

MITAKUYE OYASIN

Tiffany Singh

When we say Mitakuye Oyasin – “All Our Relations” – the word Mitakuye means relations and Oyasin means more than family, more than a Nation, more than all of humankind. Everything that has a spirit. ¹

Chief Arvol Looking Horse

THE 2012 SYDNEY BIENNALE – THE THEME

The title of the 2012 Sydney Biennale, “All our Relations,” springs from the sense of wholeness and connection implied by the concluding phrase of all North American healing prayers and chants. The phrase “All my Relations” dedicates these invocations to all physical and spiritual relations that are part of the Great Spirit. When viewed in this light, the acknowledgement metaphorically describes our universal connection.

As humans, we engage in three primary modes with which we view and experience knowledge. Firstly, via the *objective*: the physical, outside world, the world of science and measurement, density and force. Secondly, via the *subjective*: the inside world, the space of thought, mind, idea and interiority that helps us understand meaning and our linkages with phenomena. Lastly, via the *spiritual*: the quantum world, shaped by transpatial descriptors and intersections, a spiritual dimension unlinked to religious dogma, described in ethereal, mystic, and yet experiential terms. All my relations; or, in Native Science, the “Implicate Order”.²

With considerable courage and élan, the Biennale curators have set out to build on such an experiential knowledge base, creating a venue that binds the artwork and artists together. Under its chosen title, the Biennale facilitates a resurgence of the sacred or spiritual to champion the intellect and theory, extending to the audience a sharing of consciousness and purpose that intersects with the artists' own. These manifestations, that seemingly travel across time and space, allow a synching between artist and audience that transcends traditional roles – relationships are re-established across the three ancient categories of Body, Mind, and Spirit, which in turn provide a space for us all to hear the distinctive, unique, yet cohesive harmonics which this ancient trinity has the potential to create.

This sacred and holistic framework inverts a modern view of separation that focuses on parts separate from each other and the environment. Native Americans, along with the other wisdom traditions, believe we are all synergistically part of a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts, and healing must be considered within this context.

The role of spirit and connection within a framework of healing allows for an exploration of the relationship between healing and the life force. It is not only the individual's spirit that is important but also the spirit of the healer; and the individual's family, community, environment. The medicine itself and, more importantly, healing must take into account the dynamics at work between these spiritual forces as part of a universal spirit. It is this aspect of healing and energetics that I believe links *Knock On The Sky Listen To The Sound*³ to the curatorial considerations behind this year's Biennale.

KNOCK ON THE SKY LISTEN TO THE SOUND

Knock On The Sky Listen To the Sound was conceived through a desire to extend the notion of artworks that examine the sacred and healing into a space beyond the gallery and into spaces that require balancing from histories or energies. The audience are invited to mediate with instruments denoting spiritual space – instruments believed to have a role in healing, through clearing the space and energy around the chosen structures or sites.

This work adheres to an openness, an inclusive-of-process mode and development that curators Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster have prioritised. The 18th Biennale of Sydney, "All our Relations," intends to focus on inclusionary practices of generative thinking, such as collaboration, conversation and compassion, in the face of coercion and destruction. The creation of conditions for an encounter in consonance with our surroundings brings an emphasis to what is already happening in the world at large. Drawing on the possibility of the present, the Biennale emerges from the engagement of all participants by using a model that begins with two curators in dialogue. This matrix of conversation extends to both artists and audiences in a multi-vocal correspondence. These various exchanges, affinities and empathies created a dynamic structure – the vascular and cellular structure and sinews of a kind of living, breathing organism – from which the Biennale's meanings grew. Artists worked in a context that allowed for mutual recognition, and audiences from differing backgrounds were part of this continual process of development, finding their own direction in these connections. It is in the meeting and making of ideas together that constructive consequences can flow.⁴

This non-linear pathway serves to endorse and illuminate experience and brings forth meta-conscious awareness and purpose to create meaning and interconnection. It is the maturing agency of collective and individual thinking, unpacking ideas around thinking without competitive comparisons – a kind of thinking that inspires what Māori have called aromatawai or self-reflection that instructs and transforms, and is vital to an understanding that prioritises the larger



Location 1. Tiffany Singh, *Knock on the Sky Listen to the Sound* (2011), bamboo wind chimes and mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012) at Cockatoo Island. Courtesy the artist.

transformations of society; this capacity to reflect, to think, use our minds and, most importantly, to feel out our innate connections with the world around us.

