

# SAM HAMILTON EXORCIZES THE COLONIAL SPECTERS OF A GLOBAL MONUMENT AND TURNS IT OCEANIC.

Vo Vo interviews Sam Hamilton about their work *Te Moana Meridian*, currently on show as part of Converge 45 *Social Forms* Biennial in Portland, OR.

**W** How would you describe your current work?

**SH** *Te Moana Meridian* is a fairly large interdisciplinary project being produced across three different platforms. All of its parts are centered around a single idea that's presented first and foremost as a text proposal addressed to the United Nations. The proposal calls for formally relocating the international Prime Meridian from Greenwich, London, to its antipodean coordinates on the other side of the planet, which would reposition it in the middle of the open ocean, in Te Moananui-ā-Kiwa, the South Pacific Ocean.

**W** And those coordinates geographically and spatially are fairly close to Aotearoa?

**SH** Yes, it actually falls just

within Aotearoa's exclusive economic zone. But the proposal suggests designating a 50 kilometer radius around the coordinate an international Unesco World Heritage site and marine sanctuary that's territorially part of Earth's oceanic global commons as defined by the UN's recent High Seas Treaty.

**W** So you would call the letter and the proposal the centerpiece?

**SH** Yeah, one that's subject to constant review and revision. At the moment it's mainly an artwork, but my goal is to get to where at some point it has the potential to actually become or lead to real policy change. So making it as politically, historically and technologically feasible as possible, and submitting it to due critical and cultural process.

**W** So poetics to pragmatics. Right now the abstraction around it, all the other platforms that are involved, like the conference and choir—are they more the poetics side? Is the conference like a review mechanism?

**SH** Yeah, all of the above. You know, I'm not a politician, I don't even have a high school degree. I'm very unqualified to be doing this. But I am an artist. Which for now is the most effective platform I have for advancing the proposal. The first creative platform is an exhibition with Converge 45, that first premiered last year at Artspace Aotearoa, which has a bunch of works, paintings and text works, but the main thing is a huge 5-channel video installation. The next stage

is a large-scale experimental live opera that will premiere late 2024. Those are the two creative vessels for delivering the proposal. The third component is a series of conferences that function as critical public program counterparts to the exhibition and opera. They're designed to bring various academics, culture bearers, theorists, artists, critics, and policymakers together to actually dig into and seriously explore the proposal in depth. If anything, it's the conferences that have the potential to really propel the proposal into the real world.

**WV** From your imagery and aesthetic choices. I've been considering the conferences the parliamentary side, and then the opera as the church side.

**SH** Oh, wow. Yeah, yeah.

**WV** But I'm not sure if that's a strong suggestion from your aesthetics or if that was how you were approaching this?

**SH** Yeah. Along with "dance" from Dr. Tru Paraha (Ngāpuhi, Waitaha) and sidony o'neal, a 35-piece youth choir singing like the ocean, the video work and the opera both center on the delivery of the proposal as a bilingual libretto sung side-by-side by Holland Andrews in English, and Mere Tokorahi Boynton (Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki, Ngāi Tūhoe) from Aotearoa in te reo Māori—as translated by Rhonda

Tibble (Ngāti Porou, Te Whānau a Apanui, Te Whatuiapiti). And there's definitely tons of complexity and symbolism in that as the relationship between English and te reo Māori becomes a shorthand for reflecting the broader geopolitical relationships that are—for better or worse—shape our world.

**WV** You mean, colonial and colonized?

**SH** Yes, but also just the nature of how people relate with each other more broadly at the macro scale, and the very real and consequential implications that stem from that. And Aotearoa is an interesting case study for how those dynamics can play out in a way that's like... not great, but not entirely a write-off either. There's some relational middle ground between Māori and pākehā (New Zealanders of British colonial settler descent) where some genuinely good things are happening politically and culturally. And I think there's a lot to gain from engaging in and investing in that space. As a pākehā from Aotearoa, these two languages, and the complicated political interplay between them, have more or less shaped my identity and worldview. For this project, they essentially function as proxies for thinking about how we might better navigate and manage relationships at macro scales.

**WV** Sure.



Installation views: Sam Hamilton/  
Sam Tam Ham, *Te Moana Meridian* (2023),  
five channel video installation. Photo:  
Mario Gallucci, courtesy the artist and  
Oregon Contemporary.

**SH** It's not a perfect system.  
[chortles]

**WV** And I'm positive that binary or that simplification will rear its head in different ways in the project.

**SH** Oh, for sure.

**WV** So related to that, when we make a proposal that is part activism, the question is always: where did the idea come from? And who did it come from? And who is it for? So maybe you could speak on that?

**SH** You know, what I will say is that the inclusion of te reo Māori in this project, particularly



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as a pākehā, is inherently very complicated. But although it's somewhat unsettling, that complication is, for lack of a better word, something I'm trying to lean into. I know there's risks. But I feel that, if approached with the right care, there's a lot of gain, generally, from trying to address these complications. I might very well fuck up, but I feel it's important to try. And particularly in Aotearoa there's lots of necessary conversations going around about who has the right or authority to use this language. On the one hand it's in the process of becoming far more widely used as a celebrated mainstream language of Aotearoa, which

is beautiful. But on the other hand it's something that's going to remain super complicated and sensitive for as long as the continuing legacies of European colonization remain unresolved. But for me there's only really one option which is to at least try and work our way through all that, regardless of how messy or risky it is. Especially on the pākehā side of things.

