

02 November 2018 to 27 January 2019 ARTSPACE MACKAY, MACKAY REGIONAL COUNCIL

Sugar vs the Reef?

LUCAS IHLEIN & KIM WILLIAMS





Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN *Sugar vs the Reef?* Meeting between artists, farmers, and members of Mackay and Districts Australian South Sea Islander Association (MADASSIA). Left to right: Lucas Ihlein, Deb Francis, John Sweet, Aretha Yasserie, Starrett Ve'a Ve'a, Simon Mattsson, Kim Williams, March 2017.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN *Watershed Land Art Project: Legumes at the Beacon*, April 2018. Photography by Jac KOTZE.

Foreword

Wollongong artists Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein have been visiting the Mackay region since 2014 to gain a deeper understanding of the sugarcane industry and to investigate how artists and farmers can work together on large-scale human/ecology problems. The declining health of the Great Barrier Reef has increased pressure on our sugarcane industry to reduce chemical and sediment run-off and improve its environmental performance and it is this challenge that lies at the heart of their Artspace Mackay exhibition *Sugar vs the Reef?*

The social and ecological engagement that has occurred over the life of the project, through the artists' interactions with local farmers, traditional custodians the Yuwibara people, the Mackay Australian South Sea Islander community, politicians and Natural Resource managers, has informed the stories told through this exhibition. It is also important to acknowledge that *Sugar vs the Reef?* forms part of a much larger body of work, which has seen Kim and Lucas create large-scale events and installations in the region, including the *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* event on the Mattsson's farm in 2017 and the current and ongoing *Watershed Land Art Project* at the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens.

The artists' passion for working with communities and their desire to develop ethical relationships between humans and land through their collaborative processes are truly inspiring. *Sugar vs the Reef?* is a fascinating look at what's possible when artists and farmers come together to envision a new future for agriculture.

Tracey Heathwood

Gallery Director,
Artspace Mackay, Mackay Regional Council

Cover image: **Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN**
Watershed Land Art Project: Legume Planting Day,
February 2018. Photography by Jac Kotze.



Coral Relics
Coral Relics, Crayfish Beach

2016

Kim WILLIAMS *Coral Relics Crayfish Beach* 2016, watercolour and pencil on Arches cold-pressed paper.

The following conversation with Kim and Lucas was led by local artist and Mackay Regional Council Arts Development Officer Fiona Vuibeqa and provides further insight into the processes that informed Sugar vs the Reef?

In conversation with Lucas Ihlein & Kim Williams

Fiona Vuibeqa: Having worked with you both and participated in some of your processes, here are some of the words that occurred to me in reference to your style of work: collaborative, site-specific, socially engaging, culturally adaptive. I'd like to add exploratory, challenging, process-driven, accessible, thought-provoking, connecting – and I say connecting thinking of the relationships you establish and strengthen along the way, as your processes are just as important as the final outcome. Can you tell me a little bit about the processes that you have been using over the last few years since you've been engaging with the community here in Mackay?

Lucas Ihlein: We've learnt a lot about the process of social engagement from John Sweet. John is a retired farmer and an energetic community activator around health and environmental issues. He saw the potential in having artists work alongside farmers to support the move towards regenerative agriculture. This was in part prompted by the pressure on sugarcane farmers to reduce chemical and sediment run-off to the Great Barrier Reef. John began introducing us to farmers and natural resource managers, people in the council. We come in with a desire to make connections and relationships and learn, and then see what emerges as a thing that needs to be done. That's our process.

Kim Williams: And that thing that needs to be done, ends up being many things that need to be done! The *Watershed Land Art Project* at the Botanic Gardens was a development from what we were already learning on farms about multi-species cropping, with a focus on soil health. But the Botanic Gardens work came from the realisation that it was really important for us to engage not only with sugarcane farmers, but also with the local Indigenous and Australian South Sea Islander communities. Along the way we've been talking with many different people, including politicians, about larger scale agricultural ideas- a Regenerative Agriculture Demonstration Farm, for example. So what the public is seeing are the intersections of culture and agriculture.