This call for a critical consciousness and a new respect for alternative ways of knowing, seeing and experiencing has been heard for millennia, and is what enduring practices have developed and processed: a knowledge ethic shaped by the needs of place and people. A cultural empiricism,⁵ so to speak, altered by the seasons, the sharing of ideas with others, with its own referential knowing steeped in ancestral memory. It is also real, alive and part of the external and internal worlds. A manifestation of access, as the work generates an energy all its own, outside its creators' expectations.

Knock on the Sky Listen to the Sound is a work that focuses on participation via audience engagement and artistic contribution. It is a work that relates to the role of healing, spirit and an ephemeral experience of itself. The notion of the pilgrimage embedded in a journey from one site to another invites the audience to enter a wide-open field of knowledge production and exchange with priorities in practice, relevance, context, consciousness, and with a shared common sense and experience.

The work intends to promote a knowledge gained through experience, both individual and collective, and a way of being, via a site-specific familiarity through years, generations, and lifetimes. In this way patterns emerge, collapsing time into space and all unknowns into mystery and story. It is knowing shaped by purpose and knowledge prioritised by having a function. Finally, it is an understanding and an ancient mode of spirituality that has endured time for a reason.

Most if not all belief systems contain in some way, shape or form the idea of the pilgrimage. Typically, this takes the form of a journey to a shrine or other location of importance to a person's beliefs and faith – although sometimes it can be a metaphorical journey into someone's own beliefs. Many believers attach spiritual importance to particular places or to the place of their "calling" or spiritual awakening, or of their connection, be it visual or verbal, with the divine. The title *Knock on the Sky Listen to the Sound* draws its origin from a Buddhist proverb which refers to the faculties of hearing, thought, and meditation, which correspond to the body, mind, and soul – reflecting the similar beliefs in tinana, hinengaro, and wairua in Maori tradition. This space of connectivity is what 'native intelligence' has erected as an enduring pattern of thinking and which has been extended with the aid of quantum sciences – the notion that a realm of unseen connecting patterns exist and that we are the causal linkages that modify its capacity.⁶

*The depth of relatedness is so powerful that it guides our lives. It is our Law.*⁷

Karen Martin, Aboriginal

At this Biennale there are many artworks which function in a gentle and inviting way, asking that the audience become co-authors with the artist in ways far beyond being mere witnesses to the work. They call for a comprehensive perspective from which to engage an idea and an object, prioritising alternative ways of thinking as a key challenge to secularism in modern society. By following the inscribed patterns of connected healing we are becoming, rather than witnessing, the patterns that develop and then intersect, like fractals converging with others in an infinite array of evolving life or the work of art.

The Biennale is an invitation to enter a comprehensive kind of thinking, seeing and feeling. It is an attempt to fuse the building blocks of cultural empiricism, with a different sensory immersion, a heightened sense of context, of the whole, with open arms to the experience. What is gained can then prove useful in shaping cultural sensitivities for different understandings.

