

Talking Dance: Dance Ecology Two

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Jade Dewi Tyas
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Victoria
Hunt



Kirk
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CHOREOGRAPH
INVEST
INSPIRE

CRITICAL



For the second edition of *Talking Dance: Dance Ecology Two*, I have been talking to New South Wales-based dance and performance makers Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal, Victoria Hunt and Kirk Page.

Speaking with each of the artists individually, it quickly becomes clear how strongly their work as artists is fuelled by how they negotiate their cultural identity as people. In fact, their cultural and artistic identities are inextricably linked.

Cover Page Photo credits:
Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal – Matthew Syres
Victoria Hunt – Kate Holmes
Kirk Page – Kate Holmes

Critical Path

When talking to all three artists together, it also becomes apparent that curiosity plays a major role in their lives as well as their work. Not surprisingly, they all have longstanding relationships with Critical Path.

Interestingly, it was during Charles Koroneho's Critical Path workshop in 2017 where Victoria, Jade and Kirk came together in a creative environment for the first time. They had known each other for years and Kirk had worked with both Jade and Victoria on different projects, but Jade and Victoria had never met in a work-related context. Victoria remembers 'a lot of excitement' on both parts: 'There was something gravitational about us.' 'Yes, attraction!' Jade laughs. 'Electromagnetic communication.'

Charles, a New Zealand artist of Maori descent, had been a significant mentor to Victoria, and she relished the opportunity for Jade and Kirk to be introduced to him: 'I was really excited for you to meet Charles. He and Tess de Quincy have been such wonderful guides and mentors for me.' Jade says she can still 'feel the vitality of that shared experience together.'