FV: One of the words I used to describe your practice is challenging, challenging ways of thinking, because I understand that part of your process is about working with communities to introduce ideas, to change thinking to establish a more functional way of approaching land use. A major outcome of this would be improved practices, improved knowledge of how you can manage land so that it's more sustainable. Would you agree?

LI: That's right, and in itself that's not very controversial because who doesn't want to improve the way things are and benefit the environment? That's not a challenging idea, but when you apply it to specific contexts and industries, it can get pretty crunchy because actual, concrete things might have to change in people's everyday lives. That stuff can be sensitive to talk about.

FV: I'm going to add a few words to my list: change-makers. You're change-makers. Also, slow art or process-driven art as a form of slow art; where things evolve, and practices evolve, and ideas evolve and strengthen. And conversational work.

KW: A key thing in conversational work is listening – because it takes a lot of careful, patient and deep listening to form relationships with people and take it somewhere. I guess rather than challenging in a confrontational way, one thing we're doing is showing what's possible in agriculture, perhaps it's more inspiring rather than confronting.

FV: There's a quote that I found from an interview in *Artlink* that you did, Lucas, with Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna of Latitudes. You asked, "what are the real world stakes of what we do?" So, what are the real world stakes of what you are doing in Mackay?

LI: When an artist gets called up by someone from Mackay who says "we want you to come up here and help us to save the Great Barrier Reef!" you kind of think... that's an unusual call to get! The invitation is saying "We think that the work that you do might have some effect beyond the boundaries of the artworld." So that's a really exciting proposition. How can the work that we're doing be useful in the world somehow?

KW: Key to that drive, is collaboration, because you can't do this stuff on your own, you know? It fundamentally requires joining forces with people. People putting their heads together. People collaborating. Change is very slow. It would be great to just come in with some kind of cape and make a sweeping change that really did



Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN *Watershed Land Art Project: SEED and SONG*, Aunty Deb Netuschil, Lyndon Francis and the Diranga Gangali Dancers with Uncle George Tonga, August 2018. Photography by Robert Bole.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN *Watershed Land Art Project: SEED and SONG*, Sugarcane and sunflower community planting event, August 2018. Photography by Robert Bole.



Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN *Watershed Land Art Project: SEED and SONG*, The Sakwolo Islander Dancers, August 2018. Photography by Robert Bole.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN, Simon MATTSSON, Kim KLEIDON, *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, July 2017. Photography by Cherrie Hughes.

save the Great Barrier Reef, but it's very slow, because humans are involved. So, collaboration is intrinsic to our process.

FV: I want to talk about the legume planting event at *The Beacon* as part of the *Watershed Land Art Project*. My children participated in that. It was a beautiful experience, and really great for them to see things grow and to know that they were part of what would become a visible aspect of the project. We were planting in rows. Even though it was structured, we had lots of young children involved, and their idea of measurement was quite random! The fact that we could come back later and see the plants progressing was wonderful.

LI: Yes we have to accept that things will never be perfect when we collaborate with kids! But the imperfections in planting speak of human involvement on the ground, which is important, and a point of difference with the machine-made processes of industrial agriculture. Also, it was so dry this year. Our legume crop at the Botanic Gardens did well, but then our winter cover crop struggled because there was just no rain whatsoever. So we get a tiny glimpse of what it's like to be a farmer, where things that are entirely out of your control can shape what you're trying to achieve.

KW: That series of crops which are grown in a circle, it's like a hub. The circular shape of *The Beacon* is the centre of a process – we gather people there and something gets performed in, on, and around it. And at the same time, we've got these drone photographers that come every so often and shoot it from above. The product of that, the photos, are stunning! This very abstract shape, a very symmetrical circle in the land. The legume crop, which was planted so haphazardly, has resulted in this really beautiful photograph.

FV: With your exhibition at Artspace you are taking the outdoor experiences in the field and presenting them in a gallery. What's it been like trying to translate your process into something for the gallery?

