

A photograph showing a person's bare feet on a concrete floor. A white plastic bag is on the floor to the left, and blue jeans are on the floor to the right. The text 'Personal Space' is overlaid in the center in a large, white, sans-serif font.

# Personal Space

May 2020

Tanu Gago \ Atong Atem \ Campbell Patterson  
Natasha Matila-Smith \ Janet Lilo

# Personal Space

Serena Bentley

2019 Curator-at-large – CIRCUIT

I was eight months pregnant with my first child when I was invited to curate CIRCUIT's 2019 Artist Cinema Commissions program. As someone from Aotearoa who has lived in Australia for the past twelve years I have always felt the tug of home. With the arrival of my first child this tug had a different weight now. *Where did I belong in the world? Where does my daughter? Where does comfort lie?*

Home can be permanent, transient, or imagined—a place to work towards, leave behind, escape from or return to later. 'Home' for me was currently unresolved. And accordingly, the provocation for the artists in what became titled **Personal Space** was filled with questions of intimacy and distance;

*Is home a place we get to choose for ourselves? When you think about yours what does it look like, and what will it look like in the future? What does home look like from the inside versus the outside?*



Campbell  
Patterson  
**Untitled**  
2019  
6 min. 33 sec.  
Digital video,  
sound/silent

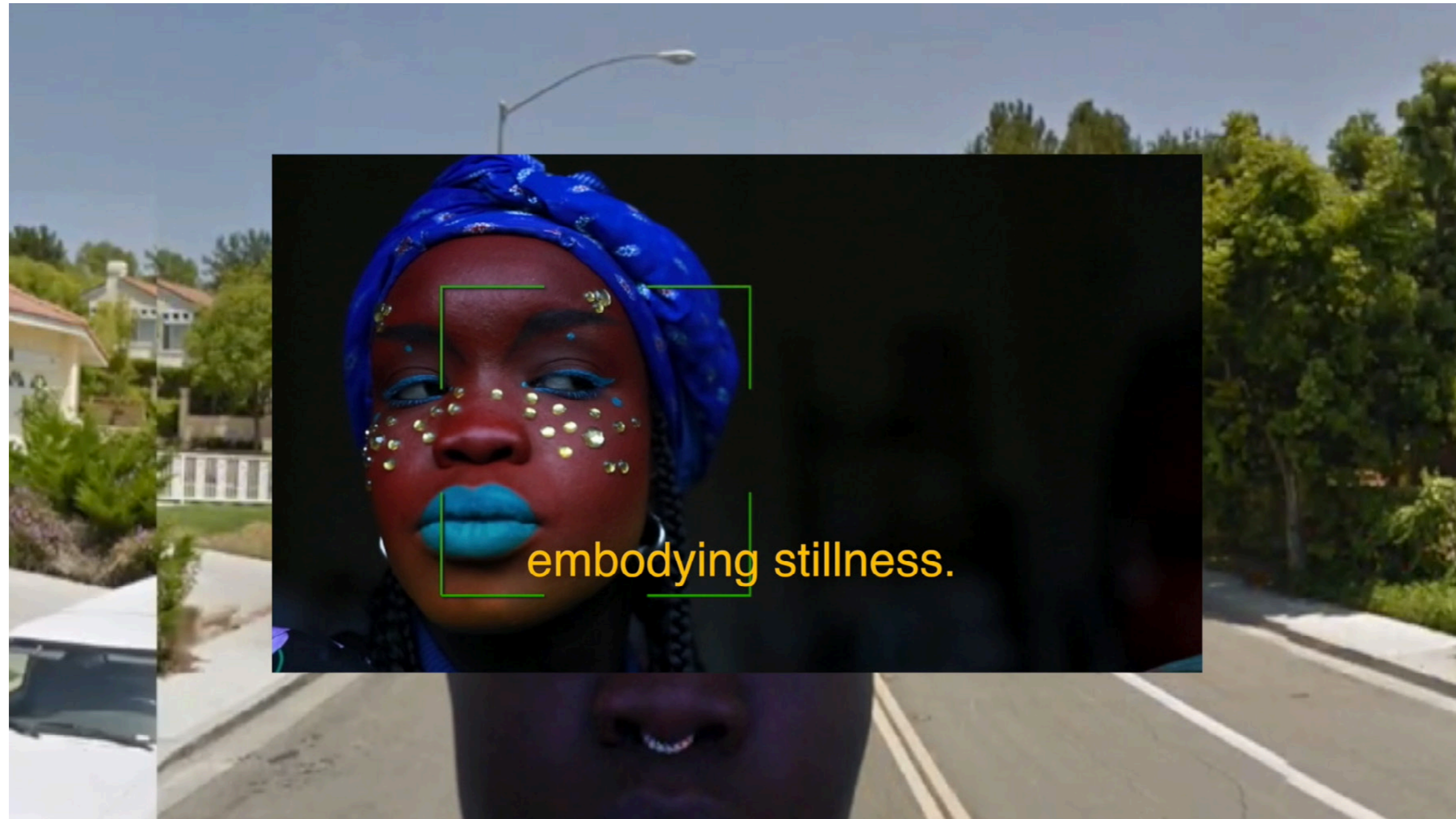


When selecting artists for **Personal Space** particular works sprung to mind. Campbell Patterson's now iconic series of videos **Lifting my Mother for as Long as I can** (2006–2011) is described exactly by the work's title. Recorded every year around his mother's birthday in front of a heavily patterned curtain in the family living room, this intimate action—like much of his work—occurred behind closed doors, and is publicly shared after the fact via video.

Patterson's new work for **Personal Space** is his first with someone else filming. Despite this, **Untitled** (2019) retains similar ritualistic gestures to his previous works. Donning a pair of orange juice soaked underpants procured from an op shop, Patterson enacts a simple, repetitive movement, repeatedly stamping on a sponge on the floor as his jeans darken with juicy moisture. The video seeps with squishy, sticky textures and absurd, seemingly futile movements. There is something slightly uncomfortable about witnessing what happens behind Patterson's closed doors.

His gestures reflect deeper concerns. Originally from Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland but currently based outside of Ōtepoti/Dunedin, Patterson is acutely aware of the ever increasing cost of housing, with the median

