. 'We play to their soul, and then talk to their minds.'

In between the songs, the band explain the stories behind each song. They bring to the audience the nuance and details of Ghanaian history and culture. Ghanaian culture is rich and expansive, however, like many colonised nations, there are parts of the culture that have been suppressed. 'We have a lot that is buried. There is a lot that needs to be shared—it's got to get out there.' WALA are themselves messengers of the culture—they give it a voice.

The issue, however, is that in order to share this message, you need an audience. WALA need to be heard, and in the Australian musical scene it's often about who you know and how you fit into the boxes available to you. These categories are often created by those who don't understand the specifics of different cultures, or genres outside the mainstream Western canon.

There is a tendency to categorise music as simply 'non-Western', just as there is to categorise people as 'non-Western', 'non-white' or perhaps just 'other'. These ideas centre white or Western music and culture and homogenise other cultures. Ga music becomes Ghanaian music, which becomes 'African music', which becomes 'World music', which becomes 'other' and thus pushed aside.

WALA are rebelling against this—they are purposely taking up space. Their presence and celebration of their specific culture is an act of resilience against a system that attempts to exclude those who are 'different'. And it's not just them—there are many groups across Australia that are demanding to be seen as more than 'other'.

Above: WALA Drum Making Workshop held in the Atrium of the Immigration Museum.

‘We want our music to be more educative rather than just joy and dancing—it’s about understanding.’

Programs like Culture Makers bring WALA and others to audiences they may not otherwise find, and to places that may not otherwise house them. Museums often exist as bastions of a particular culture or worldview—presenting the world from the perspective of the majority. This is particularly true of the Immigration Museum, which holds its own distinct tension due to the building’s original role as the Old Customs house, the purpose of which was to decide exactly which cultures were excluded from Australia (and thus its history). But with programs like Culture Makers, there is acknowledgment that this perspective is skewed and needs to be broadened.

The work that WALA is doing to widen both the Australian music scene and its understanding of culture is essential. They present Ghanaian music as not just something zany and palatable for white audiences, but a symbol of our entire society. They demand that audiences understand the truth of our history rather than focus on the bright colours.

‘We want our music to be more educative rather than just joy and dancing—it’s about understanding.’

WALA believes the path to harmony is through this understanding—that in coming together in music, we can overcome the challenges of difference. It’s a powerful act of resilience to build community with strangers in strange places, but that risk is worth it if we learn a little more about each other and a little more about ourselves. Through Culture Makers, they were able to do just this, with audiences engaging deeply on ideas and topics they hadn’t considered before they walked in the door.

In one of their Culture Makers performances, WALA held a drum making workshop specifically so the participants could have something to take home with them. ‘It gives them a sense of ownership and connection.’ The band want to give the audience something to remember not just the art, but also the people who made it and the community they represent.

Through their music and teachings, WALA are showing the importance of embracing and understanding other cultures, rather than just taking from them what is palatable or profitable. It is now up to the Australian audiences and industry to be willing to let them try.

Left: WALA Drum & Dance Ensemble at the Immigration Museum.

OLANA JANFA: YOU NEED TO LIVE LIFE FIRST

BY CHER TAN

When I first meet painter Olana Janfa at his home in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, he's speaking on the phone as he opens the door. There appears to be some kind of issue pertaining to sending funds over to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, where Janfa was born and raised until the age of 13. As a child of the Ethiopian civil war that raged between the Derg military junta and Ethiopian-Eritrean anti-government groups until 1991, he ended up fleeing in its aftermath. He and his brother made it to Norway where they could legally seek asylum.

After the call ends, Janfa begins to explain the situation, palpable confusion on his face as he thinks aloud about the bureaucratic processes that seem to undercut what he calls 'the extra business stuff'—something he's still figuring out as an emerging working artist in Australia. Recently, he'd painted four skateboards for an event spearheaded by the charity Ethiopia Skate; profits would go towards building a skate park in Ethiopia. Ethiopian jazz icon Hailu Mergia—who was going to be touring Australia from the US—had agreed to perform at the fundraiser, and Janfa was going to host an online auction.

But after another short phone call, Janfa just as quickly forgets about it: he shows me another room adjoining the lounge which is ostensibly a dining area, but it's also surrounded by his paintings, all of which are loud and colourful in what is now known to be his signature style. On the ground, kids' toys are strewn about (he and his partner, writer Leanne, have a four-year-old). He tells me the family had been living in this house for the last fourteen years, and this was also where he began taking up painting, after first being inspired by Ethiopian Orthodox Church art.