Wind chimes were used in ancient Rome, as well as in both Eastern and Western Asia, near or on places of religious significance such as temples and shrines, and often in great numbers. They were hung from shrines and pagodas to ward off evil spirits and attract benevolent ones. Today, wind chimes are commonplace in the East and are used to

maximise the flow of chi, or life's energy. The intention is to allow the winds of fortune or chi to flow freely, as wind chimes can influence how chi flows through a space. The five-pronged chimes used for the Biennale are believed to help slow positive energy as it approaches the building, inviting it inside from all four directions. Here my work plays on a connection with the physical and non-physical states altered by our own seeing through the medium of sound and spirit that the chimes are calling on. It is about the energy and life-force found in both ourselves and in a meaning and experience that relates to our universe.

By framing a part of this work as a pilgrimage, the artist seems to endorse the new Jungian archetype of the pilgrimage as a universal human experience.⁸ The application of multiple sites creates a non-static developmental work that externally generates its own tools, channels and co-authorship. The notion of pilgrimage alludes to a discovery of what interdependence really means by listening to others, by watching how those who have more experience do things, and by sharing ideas when asked – and by feeling our way through something that is unfamiliar yet simultaneously resonates within us and through us to help us develop a quality within our relationships that will enable us to evolve, then finally to heal.

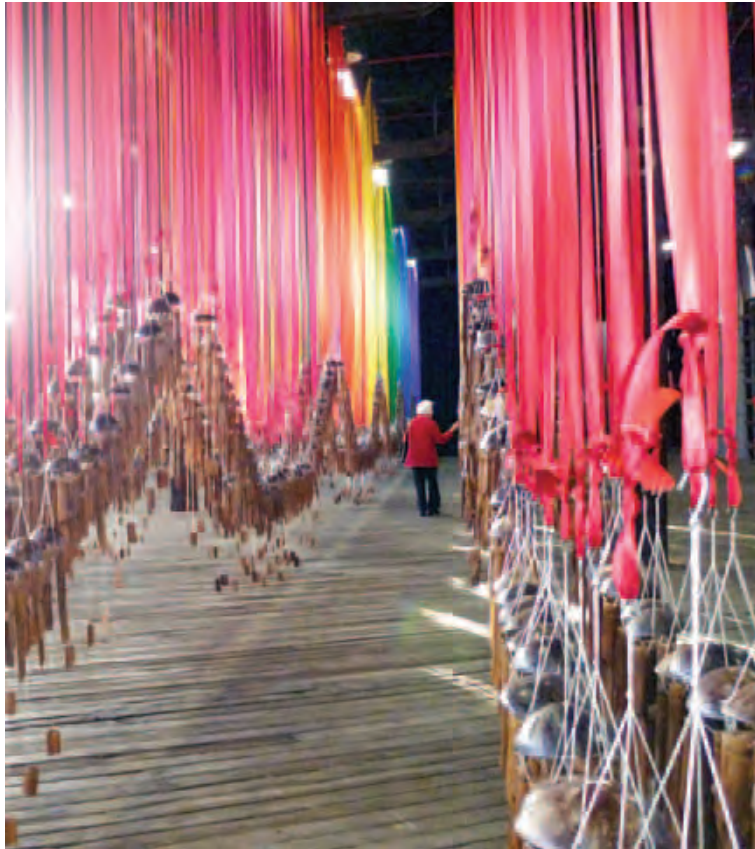
Activated through audience participation, the participatory element is opened via a ceremony held by the Gadigal-language people of Australia. The static installation located at Cockatoo Island, where 800 wind chimes are suspended in a geometric colour spectrum pattern, utilises the architecture of the open-air structure. The colour pattern of the chimes is a reference to the chakras, a Vedic concept referring to a number of wheel-like vortices which, according to traditional Indian medicine, exist on the outer surface of the subtle body of living beings. The chakras are said to be 'force centers' or whorls of energy permeating the subject from a point on the physical body. They are considered focal points for the reception and transmission of energies. This primary work's aural sensitivities function as the karakia for the chimes installed at Pier 2/3, ensuring their safe journey in their true essence, invoking spiritual guidance and protection.