KW: On one hand, the stuff that we do outside the gallery is the artwork, and the artefacts in the gallery are documentation of that process. We're selecting aspects of the process and making representations of them, whether it's through drawings or photographs or videos or objects. On the other hand, the gallery is a space of encounter in its own right. There are two different audiences, some of which are blended, but it's also then taking the gallery audience back out into the field.



Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN *Watershed Land Art Project: SEED and SONG,*
Community planting event, August 2018. Photography by Robert Bole.



We can't corral all the aspects of the project into a single room! We can just tell some of those stories.

FV: Do you want to tell me a bit about the relationship that you've built with the Mattsson family?

LI: When we met sugarcane farmer Simon Mattsson we became friends quite quickly. We had been looking for someone like him, and he also saw us as an opportunity. He said, "if I hang out with these guys, the stories that I'm trying to get out to the wider world will be amplified." So, there was an exchange of useful resources and skills.

KW: Simon is a very good amplifier in his own right. He's a born educator. Through his own farming practices and experimentation, and his study through the Nuffield Scholarship, he's a lifelong learner and an excellent communicator. I've learnt an enormous amount from Simon about the sugar industry, and about what happens underneath the ground, too, with soil microbiology. We've gone through some really intense processes together. Staging *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* last year was a whole family effort. Susie, Sophie, Luke, Granddad and us, and a willing band of family members and volunteers. The aunts and uncles, cousins and nieces and nephews all came on board. It was a very intense experience, with lots of meetings and lunches at the Mattsson farm kitchen table. They opened their doors to us, and that has forged a deep friendship. And a trust, too. Trust is so important.

FV: What we didn't speak about before was when you did the planting of the legumes at *The Beacon*, Simon and Susie's daughter was part of the singing crew wasn't she?

KW: (laughs) Yes. It turned out that Sophie's already a dab hand at playing the ukulele, and she can sing and play at the same time! We've introduced music into our practice because it's joyful and it brings people together. We didn't set out with the goal of playing music and writing songs. It just emerged. The first day that we met Charmaine Miller at the indigenous radio station, My105.9 FM, we had her singing *The Legume Song* with us on air, and it was an unforgettable experience, I think, for all of us.

FV: Music not only connects people but it makes connections in the brain, so if you're also working at changing thinking, having music as part of that process enables the pathways to be connected in the brain.

KW: It's interesting, isn't it, because when you hear a catchy song and particularly if you actually participate in the singing of it, it stays in you, and then it forever becomes a kind of symbol of that event. You've immediately got something aural to attach to an experience or an event. It's very powerful in that way.

FV: Throughout cultural history rhythm, music and song has always been important. When people worked in the fields they sang because it helped their body move, it helped them progress through the things they had to do.

KW: Well, I deliberately wrote *The Legume Song*, or adapted it, from a sugar cane working song from Barbados. That seemed to me an obvious thing to draw upon.

FV: Would you like to talk about your relationship with MADASSIA (Mackay and Districts Australian South Sea Islander Association) and the Australian South Sea Islander community?

KW: I can remember the very moment when I realised that it was really essential to make contact with the Australian South Sea Island community. I was cycling through the Botanic Gardens one day, and I came across the MADASSIA Hut. I started looking at the monument outside, and looking at the building and thinking this looks really significant.

LI: That contact with the Australian South Sea Islander community was not initially a priority for the farmers that we've been working with, but for us as cultural workers, we were aware that it was something that we needed to engage with: the history of slave labour and indentured labour to establish the sugar cane industry, the huge contribution of this community to shaping what Mackay is today. The RADF (Regional Arts Development Fund) program that you're a part of Fiona, it didn't just give us financial support to do our work; it actually transformed our work by providing us with introductions, it became an essential part of our process of doing socially engaged art work. Starrett Veve, and more recently Jemal Davis, recognised that our project had some value for them and for their communities. Starrett said, "You're going to grow sugar cane here at the Botanic Gardens? Terrific! We can use this as a way of creating this intergenerational connection between our elders, who worked by hand in the sugar cane industry, and our grandkids, through the physical re-enactment of those agricultural processes."