house price in Tāmaki Makaurau now hitting the million dollar mark. The cost of returning to his hometown is prohibitive and symbols within the film reflect his sense of hopelessness. We all enjoy the comfort of a clean pair of underpants. Sodden and stamped upon they become an analogy for Patterson's frustrations. **Untitled** is bookended by the blinking lights of an oncoming train and the artist's movements echo them. When renting a home, one must be in a constant state of readiness, anticipating the possibility of being upended and moved at the whims of an owner or landlord.



Atong Atem  
**Zero**  
 2019  
 5 min. 31 sec.  
 Digital video,  
 sound

The impermanence of home can also be the result of political unrest. This was the case for Atong Atem. Due to conflict in Ethiopia (where she was born) and South Sudan (where she and her family are from), the Naarm/Melbourne based artist spent her early years in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya before moving to Australia as a child. Working mainly in photography and video, Atem explores migrant narratives and the African diaspora.

**Zero** (2019) tracks her migration from Africa to Australia using Google Maps. Zooming in and out street by street, place by place, we get a sense of the neighbourhoods Atem has occupied in the idiosyncrasies captured by Google Maps' roving cameras—a herd of cows, stacks of rubbish, passing pedestrians. But this is not just a cartographic journey. Layered in and atop these landscapes is footage of the artist herself. Renowned

for her photographic explorations of blackness and the construction of identity through portraiture, Atem often presents herself as subject in highly decorated guises. In **Zero** she traverses public and private domains through two different incarnations. In the first, she is stripped back—bare shouldered and without makeup, superimposed on the suburban and rural Australian landscapes she has occupied. In the second, she is heavily made up, posing for an unseen

camera, her face framed and reframed by the flickering viewfinder. In this central image, Atem's makeup is dramatic, almost scifi (recalling her interest in the writing of Octavia Butler and Afro-Futurism). There is a vibration between her glamorous, otherworldly camouflage and the everyday environment she records herself in—her bedroom. This intimate interior space becomes an arena in which the artist performs. In the back of the shot we see stacks

of clothes and other everyday detritus, thus creating a tension between fantasy and reality. Flowing through the work is a dreamlike, stream of consciousness text—*'you lay here once and thought about what it might take for your body to be part of a constellation'*. This layering of selves, places and text reveals how our experiences of home build our identity.