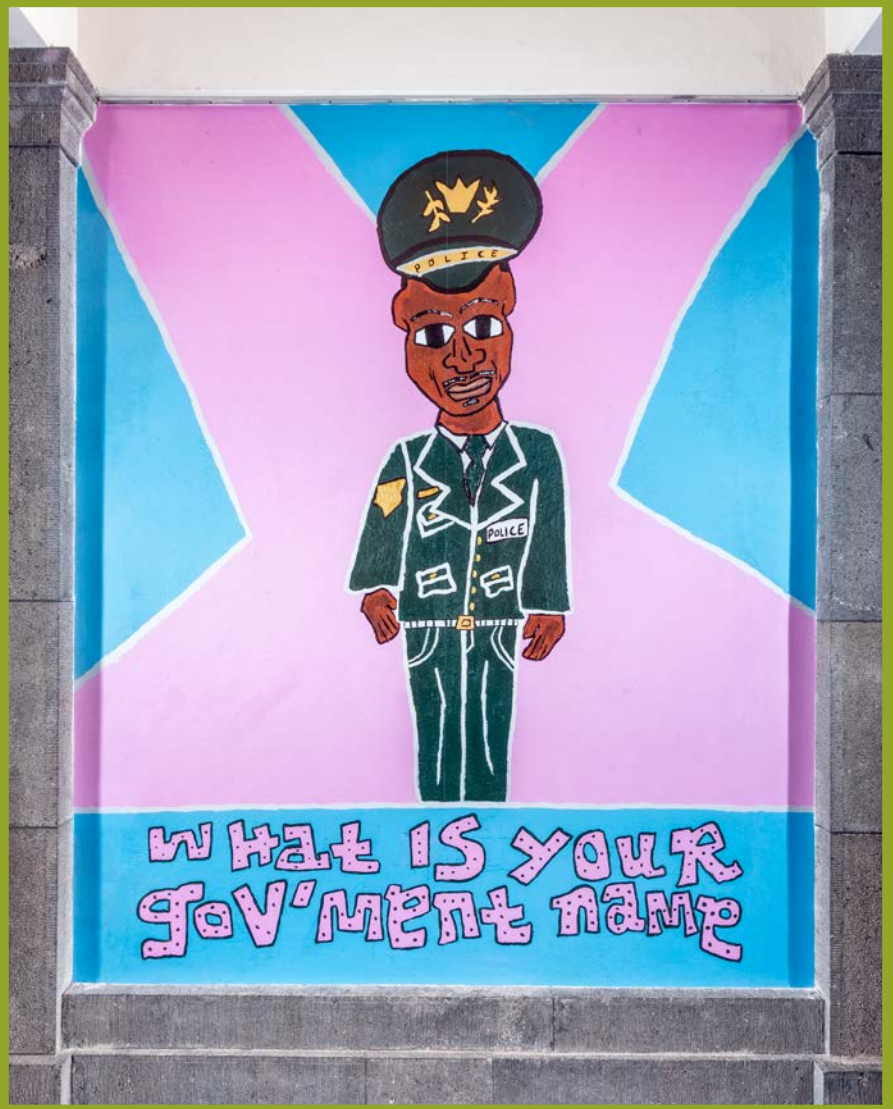
Left: Artist Olana Janfa at his *What is your Gov'ment Name* exhibition, held at the Immigration Museum.

Fresh off *What Is Your Gov'ment Name*, a major exhibition at the Immigration Museum that ended in August 2023, few may know that Janfa's artistic career only really began in 2018. A fortuitous collaboration with the cult Australian independent fashion brand Obus skyrocketed his worth in the attention economy, and as these things go in our hyperconnected world, one thing led to another and another. Now, previous clients include Nike—he was recently commissioned to design a basketball court in the Atherton Gardens public housing estate in Fitzroy in a partnership between the two entities. (Nike is a sponsor to Helping Hoops, a nonprofit organisation that helps children from low-income families get into basketball.) To supplement what he makes from art commissions, Janfa takes odd jobs in construction and hospitality. 'I don't want to stop working. It keeps me alive,' he tells me, saying non-art work is really where his inspiration comes from—he doesn't think that he can sit in a studio and figure out what the next painting will be simply from staring at a blank canvas or pottering around the house.