**W** You've tried to communicate with Greenwich, right?

**SH** Yeah. I have had a number of dealings with them.

I originally came to the Royal Observatory of Greenwich very open about the project with the hope that they would be interested in being a meaningful partner.

**W** You arrived at the king's court to tell them that you're about to burn down the castle.

**SH** [laughs] They're smart people, they should know that their history needs working out. But I got the impression they were a bit blindsided when I came along and that they haven't yet been confronted with their complicity in British imperialism like others have. They actually claimed to have nothing to do with British imperialism which is totally wild. In 2021, I actually went to London to film part of the video work there, a mother and daughter playing with some seashells in front

of the observatory. I even obtained a legitimate and very expensive film permit to do so. But when the observatory realized what project it was for, they had it revoked. So that, you know, I think it's stunning that one of the premier institutes of the most powerful empires to ever exist is scared of me. It's weird, bizarre, and telling as they're basically proving my point for me that the prime meridian, in its current location, is an instrument of empire.

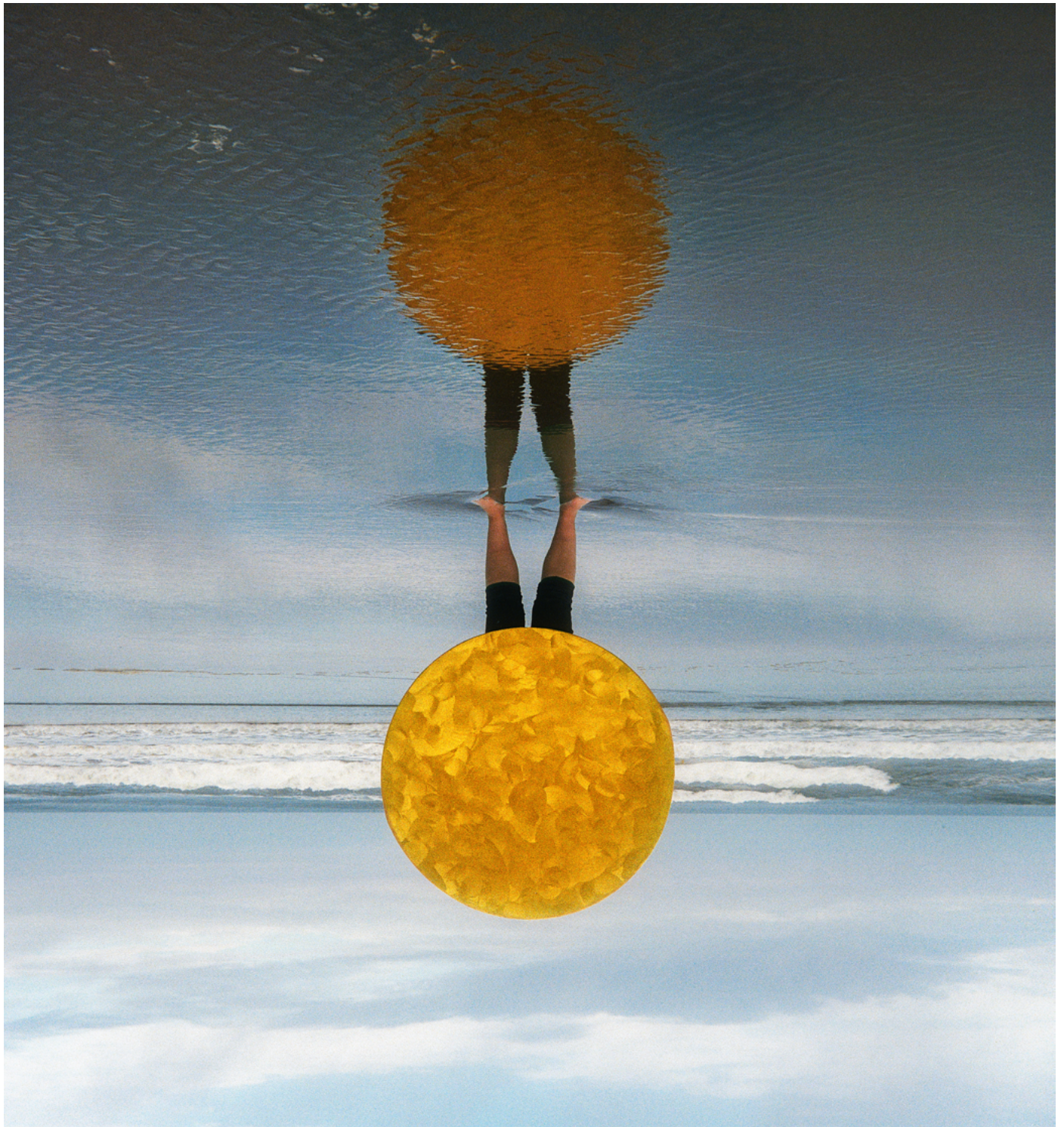
**W** There is an absurdity in all of this at the same time.

**SH** Indeed, the proposal is about a point in space that's completely arbitrary, yet vital and incredibly politically charged, right? It's this silly artwork, yet even before going public it led to meetings and engagements with folks inside the UN, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Smithsonian, Tate Modern, academics, scholars, historians, politicians, etc. It's been exciting to see this crazy idea blossom into something that increasingly seems to have real world traction. And I feel like it's just getting going too. ♦



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