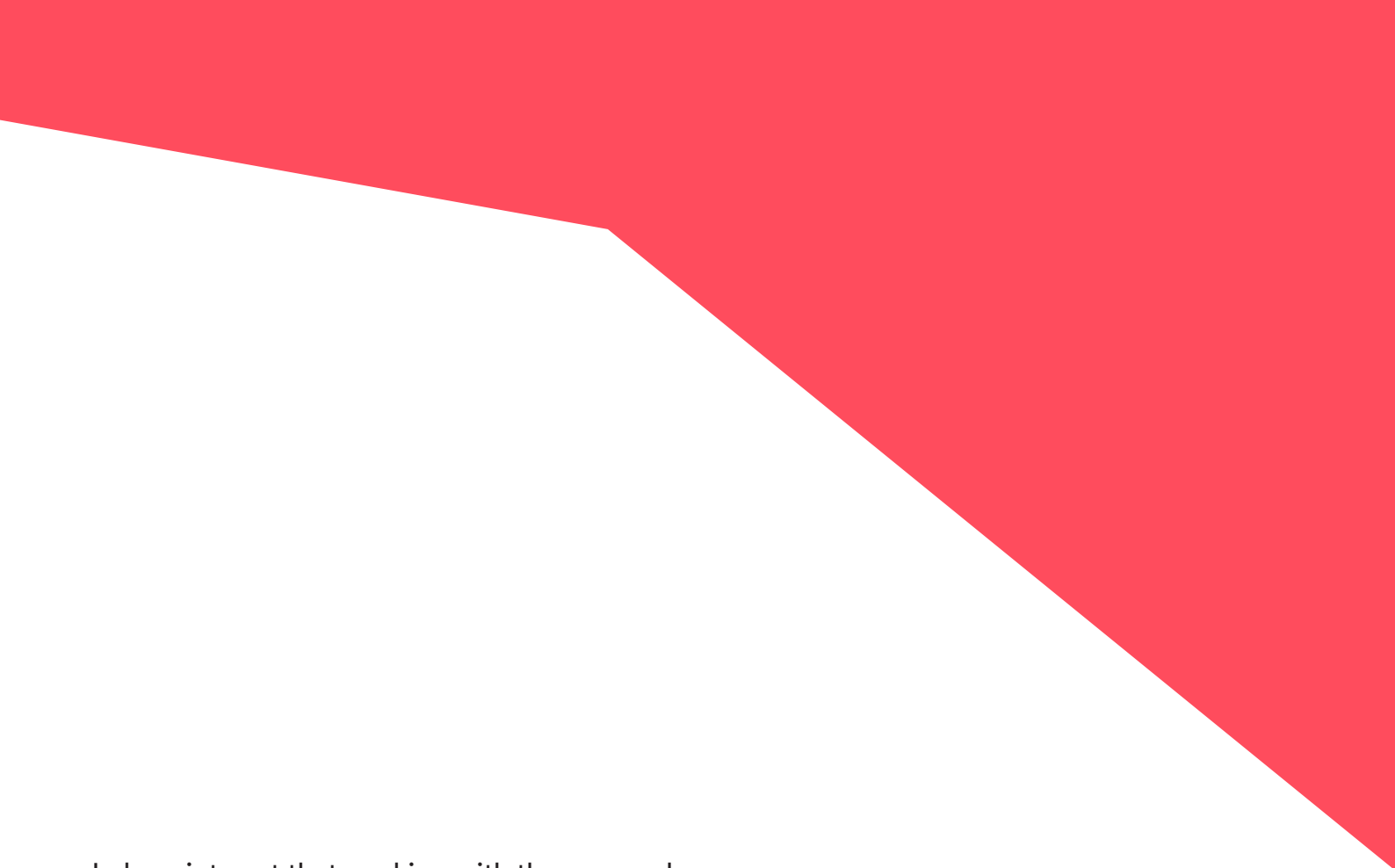
Horses Mouth

The first time Victoria, Jade and Kirk worked together was on Horses Mouth, a partnership between Beyond Empathy and Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA) in 2018. The program aimed to engage young Indigenous artists through a series of workshops and creative developments and look at the themes of protest and personal stories from a First Nations perspective. Kirk, then Associate Director of NORPA and in charge of the project, brought on Jade and Victoria as co-facilitators.

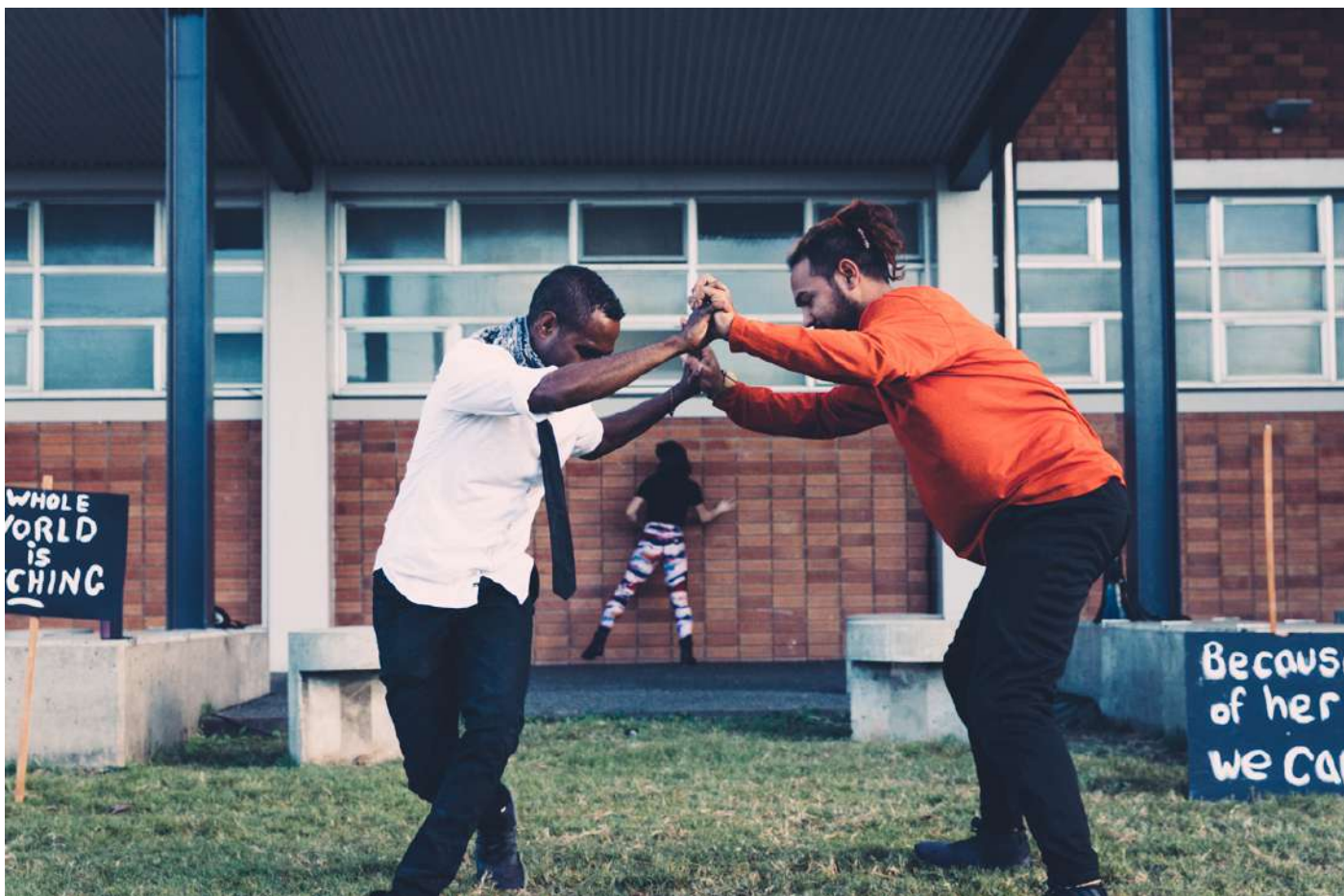
Even though they are good friends and know each other well, they all take a lot of care to find ways of working together mindfully, Victoria explains: 'We are not taking for granted that we know certain things about each other and that we're just going to be able to collaborate. It actually takes a lot of work and patience and some probing and generosity with each other to hold that space to listen.' Kirk agrees: 'Yeah, even before we start creating material and work with other people, it is about that listening and that landing. It's vital that we all feel we can give in that space.'