We turn a corner as Janfa continues to explain his artworks, most of which I've seen on Instagram. He points to a large-scale acrylic painting sitting on the ground, of a softly smiling Black man in profile as he stands in front of a crudely-drawn microphone wearing a t-shirt with the Western Union logo on it. 'This is *Send Money to Africa*. 'Cause they say one dollar a day, you know, in Africa, westerners go to Africa, just one dollar, send money to the colony, one dollar a day, save a child, you know?' Janfa quips. 'And this,' he points, grinning. 'Coconuts. It's about westernised Black people.'

As Janfa leads me past some bookshelves on the way to his garden-shed studio outside the house, he points at another one of his paintings hung up on the wall above. I recognise this as the ubiquitous *Privilege Party*, which he says was inspired by 'educated or privileged people getting an opportunity'. The painting shows three white hands holding cocktails in the air in a cheersing gesture, the words PRIVILEGE PARTY emblazoned at the top. 'Every weekend, they're having a party that's a success, or the opportunity is just a success, you know?'

Right: *What Is Your Gov'ment Name* artwork by Olana Janfa.



‘What I’m talking about [in my art] is my experience: what I see, what I feel. Most of the time, people don’t know the reality but the fantasy. If you come from certain places, you understand what’s real.’

As someone who has had no previous exposure to ‘art’ as it is used for the purposes of exhibition and consumption, and who had not being taught ‘art’ as a subject worthy of study (for example, he didn’t know mixing red and yellow creates orange until a few years ago), Janfa doesn’t think he cares that much about attempting to get on capital-A Art’s level. He’s often stated that, apart from life itself, and the aforementioned Ethiopian Orthodox Church art, he draws inspiration from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church he remembers from his childhood. Eras and jargon don’t particularly matter to him. ‘I think, as an artist, you need to live life first. You need to experience things,’ he says.

These combined factors must surely be the reason why his paintings exude a carefree yet sombre energy, all of which are often laced with a kind of oh-shucks dry humour and bursting with colour; people are illustrated in what can be called ‘post-postmodern caricatures’. Each painting also carries some kind of punchline, often witty slogans that also act as their titles. While this may be regarded as a somewhat expository, juvenile style, there are many more layers to Janfa’s work beyond what is on the surface, ironised to the point that they seem to openly poke fun at audiences’ expectations as much as they may validate them.

Left: Artist Olana Janfa at his *What is your Gov’ment Name* exhibition, held at the Immigration Museum.

Looking at his body of work so far, it seems to stem from a kaleidoscopic gaze that could very well be a byproduct of what the sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois calls 'double consciousness', to refer to the feeling of alienation many Black people and people of colour experience as they attempt to balance their search for self-determination against what is expected of them in white-dominated societies.

As someone who has lived in such societies on opposite ends of the world (Janfa moved to Australia from Norway in 2015, not long after a holiday to the continent), double consciousness is such a normal part of his day-to-day existence that he barely cares to comment on it. While he didn't grow up impoverished, he reminds me that Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. 'I just like to remind you where I come from. What I'm talking about [in my art] is my experience: what I see, what I feel. Most of the time, people don't know the reality but the fantasy. If you come from certain places, you understand what's real,' he continues.

When I ask him if he's working on anything at the moment, he's shy, implying that there's a 'big project' coming up. But, Janfa says, 'when you talk about things [before they're done], the window might take it away', a superstition familiar to many artists. But he is keen to exhibit more work after *What Is Your Gov'ment Name*, which he says saw great responses in the four months it was up. I ask if there were any memorable interactions. He chuckles. 'Okay. There was one old lady who asked me [after seeing *Get a White Friend*], 'Why do you need a white friend? Not a black friend?' And I said having a white friend is very useful: it opens doors and gets you opportunities. When people ask things like, 'How do you get this job? How do you get that job?' it is because I got a white friend.' This may very well be the underlying simplicity to Janfa's work: using whatever resources available to realise his visions, even if it seems at first contradictory to his own experience. The ironising can come later.

Right: *Get A White Friend* artwork by Olana Janfa.

MANA IN THE MUSEUM: A CEREMONY OF MEDICINE

BY VEISINIA TONGA

In the courtyard of the Immigration Museum in Naarm (Melbourne), two ancient Indigenous peoples met in ceremony—a conversation not just of language, but of deep recognition. Beneath the shadows of a colonial edifice, on the banks of the Birrarung (Yarra River), this exchange of cultural protocol and spiritual presence echoed across time, reclaiming space, voice and Mana. This was no ordinary gathering. It was the launch of the *Māreikura: Ka rere te rongoā* exhibition by multi-disciplinary artist Irihipeti Waretini.

