

Each year we set one question which our exhibitions and events orbit in the company of artists and audiences. Across the year, we explore what this question offers us and what artworks and their authors can weave together. In 2025, we ask “is language large enough?” You can think of this as one exhibition in four parts, as a score played across a calendar, or maybe even as a forest. Join us.

2025
Is language large enough?

Echo

Erika Holm, Ngaroma Riley,
Tarika Sabherwal

18 October – 20 December 2025

In the myth of Echo and Narcissus, Echo is a wood nymph cursed to only repeat the last words spoken to her. After falling in love with Narcissus, who was cursed to fall in love with his own reflection, Echo concealed her shame by hiding herself in the forest. Over time her body disappeared, leaving only her voice and her bones. The enduring influence of Greek mythology on Western culture is vast and evident still, not least demonstrated by a shared familiarity with these characters' names—if not their origins, then their subsequent meanings and affiliations. However, if these stories remain relevant in contemporary life, what of other mythologies and from elsewhere? The three artists in this exhibition contend with the possibilities of mythology through their own methods of storytelling. They resist Echo's curse of repetition by forging new narratives, developing vocabularies that speak to their own experience of the world.

Tarika Sabherwal builds on a practice that draws on imagery taken from classical Hindu literature. Raised secular in India as a child, Tarika's practice looks to the way Hindu teachings are expressed through everyday family ritual. Her work is interested in the pictorial and the material of painting to interrogate how meaning is made through the making of images. In this exhibition, she presents two large-scale paintings with a band of horses appearing across both. In *The rush* (2025), a figure appears floating as if being carried downstream among a sea of horses. In *Off beat* (2025), a figure stands with horses surrounding her like flames. The imagery here is drawn from the story of the Agni Pariksha, a trial by fire undertaken by the Hindu goddess Sita to prove her chastity and purity. Sabherwal depicts her own partner as the central protagonist in these paintings, and in doing so challenges traditionally held values and questions casually held notions of femininity, strength, and power.

Artspace Aotearoa is a public contemporary art gallery, founded in 1987 by artists and arts workers. We platform contemporary art practice, develop discourse, provide resources for artists, and connect the Aotearoa context with international conversations. Our mission is to critically explore contemporary life, led by artists.

In Ngaroma Riley's *Tihei... mauri ora!* (2025), a carved tekoteko stands over a small figure laying on a metal surgery-cum-workshop table. The tekoteko holds a hand drill emitting a beam of light into the figure's manawa ora—its physical heart—imbuing it with mauri. In this work, Ngaroma playfully draws together a range of creation stories pertaining to Māori cosmology, popular culture, and autobiography. In one reading it references Tāne Mahuta, who breathed life into the first woman which transformed her from clay into the living being named Hineahuone. In other readings, through its perhaps more illustrative aspects, *Tihei... mauri ora!* also references the macabre Frankenstein or sorrowful Geppetto. The work is also a self-portrait of the artist's journey to whakairo, through the navigation of customary and contemporary knowledge systems.

Erika Holm's *Apology* (2025) creates mythology through a site of apologetic exchange. At the centre of the artwork, a set of interlocked bronze-cast feet are suspended on a brazed steel frame. Enclosed in the four posts of the frame, a miniature bed sits atop a wooden pedestal. Two high bench seats straddle the central composition, both facing one another. Within each seat, the walls hold a felted screen of human hair and wool. Collected gradually, the hair comes from people close to the artist, such as friends or partners. Audiences are invited to sit and place their hands in the sculpture and to touch fingertips with someone opposite. Here, feelings of shame that might shadow an apology are bound in bodily experience. The felted textiles of the chairs could reference the Greek Fates or Moirai, who would spin, measure, and cut yarn determining the destiny of mortals and immortals alike. The cavern of the bronze feet allows only the slightest touch, speaking to the toils of attempting intimacy. In *Apology*, Erika creates ritual with narrative and action to ameliorate the often-absurd extremes of emotion.

Mythology can function as fable by giving narrative to the mayhem and disorder of existence. At their best, myths allow for contradiction, nuance, complexity, and multiplicity. At worst, long told stories become inherited wisdoms held as truths. These artists use various mythologies, or storytelling more broadly, as sites of analysis to explore some of life's more uncertain and abstract moments.

In his article “Rethinking Free Speech” Moana Jackson describes spoken language on the marae where two forces are activated: the force of the atua Rongo (deity associated with peace) and the force of the atua Tūmatauenga (deity associated with war). Each atua plays a specific role in establishing points of contact between speakers which cover the gamut of expressive capacity, from confrontation to reflection to nourishment. Jackson states: “In that situation, both the right to speak freely and the exercise of the right itself are ideals to be protected because the marae exists to nurture relationships.”³

Drawing from Jackson’s description of marae oration that requires relationships to be at the foreground and the establishing of a specific argument in the background, this year’s programme considers relating in the capacity of being in relation with one another and with the world. “Is language large enough?” therefore also asks how to construct a condition for life flexible enough to contain the span of the technical to the erotic? How can a condition for life be built that deviates from the entrenched “mythical norm” that Lorde so starkly warns us of? What languages are required to conjure deviations from the standards of form, of thought, of body, of desire?