This is especially important as they are dealing with young people, Kirk stresses. 'It is about them and their stories and us creating a space where they can flourish and feel confident. So, we're passing on our own experiences of getting to that place and we share that with them.'

The importance of 'deep listening' when working with artists from First Nations backgrounds is not to be underestimated, according to Victoria: 'We take a moment to understand and acknowledge all the different lineages that become present in the room and in the space through each of our own embodiments as the site of inheritance and the site of intersections between all of our teachers and our inspirations, and the lands we've grown up on and our ancestors.' Adds Kirk: 'It's not like we turn up at 10am and off we go; we're landing, we're arriving. And there is a feedback that's happening in the room, there is talk, there's tension we're listening to. We're listening to each other, we're listening to the artists, we're listening to the country we're on.'



Jade points out that working with the personal stories of young First Nations artists often brings about emotions of anger and grief. In those instances, she says, it's critical to 'respectfully acknowledge that something has happened and continues to happen. Our governance, the institutions, the systems that we live in, they make Indigenous peoples invisible. That's the foundation where we begin, it's a key part of being together with these artists and the work. It's always present.' In that respect, dance plays a crucial role, finds Victoria: 'I think with dance there's a way of metabolising some of these energies that can get stuck in the body. To dance the trauma, or dance the pain, to be able to have them move through the body, move them out into the space, have them caught and held by another body and then moved around between bodies, and in the spirit of creation and creativity as well, is a really powerful thing.'



Horses Mouth (2018) Kirk Page, with Victoria Hunt and Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal. Pictured: Benjamin Creek & Jaymen Drahm. Photo credit Kate Holmes

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Inner Workings

So, taking into account the experiences of working together, what would Victoria, Jade and Kirk say defines their ecology? Victoria volunteers: 'I feel like there is an understanding of our relations that we are sensitive to, and that's why I've loved working with Kirk and with Jade on the projects that we have worked on. Also, just as friends and people, with ideas about how to be in the world, how to be artists in the world - mothers, parents, fathers, people with cultures that extend back through ancestral lines that also are very rich.' Kirk confirms that friendship is at the centre of their collaborative partnership: 'We really respect each other. And I think often we don't get the opportunity to work in those spaces where we can just be ourselves in that sense perhaps, as bodies of culture and performers who have had a certain experience.'