Here, on the banks of the Birrarung, where in 1835 John Batman declared the beginning of the settlement that would become Melbourne, a powerful counter-narrative took form. The Immigration Museum—a space largely shaped to tell stories of colonial settlers and more recent migrant arrivals—found itself temporarily transformed. No longer just a monument to displacement and settler triumph, the building was recast as a Marae, a sacred gathering place for Māori, through the presence and power of *wāhine toa* (women warriors) who led a cultural welcome that turned the concrete into ceremony, the structure into story and the past into presence.

The significance of this site to the local Indigenous peoples cannot be overstated. For the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nation clans, this land has always been sacred—long before colonisation, before the concrete and glass—with the Birrarung flowing as a life source, a songline of connection. To stand here now, alongside *Māori whānau* (family), as we are welcomed to Country by Indigenous Elders and the Djirri Djirri dancers, is to honour that living history, to speak back to invasion with survival and to engage in a dialogue of Indigenous solidarity.

Left: Pou Atakau - Guardian Between Realms by Hayes Keepa & Irihipeti Waretini.

Above: Wāhine Māori with moko kauae.

At the heart of this moment was the *Māreikura: Ka rere te rongoā* exhibition—a profound and defiant reclaiming of Māori cultural sovereignty. The term Māreikura is still being remembered in the resurgence of Māori cosmology. The role of māreikura in modern Māori thought often intersects with mana wāhine, spiritual leadership, knowledge keeping, the feminine divine and healing. As an exhibition, it became both shrine and protest: a sacred embodiment of identity, resistance and pride. To step into the gallery was to step into a cultural heartbeat—pulsing with *whakapapa* (genealogy), *taonga* (treasures), and *wairua* (spirit).

Through large-scale photographic portraits of *wāhine* (women) adorned with moko kauae—traditional Māori women's facial markings—and surrounded by sacred objects, songs and stories, *Māreikura* claimed space unapologetically. It reasserted what colonisation sought to erase: that Māori culture is not only alive but sovereign, powerful and evolving.

The exhibit was not passive. It called out across the colonial walls of the museum, as kapahaka performances rang through the hallways. *Haka*, *waiata* (songs), and chants breathed life into the space, the reverberations of intergenerational Māori voices filling every corner. Many of the performers were *rangatahi* (youth), proudly continuing traditions that colonisers once banned in schools and homes. Their presence was a radical act of continuity, an assertion that Māori culture will not be reduced to museum artefacts or historical footnotes—it is a living, breathing culture.

The way that Irihipeti Waretini used *moko kauae* in the exhibition, placed in the context of ongoing Indigenous resistance, served as both a personal and collective reclamation. These marks are not fashion or decoration. They are sacred declarations of identity, lineage and survival—marks once criminalised, now proudly worn. They tell a story of revival.