KW: The *SEED and SONG* sugarcane and sunflowers planting event in August was very revealing for us as artists working on the project. I was sitting on the grass

watching the Sakwolo Islander Dancers performing. I looked around and thought, this is amazing. We had a big Australian South Sea Island cohort there. We had a big Yuwibara cohort there, and we had farmers there, and it was like, “Oh, these are our communities.”

FV: Yeah. I think it’s fabulous, the connections that you’ve made. Finding your community, finding the people who have that interest, who will then sustain what it is that you’re trying to achieve.

LI: It’s emerging that a major theme of the project is ethical relationships between humans and land. This connects with one of John Sweet’s teachings- that land is not just a resource to be used in a mechanistic way, but an entity to be respected in its own right. It’s not just how you use a plough or put on fertiliser, but it’s also about how you acknowledge cultural histories in relation to the land that you’re working with.

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Artist Fiona Vuibeqa is a keen advocate of collaborative practice and the sharing of skills and knowledge. In 2017 she curated Fiji Greenhouse featuring artists based in the Mackay Region, fusing traditional Fijian craft materials with contemporary artmaking techniques. Fiona has worked as the Arts Development Officer for Mackay Regional Council since 2007.

Kim Williams is an artist of nearly forty years experience, with a background in the visual arts and community and public art. Her main focus is on environmental projects. Kim is a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong, working on projects such as Sugar vs the Reef? using the methods of socially engagement and collaboration. www.kimwilliams.com.au

Lucas Ihlein is an artist and ARC DECRA Research Fellow in Creative Arts at University of Wollongong. Lucas is a founding member of the group Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation (KSCA), which in 2018-19 is developing a new project called “An artist, a farmer and a scientist walked into a bar...” www.lucasihlein.net

Sugar vs the Reef?

List of works

Kim Williams

b.1959, Mornington, Victoria

Lucas Ihlein

b.1975, Sydney

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN

Hats of Mackay 2018, digital video, 8 minutes, 16 hats. Thanks to Michael Attard, Jemal Davis, Kate Finch, Kellie Galletly, Cherie Hughes, Uncle Phillip Kemp, Simon Mattsson, Sue Mattsson, Tegan McBride, Allan McLean, Deb Netuschil nee Hazeldean, John Sweet, Uncle George Tonga, Starrett Ve a Ve a. Courtesy the artists.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN

Plant species of the Beacon 2018, ink drawings on Arches cold-pressed paper, soil, seeds. Plant species: Lucerne (*Medicago sativa*), Ebony Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*), Dolichos lablab Rongai (*Lablab purpureus*), Buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*), Fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*), Vetch (*Vicia velloso*), Sunflower Ausigold 62 (*Helianthus*), Sugarcane Q190 (*Saccharum officinarum*). Courtesy the artists.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN

A social ecology of sugarcane in Central Queensland 2018, chalk drawing created in residence at Artspace Mackay. Courtesy the artists.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN, Simon MATTSSON, Kim KLEIDON

Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers 2017, digital video, 13 minutes. Video production by Jac KOTZE, Kim KLEIDON, Simon MATTSSON. Courtesy the artists.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN

The Beacon (February – October 2018), Mackay Regional Botanical Gardens 2018, digital photography on archival cotton rag paper. Photography by Jac KOTZE and Willem REICHARD. Printed by Tom WILLIAMS. Graphic Design by April BOUGHTON. Courtesy the artists.

Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN

SEED and SONG 2018, digital video, 3 minutes. Videography by Willem REICHARD, editing by Wayward Films, music by Kim WILLIAMS with Blue Spotted Rays. Courtesy the artists.

Kim WILLIAMS *Coral Relics, Crayfish Beach*

2016, watercolour and watercolour pencil on Arches cold-pressed paper. Courtesy the artist.

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Kim WILLIAMS, Lucas IHLEIN, Simon MATTSSON, Kim KLEIDON *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*,
 Left to right: Lucas Ihlein, Kim Williams and Simon Mattsson, July 2017. Photography by Cherrie Hughes.



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