For Jade, the respect she has for Kirk and Victoria, also extends to their work: 'I have deep regard for the work. That's another part of the trust.' She elaborates: 'I feel I get to be myself. I'm held. I can be vulnerable and safe. They're rare values in collaboration. I can dive into not knowing and explore intuitive questioning that's often beyond or without language initially.' And as for the actual work they have done together? 'There is a fierce

courage and bravery that Kirk and Vic have that I admire and want to have, too,' Jade says. 'I feel radical when I'm around them.'

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Tangi Wai (2015) Victoria Hunt. Photo by Alex Davis

Smoke

For the last couple of years, Kirk and Jade have been collaborating on the development of a new dance theatre production called Smoke. For this purpose, they have undertaken a series of research residencies, including one at Critical Path at the end of last year. 'Initially,' Jade says, 'the research was to look at the role of smoke in ritual and Earth, in relation to the cultural body. Another question we had was how to decolonise our practices and reach towards Indigenous systems to inspire new processes when making work.' The creative process until now, even though productive and highly generative, has not been a smooth one, Jade concedes. 'We both have been in Emergency and Intensive Care wards over the course of the project so far.' This was due to an ankle injury in Kirk's case and complications during childbirth in Jade's.

Throughout their research, Jade recounts, they had encountered a lot of racialised trauma - historical, intergenerational and institutional. This, combined with experiencing traumatic events in their own lives, eventually led them to focus their research on personal trauma. Last summer's bushfires have also had a major impact on the direction of their research. Kirk recalls: 'Through the bushfires, it became clear that this smoke, this thing, is everywhere.

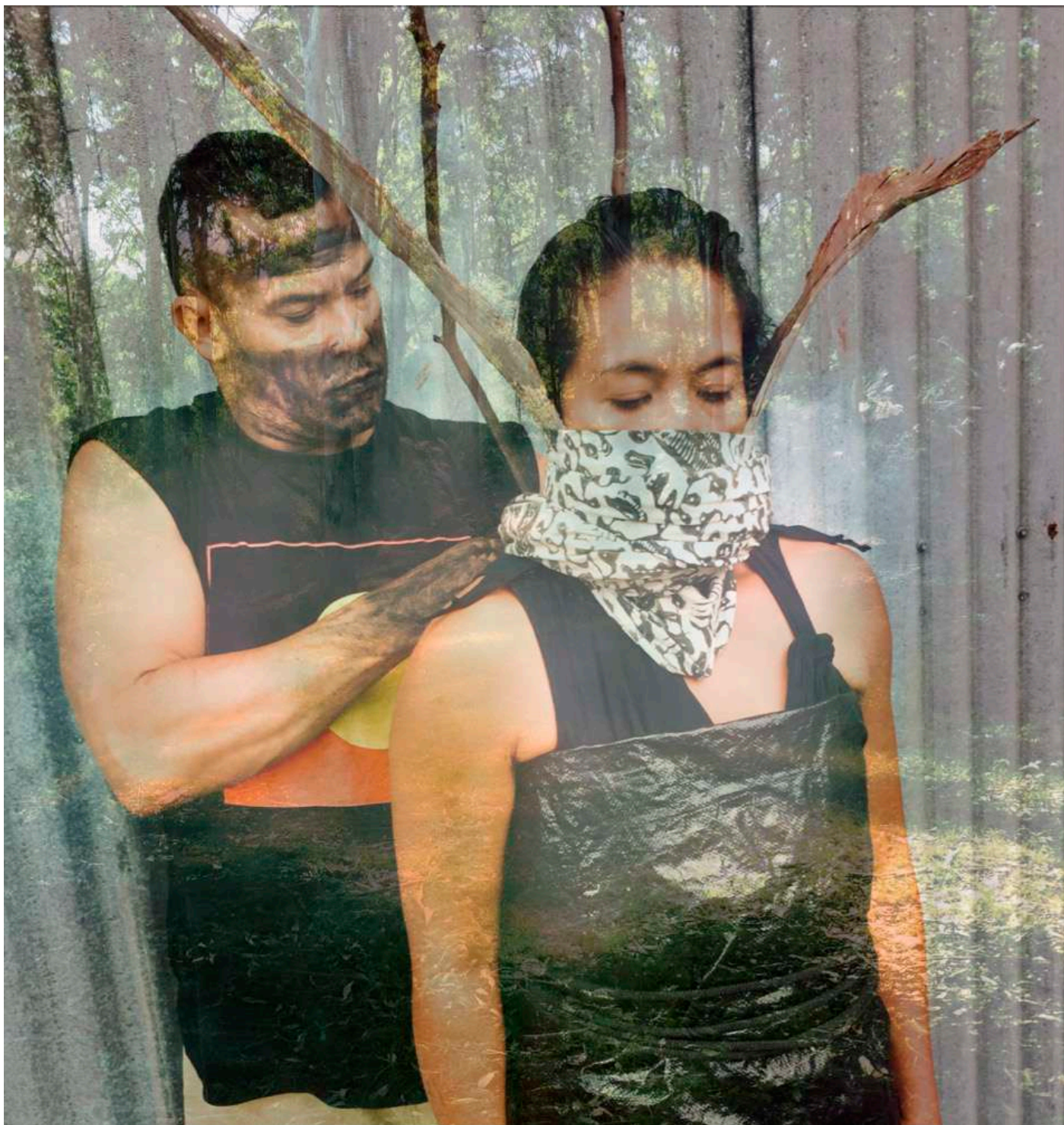
And it's really dangerous as well as soothing and cleansing. It made me think about smoke in a very different way.' Neither the shifts in direction of the research nor the ongoing accumulation of ideas seems to faze Kirk and Jade. 'The significance of the project is that it is personal,' Jade maintains. 'Our bodies are directly affected by catastrophic bushfires, a global pandemic and race-based traumatic stress, the plume of smoke is getting bigger.'