At Pier 2/3 there are 1,000 wind chimes suspended from the ceiling by ribbons, in the same colours as the Cockatoo Island installation. Following the opening ceremony on the date of Imbolc, 7 August (a date corresponding to the intersection of the seasons, as the Northern Hemisphere is considered to be halfway through its summer and the Southern Hemisphere halfway through winter on this day), these chimes underwent a shift in state – from static to mobile, from private to public.

The work attempts to invoke elements of the sacred at every interval of its conception and realisation. It encourages the audience to imbue the work with their own energy, bringing their own belief systems and historical references to the pilgrimage, functioning in a space of participation while pondering the experience carefully, and then inspiring the world with the quality of their participation while creating joy within the process. These elements of physical, intellectual, and spiritual accompaniment of the work allow the creation of a pathway to healing, to sensory perception and to an experience of the work that bestows a function or purpose on the audience that goes beyond being spectators of a visual work of art.

WJ Norton Jr, who in 1940 wrote *Modern Art and Social Responsibility*, spoke of an artist's obligation to society, and suggested that in recognising the world crisis of the time, artists can no longer make work in a void of moral consciousness – art that carries no responsibility, art without spiritual content, art that places form above content or art that denies the very state of the real world in which we exist. It is with these thoughts in mind that the project is opened up to the audience, inviting them to become the makers, sharing in a conscious co-authorship that has the ability to affect the way we create, appreciate and value our own, intuitive sacred spaces.

My work aligned itself with the curatorial direction of the Biennale by focusing on the connections between site, audience, and spirit. Reiterating the sentiments of the curators, the 18th Biennale of Sydney is rooted in storytelling as it is currently being re-imagined as a coming-into-being. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, both teller and



Location 2. Tiffany Singh, *Knock on the Sky Listen to the Sound* (2011), bamboo wind chimes and mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012) at Pier 2/3. Courtesy the artist.

listener inhabit the space of the story. Telling stories connects us and allows us to care, to be; it is an activity that fosters collaboration; it aggregates knowledge and generates new ideas; it ignites change; and, ultimately, it builds community.⁹

This narrative lens promotes an ephemeral and sensory perception of the work that shifts the reading of it from being primarily aesthetic and intellectual to one that engages the senses in a real and profound way, allowing the audience to absorb an energetic reading and feeling of the work before any intellectual analysis begins.

OTHER WORK

This Biennale is a showcase of artists working in a spiritual way. Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya's most recent works include *Tales of Ugetsu*, which created a magical, enchanted aesthetic through a waterfall-like fog installation in a garden where wind sensors controlled the production of fog and lighting by responding to the presence of viewers; and *Fog over Asuka Breathes with Ancient Life* (2011), where fog completely covered the oldest stone tomb in Japan. She created a magical and suspended reality, where the spaces in between become present and reinvigorated.



Location 2. Tiffany Singh, *Knock on the Sky Listen to the Sound* (2011), bamboo wind chimes and mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012) at Pier 2/3. Courtesy the artist.

Sriwhana Spong is another New Zealand artist who explores the relationship between physical and spiritual worlds and the differing cultural attitudes of East and West.

Also using sound as an other-worldly signifier is Ann Veronica Janssens, best known for her light and mist installations as these immersive and ephemeral sculptures infiltrate the exhibition space in an examination of the body's relation to time and space. She works with materials including lighting, artificial fog, projections and sound to create environments that evoke an experience of sensory deprivation within the viewer. Sensory perception is played with again by Reinier Rietveld and Craigie Horsfield from the Netherlands who produce sensory-engaged work through the use of 22 speakers which are combined with self-designed software by Rietveld to create a unique, site-specific, surround-sound experience at the Turbine Hall on Cockatoo Island. Their installation creates idiosyncratic, yet hauntingly beautiful, site-specific sonic dream work, eliciting an abstract sense of melancholia, a dystopian intertextual weave of sonic noir that affects our emotional responses of the uncanny.