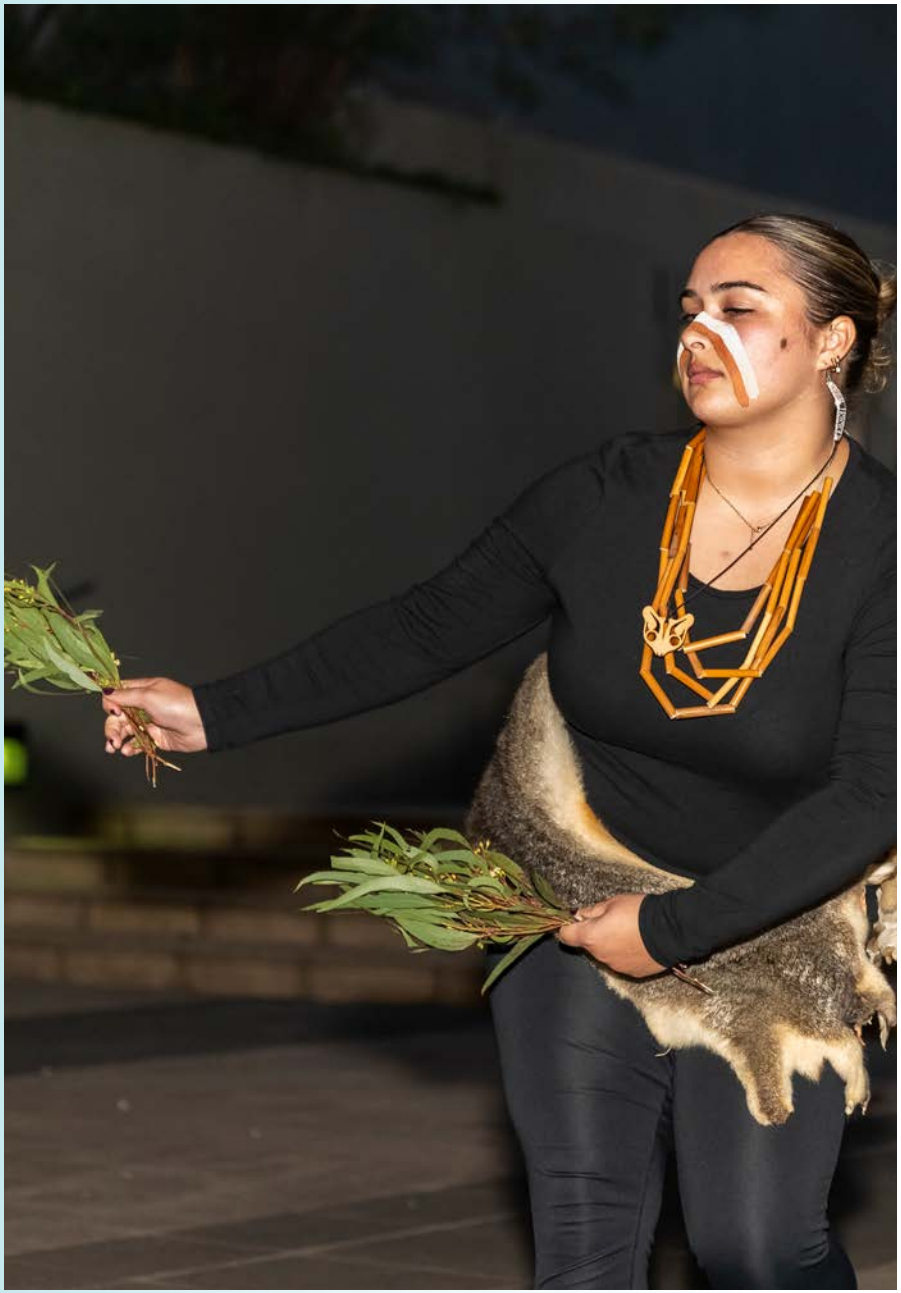
Above: Māreikura: Ka rere te rongoā
The medicine flows

But the *Māreikura* exhibition is more than a celebration. It is also a site of struggle. It speaks directly to the ongoing efforts to protect Māori rights under *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the Treaty of Waitangi)—and, by extension, calls attention to the absence of such a treaty in so-called Australia. The *hīkoi* (marches), the protests and the community campaigns are still ongoing in Aotearoa and are all part of a wider movement to uphold the original intent of the Treaty and resist the ongoing undermining by colonial legal and political systems.

At the same time, the exhibition reminds us of the interconnectedness of Indigenous struggles. Māori were granted voting rights in Australia in 1902—a full 60 years before Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be recognised as citizens in their own land. Māori, seen by the colonial authorities as more 'civilised', were granted limited privileges denied to First Nations peoples here. It is a sobering truth—one that acknowledges the complex positioning of Māori under the White Australia Policy: privileged in relation to Aboriginal people, but still subject to assimilationist logic and settler power.

This complexity does not divide. Instead, it deepens the call for Global Indigenous Solidarity—a theme that ran strong through every moment of the *Māreikura* experience. As members of two First Nations—Māori and Aboriginal—shared ceremony, space and purpose, they reminded us all that our futures are intertwined. Cultural survival is a collective project.

Today, Indigenous communities around the world are facing the accelerated erasure of language, stories and practices, intensified by the rise of the internet, the dominance of Western media and the ongoing exploitation of land and labour. The fight is not only to protect land and water, but to protect the sacred—the spiritual and cultural frameworks that guide how we live with each other and the Earth.



Above: Djirri Djirri Welcome to Country.

Above: Ngā Mātai Pūrua prepares their responses to Country.

Country, for Indigenous peoples, is never just land. It is an ancestor, a teacher and a relative. It is not something to be owned or traded, but something to be honoured, nurtured and protected. The extractive logic of colonial capitalism—which sees land as a commodity and resource—runs directly counter to the symbiotic relationship that Indigenous cultures maintain with their environments. Survival is not individual but communal. We depend on each other—human and non-human—for our collective thriving.