Natasha Matila-Smith is also interested in how identities are constructed, particularly online. Through her art, writing and online presence, Matila-Smith has created a persona and a practice that explores the tropes of theatrical, romantic longing. Her work is simultaneously deeply vulnerable and scathingly funny. It often features texts that emulate online confessions found on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. While a lot of these confessions may be genuine, some are performative, created or amplified for public disclosure, and Matila-Smith toys with the line between the two—it is hard to decipher where the self ends and the performance begins.

My work considers the round-the-clock/constant need for the persona, but particularly in regard to our value as romantic entities. I am interested in the relationship between our romantic 'performativity' and capitalism/wider networks. How this works in the bedroom...<sup>1</sup>

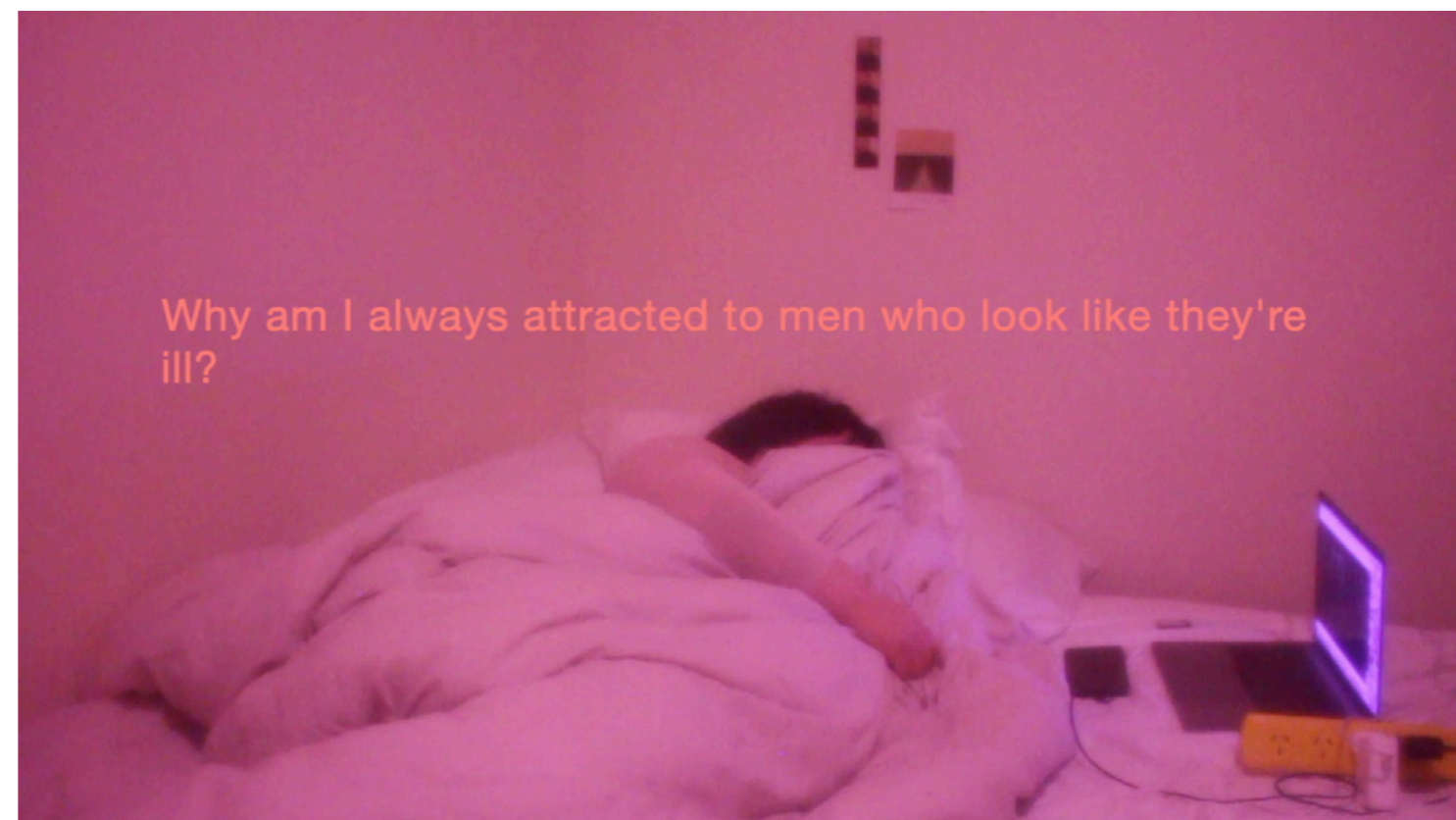
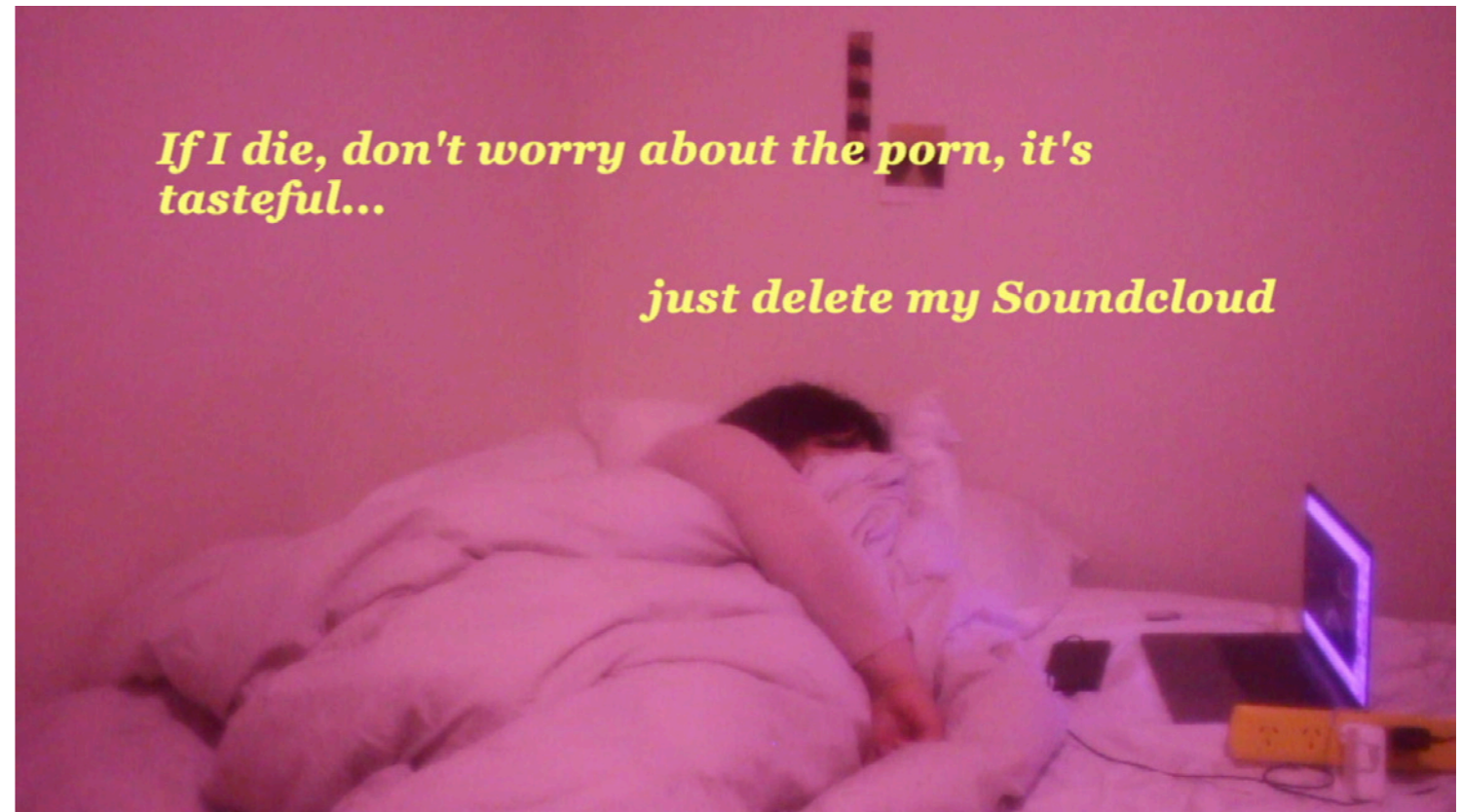
1. Natasha Matila-Smith in email correspondence with the writer, 29/8/19