Tenuous political, social, economic, and environmental terrains might adrenalise our current moment but they also expose the hegemonies

allowing these conditions to develop at alarming rate and scale. Artworks and their makers, however, wield scale with other tempos in play: the intimate, the critical, the imaginary. Rather than exploding at exponential pace, these tempos enable the emergence of a beat that is varied and compensatory. Across 2025, the programme at Artspace Aotearoa activates artwork and artistic positions from multiple contexts, diverse mediums, and between generations to consider the potential of forging an otherwise, a deviation—however provisional—through the potency of communicating in the language of contemporary art.

Ruth Buchanan, Kaitohu Director
January 2025

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³ Moana Jackson. “Moana Jackson: Rethinking free speech.” E-tangata, August 19, 2018, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/moana-jackson-rethinking-free-speech/>.

The annual question

Each year Artspace Aotearoa sets one question which our exhibitions and events orbit in the company of artists and audiences. Across the year, we explore what this question offers us and what artworks and their authors can weave together. In 2025, we ask “is language large enough?”

In Lubaina Himid's 2022 drawing made directly onto the wall of London's Tate Modern she asks, but also states: “we live in clothes, we live in buildings – do they fit us?” When I encountered this prompt, it turned my attention to the essential infrastructures of daily life: places in which we shelter and what covers our bodies. It struck me how each part of this prompt straddles the technical and the erotic frameworks for forming our world. In asking her question, Himid draws a diagram arcing the zones of the technical and the erotic, subsequently highlighting the friction existing between them. This same friction is activated when language shuttles between the organisation of bodies, space, and culture as a crucial instrument in shaping and scaling our lived experiences. In asking this necessary question “is language large enough?” Artspace Aotearoa invites its audiences to consider contemporary society—from the public to the private, the artistic to the bureaucratic—and language's charged role in defining these domains.

Language—whether written, aural, somatic, or otherwise—is not a fixed object but is highly unpredictable,

fluid, and consequently evolving. Despite this fluidity it can be wielded to establish and entrench what Audre Lorde has described as the “mythical norm”.¹ In this scenario, a certain type of subjecthood is established as standard and subsequently prioritised, often at the cost of another kind of subjecthood.² If territory is the outline that defines the differentiated but interconnected zones of life (the public, private, artistic, and bureaucratic), then language forms or flattens the contours of these zones as it determines possible ways of relating. In other words, through repetitive use, language constitutes individual subjects by providing frameworks for sets of behaviours that are normalised. This becomes a feedback loop: we relate to one another through and within the languages we have received or accessed. The often invisible impact of contextual access also describes the limit of language.

While this analysis might sound discouraging, encountering the limit of language and its capacity to capture the wholeness of life may propel precedent-setting opportunities. The limit then acts as the enabling context where the capacity for language to become a vital force in any process of transformation is underscored, whether at the scale of the individual, organisation, or community.

¹ Audre Lorde. “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. (London: Silver Press, 2017), pg 96.

² Audre Lorde expands: “In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure. It is within this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.”

1

Tarika Sabherwal

The rush, 2025

Ink, pencil, marker on stretched calico, 198 x 300 cm.

Both paintings by Sabherwal make reference to the Hindu epic narrative Ramayana in which the goddess Sita undergoes a trial by fire to prove her virtue and chastity. Sabherwal interrogates this story's moral imperative and its visual symbolism, depicting her partner as the protagonist. Courtesy the artist, commissioned by Artspace Aotearoa.

2

Erika Holm

Apology, 2025

Bronze cast feet, steel, American oak, cotton, felt, 96 x 38 x 36 cm; chairs in American oak, felted panel with wood and human hair, each 192 x 68 x 30 cm.

This sculptural installation consists of bronze-cast feet, a miniature bed, and two seats. Audiences are invited to take a seat and gently place their hands inside the bronze sculpture.

Courtesy the artist, commissioned by Artspace Aotearoa.

3

Tarika Sabherwal

Off beat, 2025

Ink, pencil, marker on stretched calico, 198 x 300 cm.

Courtesy the artist, commissioned by Artspace Aotearoa.

4

Ngaroma Riley

Tihei... mauri ora!, 2025

Elm, macrocarpa, mother of pearl, paua, hand drill, acrylic rod, LED, electrical components, 160 x 120 x 97 cm.

This installation features a tekoteko, a carved human figure, holding a hand drill emitting a light to represent the transferal of mauri, or life force, into a smaller carved figure. Both figures have paua embedded in their forehead, chest, and stomach to represent the manawa ora, pūmanawa, and whatumanawa—the physical heart, emotional heart, and the spiritual heart.