This was the unspoken thread woven through *Māreikura*. Beyond the visual, the exhibition was an invocation: a call to remember. To remember the deities, the teachings, the songs, the rivers and the ancestors. To refuse assimilation. To celebrate the sacred.

And to resist erasure.

Australia's education system still centres British conquest and white settler achievements. The foundational violence—the massacres, stolen generations, cultural genocides—remains poorly taught, if acknowledged at all. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still fighting for treaty, truth-telling and justice. In this context, *Māreikura* becomes more than an exhibition—it is a mirror held up to the nation's soul. It reflects both the violence of colonisation and the unbreakable strength of Indigenous resurgence.

For those of us privileged enough to witness the spiritual smoking ceremony that accompanied the opening—to see Aboriginal and Māori Elders stand side-by-side, to hear the *karanga* (ceremonial call), to feel the smoke cleanse and open the space—it was an affirmation of everything this continent still has to learn.

Below: Irihipeti Waretini —self portrait as Mother Mary & her brother Eneti as Rehua.

We need more of these moments.

More Indigenous-led exhibitions in our public institutions. More cross-cultural solidarity between First Nations peoples.

More education systems that centre Indigenous knowledge, not erase it. More sacred spaces reclaimed—not for nostalgia, but for the future.

The power of *Māreikura* lies not only in its beauty or its boldness, but in its reminder that culture is not static. It lives in the breath of language reclaimed, in the stance of a *haka*, in the ink of *moko kauae*, and in the songlines of this land.

It lives in the *wāhine* toa who stand tall in spaces once built to exclude them. It lives in the sacred ceremony of survival.

And it lives in every act of resistance that insists—still—that Indigenous peoples are not relics of the past but leaders of the future.

This is the essence of Global Indigenous Solidarity: not a slogan, but a strategy. A shared understanding that while our languages, lands and customs may differ, the forces we resist are often the same. And so are the visions we hold—of lands cared for, of ancestors honoured, of futures made just.

Let us listen.
Let us learn.
Let us follow the voices that have never stopped singing.

'The power of *Māreikura* lies not only in its beauty or its boldness, but in its reminder that culture is not static. It lives in the breath of language reclaimed, in the stance of a *haka*, in the ink of *moko kauae*, and in the songlines of this land.'

CULTURE MAKERS

WALA: A Journey to Ghana

Immigration Museum, Season One

WALA Drum and Dance Ensemble is Odai, Ago, Abli, Aflah, Dan and Kofi. WALA is a drum and dance ensemble from Ghana, West Africa, who hosted a cultural workshop of call and response songs, drumming, and dance, introducing participants to some of their diverse and interesting instruments, stories and cultural history.

Michelle Chen: Mini Melbourne

Immigration Museum and Melbourne Museum, Season One

RMIT game designer Michelle Chen delivered workshops for international students to create an online universe and their own Melbourne 'skin' through learning the craft of digital gaming. Michelle invited participants of all backgrounds and abilities to co-create a video game, celebrating the cultural diversity of Melbourne and the common threads that connect us all. Each participant's creation became a playable character in a virtual recreation of Melbourne and then a collaborative artwork for all museum visitors to play following the workshops.

Maleik Njoroge: Chess Without Borders

Immigration Museum and Melbourne Museum, Season One

Kenyan-born, Melbourne-based artist and model Maleik Njoroge established the All Tribes Are Beautiful Lab, an experimental space which creates chess products and curates unique chess experiences. Njoroge produced Chess Without Borders: a celebration of chess, migration, and diversity in our community at the Immigration Museum, encouraging active reflection on chess, art and community. 'The beauty of the game lies not only in its design and function, but what it offers the community,' says Njoroge. 'The game brings a universal language, governed by a logic that can only be appreciated and understood in practice.'
Chess Without Borders was first delivered at the Immigration Museum and later in the Learning Lab at Melbourne Museum.

CONTRIBUTORS

Olana Janfa: What's your Gov'ment Name

Immigration Museum, Season One

Melbourne-based rising star, Ethiopian-Norwegian artist Olana Janfa presented his exhibition What's your Gov'ment Name, reflecting on his migrant experience across a series of works that showcased his trademark colour, humour and engaging social commentary.
'Art has connected me strongly with my culture and given me a way to communicate my ideas and experiences without worrying about having perfect English,' says Janfa. 'I love the resourceful imperfection of broken English, and I celebrate it.'