2. Natasha Matila-Smith in email correspondence with the writer, 15/9/19

In her new work **If I die, please delete my Soundcloud** (2019) we enter this most intimate of spaces to observe Matila-Smith lying in bed, illuminated by the pink glow of her laptop. We have been invited in, but only so far. Matila-Smith reveals her thoughts but not her face, which is obscured by folds of blanket. Intimacy lies in the texts that materialise onscreen, revealing thoughts we might think but be reticent to share—'my loneliness is manageable but I think I'm just a bit tired of doing things on my own' or 'I'm ready to have my heart broken again'. Her work recalls late nights online, scrolling through a smartphone or laptop, or sometimes both simultaneously. Matila-Smith is physically alone but also connected to a virtual, online community; 'the glow of the laptop running all night makes me feel physically safe'. The different styles and colours of the floating texts suggest a proliferation of online voices, a chorus of vulnerabilities.

The negative effects of social media are well documented. Excessive use can compromise sleep, self-esteem and relationships as well as increase depression, anxiety and loneliness. With the 24/7 nature of social media and screen culture, when does the persona get to rest? But is this merely my own generational concern, one perhaps borne not only of my own perspective as someone on the Generation X/Millennial cusp but as mother of a newborn entering the world in 2019? Matila-Smith takes a more philosophical approach; 'it exists and I exist, and we all exist and that's that'.<sup>2</sup>

Natasha  
Matila-Smith  
**If I die, please  
delete my  
Soundcloud**  
7 min. 35 sec.  
Digital video,  
sound