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Their research on Smoke has also taken Kirk and Jade to Indonesia. They journeyed to three different islands – Java, Bali and Kalimantan. Visiting Merapi volcano, Borobudur temple and observing Keraton ceremonies, they connected with Jade’s Javanese Yogya heritage. They also met with cultural custodians from different suku (tribes) while teaching at an Indigenous Arts Festival in Ubud, Bali.

Being taken on to country with the Indigenous Dayak, visiting the rehabilitation islands of the Orangutans and seeing how small parts of local peatland forests are being regenerated, has left an indelible impression on Jade: ‘The cultural wisdom of people who are physically embodying traditional ecological practices, in relation with 30 years of haze and these burning landscapes, is profound.’

And how was it for Kirk to undertake research outside of Australia? ‘You arrive and everything you think you know, you end up having to let go of in a sense,’ he states. Quoting Bundjalung elder Roy Gordon with saying ‘eyes that have never seen and ears that have never heard’, he continues: ‘Because we are working in a space around country and culture, how do we get to that place where we see more and hear more? Without closing down and going: ‘That’s enough. We’ve got that thing and now we can move on to the next thing.’ That’s the quest.’



*Smoke (2019) Jade Dewi
Tyas Tunggul & Kirk Page.
Photo credit Helen Tyas
Tunggul*

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The Land

There is no question that ‘the land’ plays a central role in the thinking of all three artists. Not only in relation to their own personal history but also in the way it informs their work. About her own experiences in this regard, Victoria says:

‘When we talked about the importance of being on the land and land-based learning, it makes me remember how powerful those experiences were, of being back on my ancestral lands.’ She elaborates: ‘What it is to consult with the mountain or to consult with the lake and to consult at the pre-dawn moments, watching mist travel across the surface of the lake as the light’s changing, and then seeing all these different figures and configurations in the mist, and seeing them in a sacred lens, from a sacred position.’