Irihipeti Waretini: Māreikura

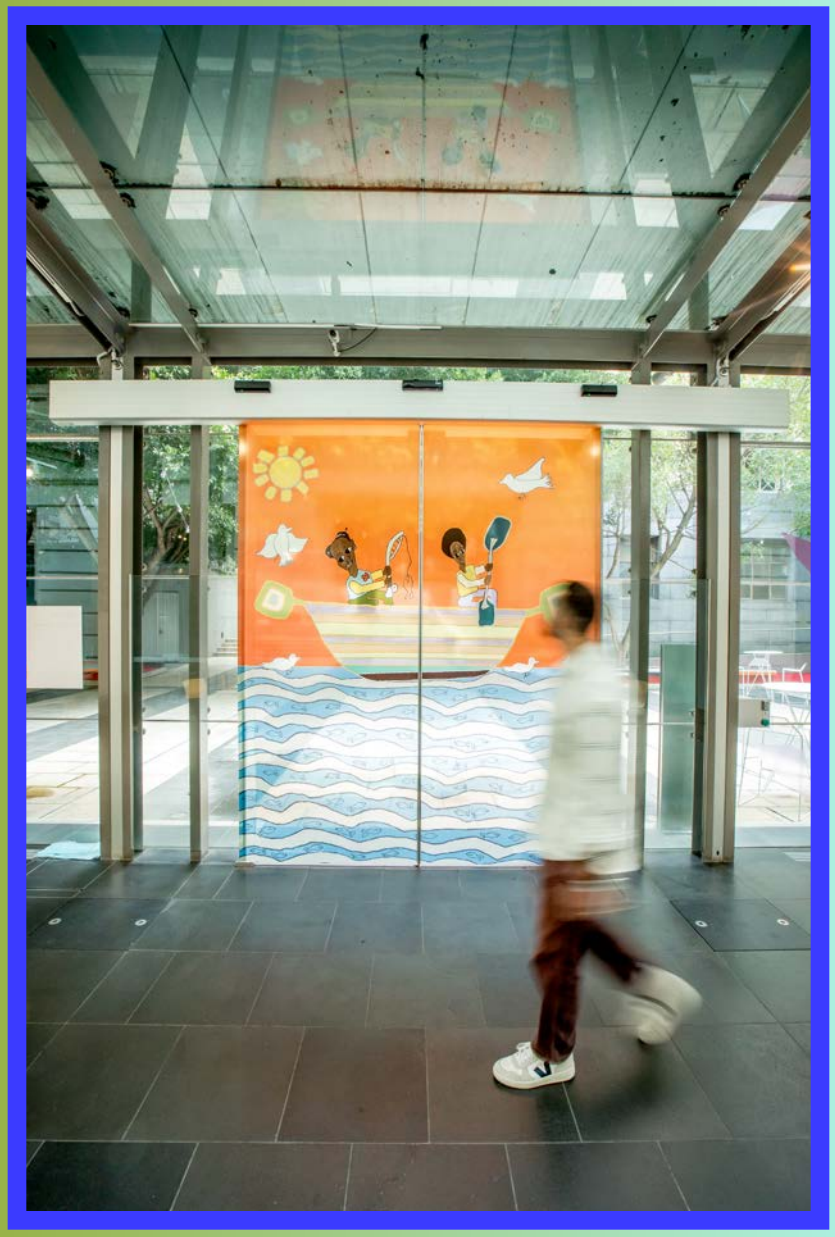
Immigration Museum, Season Two

Created by Indigenous storyteller Irihipeti Waretini, Māreikura: Ka rere te rongoā | the medicine flows explored traditional Māori sacredness. Portraying a contemporary, dramatic showing of cultural practices and knowledge systems, the exhibition was anchored by a carved pou (pillar) and features stunning photographic portraits of Māori women living in Naarm (Melbourne) with moko kauae (traditional chin tattoos), with additional installations of multimedia art, text film and soundscape.
Māreikura communicated the impacts colonial structures have had on the sacred feminine and spirituality and a gentle reminder of the medicine Indigenous Matriarchs hold for the wellbeing of community, culture and land.