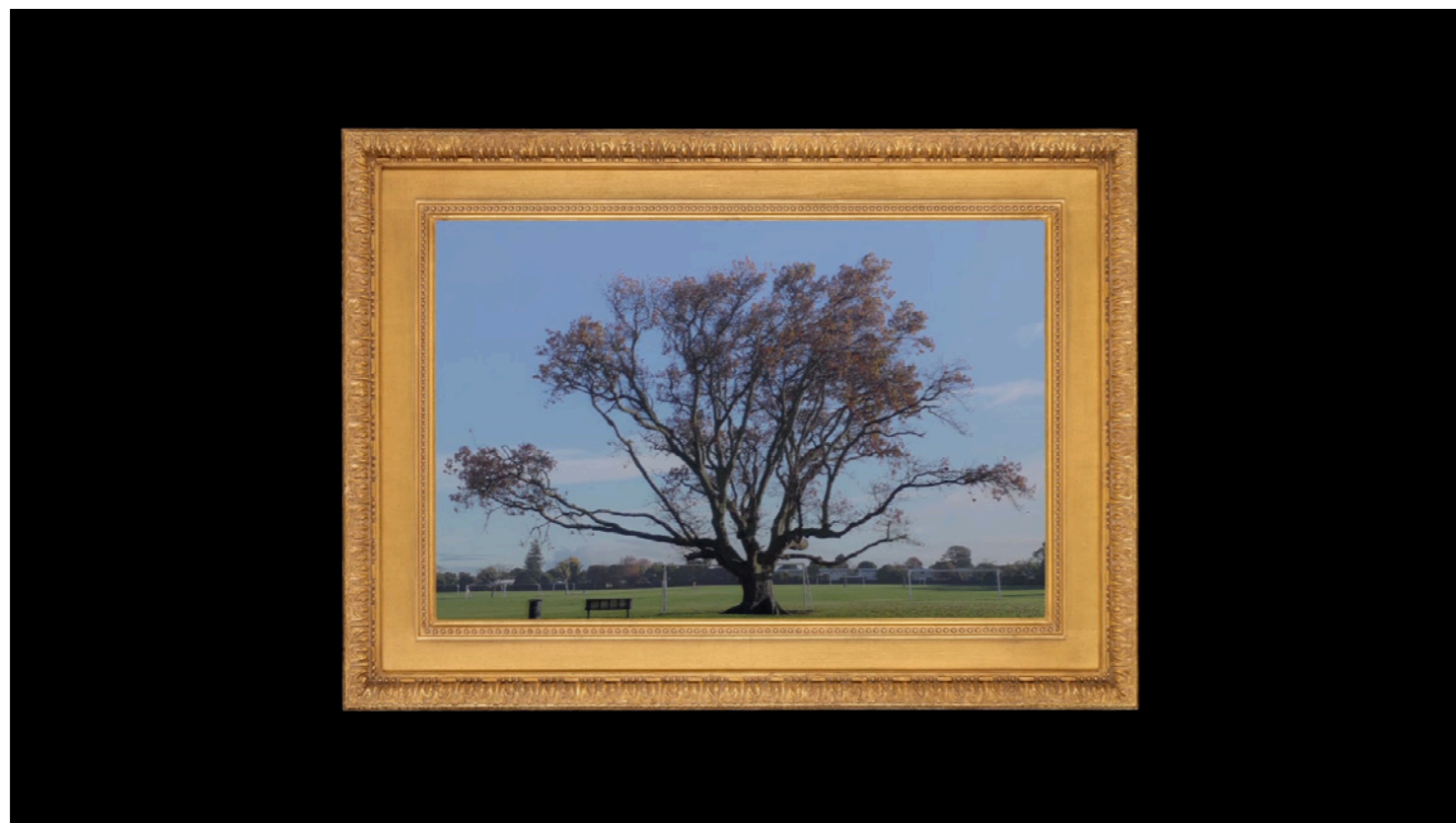


Janet Lilo  
**Untitled**  
2019  
4 min. 30 sec.  
Digital video,  
sound



Janet Lilo is interested in social media too, often using it as source material for her work. An active participant on Instagram, she has for the past seven years posted images (sometimes daily) of a magnificent tree, sitting at the edge of a sports field, viewed from outside her window. This tree is central to her new work **Untitled** (2019). It appears in an ornate gold frame, akin to one you might find hanging in someone's living room. Bleeding from one image to the next, the tree morphs between seasons and times of day, reflecting the artist's interest in recording time and space. Another of the work's central motifs is a domestic fire, the crackling sound of which permeates the soundtrack, along with a piano rendition of the pop song **Faded** (2015) by Alan Walker played by the artist's son, Harry, as well as the **Tika Tonu** haka performed by him and his classmates at Owairaka District School. Together, these sounds and images reflect on the decline of a relationship, the disbanding of one home and the creation of another. The tree was a fixture across the road from Lilo's family home, its' immolation at the end of the film marking the end of that time. Yet from the ashes new things grow. As Lilo carves out a new path and new home for herself and her sons, the **Tika Tonu** haka provides strength for the path forward;

He hiki aha to hiki?  
He hiki roa to hiki?  
I a ha hā!  
E tama, te uaua ana  
E tama, te mārō  
Ro ina hoki ra  
Te tohe o te uaua na  
E tāu nei.  
'What is this problem  
you are carrying?  
How long have you  
been carrying it for?  
Have you got that?  
Right, let's go on.  
So son, although it may  
be difficult for you  
and son, although it  
seems to be unyielding  
no matter how long  
you reflect on it  
the answer to the problem  
is here inside you'





Tanu Gago  
**Savage in the Garden**  
 2019  
 4 min. 51 sec.  
 Digital video,  
 sound