And in terms of the impact these experiences have on her work as a choreographer and dancer? ‘They become conversations that become like whispers of messaging, and guides. And that becomes the journey of how to bring that into my body so that, in performance, I can bring that back and continue to find a way to dance those fleeting moments and the memory of being on land.’ For Victoria, ‘the spiritual, cultural and ancestral’ is at the heart of who she is as

an artist and a person: ‘It’s really necessary to think this way because I feel that’s what being Indigenous is for me, in terms of how I’m trying to understand this incredible shifting of lifeways that do depart from a kind of Western system that I was brought up on.’

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Both Kirk and Jade are currently based in the Northern Rivers area, on Bundjalung country. Kirk, originally from Ipswich in Queensland, has lived in Sydney for most of his adult life.

When I ask him if being based in Lismore means being back on the country that he was brought up on, he explains: ‘The Bundjalung footprint covers the area from the Mid North Coast, into the Gold Coast and up to South East Queensland. And my lineage is a part of this songline. So yes, I’m closer than I was before.’ As for the complex relationship many Indigenous Australians have towards the land of their ancestors, due to the devastating effects of colonisation, Kirk contends: ‘We come from a shattered history.

We’re getting to understand and we’re reclaiming that through processes, whether that’s on Jade’s country or through conversations with Victoria about her experiences or whether it’s about me speaking to Roy. I’m putting pieces of the puzzle back together each time. So, in that sense, I don’t have a section or area of land that I am the custodian of, but I belong to the history of that space.’ Kirk knows that rebuilding is not an easy task: ‘That in itself requires a lot of research and work and understanding and

decolonising and reprogramming, in the sense that you’re walking away from everything that you’ve known and that you’ve been conditioned to understand about yourself, even inside your own family.’ Referring back to Victoria and Jade, he adds: ‘And we are reclaiming that through our practice and through these relationships.’



Opal Vapour (2012) Jade Dewi Tyas Tunggal. Photo credit Paula Van Beek

Parenthood and Humour

Another thing that connects Victoria, Jade and Kirk is that they are all parents. Jade has two children. As does Kirk. Victoria has one. In fact, Kirk and Victoria share a daughter as part of what they describe as ‘an indigiqueer family’. So, in what way has being a parent reshaped their outlook on life? And has it impacted on how they pursue their artistic practice? Jade feels that her children’s curiosity and imagination are a constant source of inspiration for her own creativity: ‘Recalling my own embryology during pregnancies and being with my children as they are learning through discovery of their developmental movement patterns is invigorating.’

Kirk agrees: ‘Rediscovering the joy and that sense of play when you are in the moment with a child – that’s pretty special.’ Victoria, for her part, is acutely aware that her daughter’s generation will inherit ‘all the things that we’re dealing with right now.’ It’s a big motivator, she says, to address some of today’s ‘huge crisis moments’ so she’ll be able to look back at her daughter and say: ‘I tried.’

What’s striking when talking to Victoria, Jade and Kirk is how joyous and warm the tone is between them, even though they are continuously broaching difficult subjects.

Maybe this comes from being around children a lot? There is definitely the sense that they take what they do very seriously, without taking themselves seriously. Victoria concurs: ‘Some of the things that we draw from are very heavy and trauma-ridden. As Kirk said, it’s dealing with the pieces of a shattered reality that is still present. So, the antidote to that is humour and laughter. It’s really important to be able to walk away. Hold it as long as you can and then be able to drop it, put it down and go, ok, just shake it out.’

Jade echoes Victoria, acknowledging that whenever the three artists interact with each other there is a sense of trying to balance the sacred with the mundane. For her, it comes down to 'elasticity'. 'When collaborating with Kirk and Vic there is a vibration quality [makes bouncing sound], like a big bounce.' She laughs: 'Not a big bang but a big bounce.' And yet, perfect equilibrium remains elusive. According to Victoria, it is impossible to engage nonstop with 'all the things that we navigate that are tricky'.

However, she seems to speak for everyone in the group when she says: 'What we can do, though, is create moments of ritual and ceremony to be a container for something to happen and then we can open it and close it, in a way that is respectful and honouring the protocols, and then be able to put it down again.' After a pause, she adds: 'That's choreography to me.'

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