Kate Robinson & Maria Birch-Morunga: Threads digital work and education workshops

Melbourne Museum and Immigration Museum, Season Two

Threads is a stop-motion animation exploring race, identity and belonging by Melbourne-based artists and co-hosts of the Being Biracial podcast, Maria Birch-Morunga and Kate Robinson. It captures the small, nourishing ways in which culture can be practised, rooting identity in place and rituals – for Maria and Kate a journey of connection with their Māori and Iranian heritages.
An immersive version of the stop motion was located in Melbourne Museum's Learning Lab and is permanently located on the Identity exhibition at Immigration Museum, including a display case of artefacts. Curriculum based workshops linked to the work were delivered to secondary students.



Above: Artist Olana Janfa at his *What is your Gov'ment Name* exhibition, held at the Immigration Museum.

MUSEUMS VICTORIA

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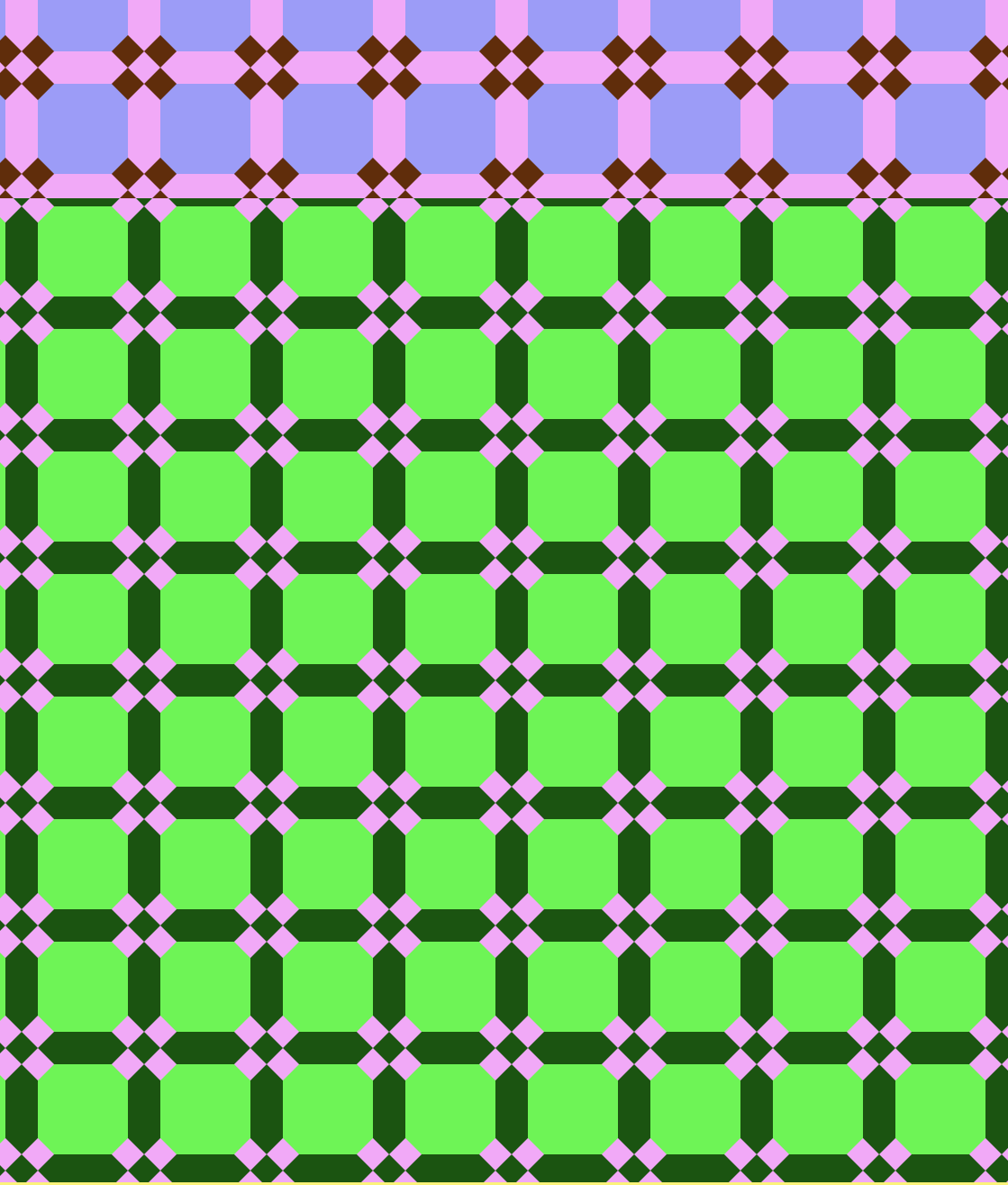

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