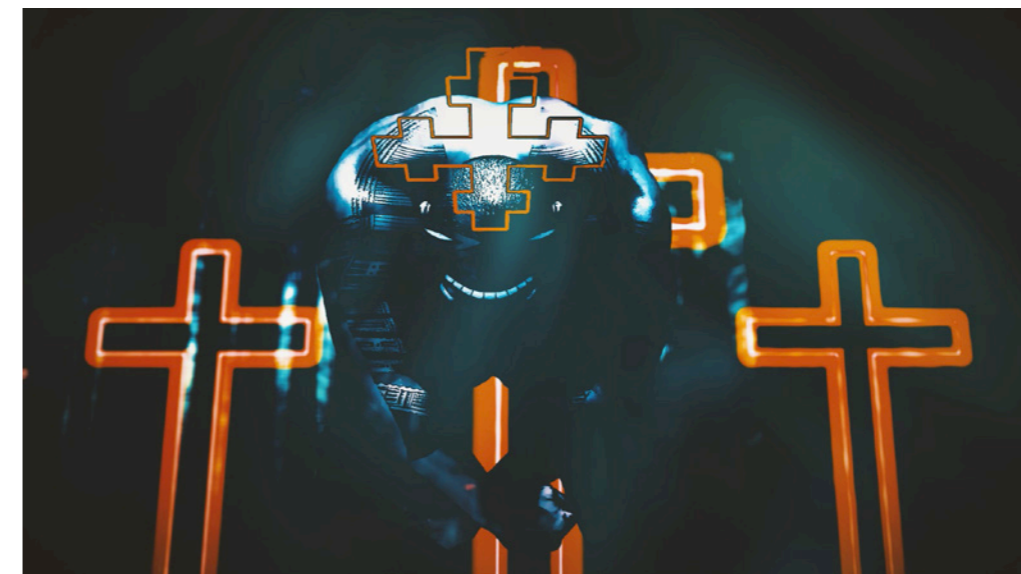


Home is not just about place but also about the people you surround yourself with—the family you belong to or create. Tanu Gago creates work first and foremost for Pacific Island audiences and is co-founder of the remarkable community that is and surrounds Pacific LGBT Arts Collective FAF SWAG (established in 2012 with fellow artist Pati Solomona Tyrell). A key concern for Gago is destabilising conventional notions of gender and sexuality, particularly in relation to Polynesian men. His new work **Savage in the Garden** challenges their reductive, often highly sexual-

ised representation in mainstream media and the damaging imposition of toxic hetero-masculinity and Christian/colonial values upon Pacific people; ‘What happens when the home you occupy is no longer safe for you to disagree with these values, to in a sense be disobedient to them?’ Central to the work is the poem Let me know e tama written this year by Hohua Ropate Kurene and recited by Gago that eloquently addresses this postcolonial fatigue;

Come here.  
 Deliver your tired body  
 from the west to the shore,  
 And take up rest in the deep.

Set to a thumping soundtrack by Mxshi Mo, Gago presents highly stylized Polynesian men wearing lavalava and Pe’a, their faces obscured by masks. A counterpoint to his previous film **APPARATUS** (2018) that asserted the individuality of the Polynesian men represented, the men in **Savage in the Garden** are deliberately homogenous and anonymous. Here, Gago delves into stereotypes, making these men ‘so fucking ‘native’ as a means of reclaiming the gaze and recentering my personal realities of HOME.’<sup>3</sup>



3. Tanu Gago in email correspondence with the writer, 27/9/19

I am privileged to call two places home—Tāmaki Makaurau where I was born and raised, and Naarm/Melbourne, where I currently live. I inhabit these places as the direct result of colonisation. Accordingly, home is inherently political as well as deeply personal. Asked; ‘what does home mean to you?’ the artists in **Personal Space** have addressed this complex and loaded proposition through the diverse themes of dispossession, migration, intimacy, queer activism, the domestic, and online and physical communities. As much as we might crave permanence, our homes inevitably change through a variety of circumstances.

In the years to come, where will my child call home? How will she understand the two countries of her parents? What will be the future social reality of Aotearoa described by the artists in the films in Personal Space? And how will she inhabit the emergent digital spaces still to come? Ultimately, home is what we make it. I recently listened to a podcast about people experiencing homelessness in which one interviewee had, after many years, found a place to live. When asked how best to describe that place his response resonated. For him, as for many of us, ‘home is love.’<sup>4</sup>

**Serena Bentley**

Bentley is a curator currently based in Melbourne. She is CIRCUIT’s 2019 Curator-at-large

4. Cane Roberts in the *Terrible, Thanks for Asking* podcast, ‘Home?’ <https://www.ttfa.org/episode/2019/05/28/71-home>



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