Courtesy the artist, commissioned by Artspace Aotearoa.

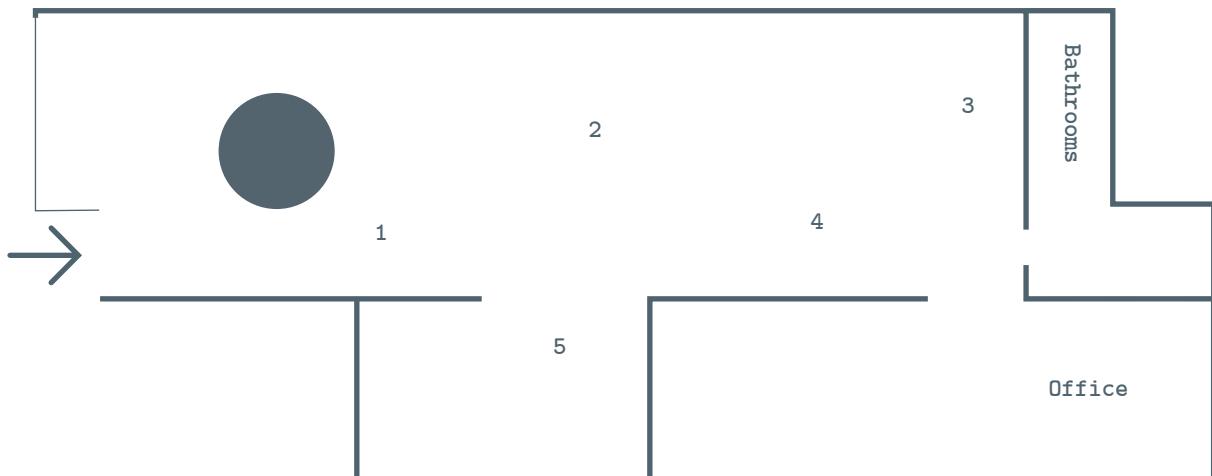
5

Ephemera

Various material from the studios of Erika Holm, Ngaroma Riley, and Tarika Sabherwal. The material includes casts, drawings, and other preparatory matter associated with the production of artworks for this exhibition.

Courtesy the artists.

Karangahape Rd



Erika Holm is an artist based in Tāmaki Makaurau. Her work explores desire, the feminised excess of ornamentation, and objects as vessels of memory. With a background in furniture-making, she incorporates wood and metal, as well as bodily matter, into her sculptures. Holm has worked at Apartmento Contemporary Furniture and is currently a workshop technician at Auckland University of Technology. Her work has been shown at Grace Aotearoa and Michael Lett, and Ivan Anthony.

Ngaroma Riley is an artist, curator and organiser of Te Rarawa, Te Aupōuri and Pākēha descent. A founder of Te Ana o Hine, a carving shed led by women based at Te Tuhi in Tāmaki Makaurau, Riley began her carving journey making buddhist statues while working in Japan. Since returning to Aotearoa in 2020 she has completed a Certificate in Whakairo at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa and has exhibited with Season Aotearoa in Tāmaki Makaurau and Te Ara i Whiti as part of Te Tairāwhiti Arts Festival

Tarika Sabherwal is an artist based in Tāmaki Makaurau who explores ways to narrativise personal relationships and landscapes within a South Asian mythological framework. Exploring how ancient stories can be reflected in our current lives, Sabherwal's work primarily uses an airbrush technique and has been experimenting with deconstructing the canvas, drawing inspiration from South Asian textile traditions. Sabherwal has had exhibitions with Khōj in New Delhi, Season Aotearoa and RM Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau, and Jhana Millers Gallery in Te Whanganui-a-Tara.

Events

Saturday 25 and Sunday 26 October, 10–2.30pm
In focus with Biljana Ceric and Trần Lương: Learning and unlearning spaces

Saturday 1 November, 1pm
FAM Art Tour

Wednesday 5 November, 6pm
Question time: Lecture by Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide
That Time When We Were Not There

Saturday 8 November, 2pm
Artist talk with Erika Holm, Ngaroma Riley, and Tarika Sabherwal

Saturday 22 November, 11am
Audio Described Tour

Wednesday 26 November, 6pm
Deep dive: Lecture by Kairauhī Curator Robbie Handcock
Exit interview

Reading Room
Rose is a rose is a rose:
five movements in which
language—that ouroboros—eats
its own tail
Jess Clifford

To learn more about these events, visit
artspace-aotearoa.nz

To read the text by Jess Clifford, visit
artspace-aotearoa.nz/reading-room

To request a tour for your group contact
info@artspace.org.nz

Acknowledgements

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To support our work and enjoy additional events consider joining a Supporters Circle. To learn more about this programme, visit artspace-aotearoa.nz/tautoko