Alongside these sensory-engaged works are artists who speak of spirit through their motifs and engaged ceremony activity. The title of Alick Tipoti's new work, *Girelal*, translates as 'dances.' It shows the cultural connection between the physical and the spiritual worlds, and depicts the stages and sequences of traditional chants and some of the totems and stories that the Maluyigal weave into their dance. Coming from a line of dance masters and choreographers, he continues the tradition. As his is an oral culture, Tipoti illustrates traditional teachings through singing and dancing from the spirits to the elders, to the youth and back to the spirits – a spiritual teaching cycle few can understand. With the blessing of his elders and cultural mentors, Tipoti has composed and choreographed chants, not sacred but spiritual, that are performed in association with the exhibition of *Girelal*.

"Post Commodity," a collective of American Indian descendants, cut away the floor of the Gallery of New South Wales, revealing the earth beneath and thus making it into a spiritual, cultural, and physical portal – a point of transformation between worlds – from which an Indigenous worldview emerges, creating a discourse on regional

and international sustainability. The block of concrete uncovered – the foundation of the 'Western' cultural institution – functions as a trophy celebrating Indigenous intervention in opposition to a Western scientific worldview, honouring the Indigenous knowledge of sustainability within a localised geographic and ecological system.

CONCLUSION

These artworks, having the ability to push and pull at religious conditions in a sensory and emotive way, promote an intuitive reading and understanding of the concepts valued by the other. They provide us with a space of suspension from the intellectual, a guiding of spirit, a fundamental shift to feeling that allows us all to share in the commonality of the human experience. Not governed by the insights of theory or a taught academia, this mode of perceiving – based on what one feels to be true, even without conscious reasoning – becomes instinctive and intuitive.

So the Biennale creates the right time and space continuum to speak of the spiritual dimension of life. This discussion of spirituality is not centred on a religious idea – we just think it is. It is time to shake off the negative religious stigma surrounding spirituality in an attempt to clear our minds, as it has been proven, stitched, sung and experienced that we are more than our bodies, more than our minds.¹⁰ Here is a Biennale that accepts that it is a culture shaped around an environment and the specific needs of people – simply articulated in the ability to feel a connection, regardless of our academic achievements. In essence, it is a space where we relate.

Tiffany Singh lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand. Her philosophies and practice encompass influences as varied as modernism, Eastern and Western spiritual beliefs, Jungian psychology and ancient cultures. Of Maori, Indian and Pacific Island descent, her cultural diversity enables her to draw from many pools of knowledge, philosophy and mythology. This mix of cultures and aesthetics is evident in her artwork, which consists largely of natural, mixed-media installations combined with ceremonial and ritualistic materials gathered from the everyday. Singh's recent and upcoming projects include the 2012 Sydney Biennale; a residency at No#1 Shanthi Road, Bangalore, India; the 2013 Auckland Festival of the Arts; a year-long installation at the Auckland Art Gallery Learning Centre; and an invitation to a residency at the Montalvo Arts Centre in California in 2013.

- 1 Chief Arvol Looking Horse, "White Buffalo Teachings", Earth Code: International Network, http://paulapeterson.com/White_Buffalo.html
- 2 Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (New York: Clear Light Publishers, 2000).
- 3 Tiffany Singh, mixed media installation, 2011.
- 4 <http://bos18.com/exhibition-overview>.
- 5 Michael Payne, *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
- 6 Ervin Laszlo, *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2007).
- 7 Karen Lillian Martin, *Please Knock Before You Enter: Aboriginal Regulation of Outsiders and the Implications for Researchers*, Post Pressed, 2008, p.70.
- 8 Jean Dalby Clift and Wallace Clift, *The Archetype of Pilgrimage: Outer Action With Inner Meaning* (New York & Mahwah: The Paulist Press, 1996).
- 9 <http://bos18.com/exhibition-overview>.
- 10 Vine Deloria, *Spirit and Reason* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999).