

KINGS Artist Run acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate. We offer our respect to Elders both past and present and extend this offer to all First Nations people.

KINGS

Gabe Tejada ENCOUNTERS

EMERGING
WRITERS PROGRAM

Artist Run

Established in 2003, KINGS Artist-Run provides a location for contemporary art practice, supporting distinctive experimental projects by artists at all stages of their careers.

Open 12-5pm Thursday,
Friday, Saturday, Sunday
69 Capel Street,
West Melbourne VIC 3003

Ang hindi magmahal sa kanyang salita
mahigit sa hayop at malansang isda,

These lines haunt me. Found in the third stanza of *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*¹, they form the structural and semantic heart of the poem often attributed to our pangbansang bayani. But these lines do not haunt me in their concrete exactness nor even in any of the myriad strains that english translations have spawned. These words haunt me in a more amorphous form, as if in my inability to grasp the original Tagalog (much less conduct a faithful translation to our stepmother tongue) only its essence stays with me—a spirit without a vessel. And like most hauntings, there are periods of peace and times of visitations, the spectre of these lines’ meaning never straying far.

Ayah Zakout’s *Anau*, in its material meditation on culture, family, identity—refracted through language, translation and meaning-making—has transubstantiated this spirit into a confronting corporeality.

My encounter with *anau*, as concept, began with a ‘moment of recognition’ precipitated by the echo of a more familiar word: *anak*. *Anak* establishes an intergenerational bond between its speaker and subject, a term of endearment immediately recognisable to Filipinos and one that transcends the strict bounds of biology an english translation ascribes to the word. As opposed to the analogous term, *bata*, *anak* is relational in both its denotative and colloquial meaning.

In *Anau* /*anau* there is this similar dimension of familial and cultural intergenerationality—*anau* as birth, the younger generation and a family’s cultural and biological lineage. And just as *anau* traverses meaning, so *Anau* traverses medium. Encompassing both beginnings and futures, roots and branches, *Anau* /*anau* explores the liminal space of diaspora as one “of future possibility and not only (of) past loss”² from the contested positionalities of Ayah’s Palestinian-Pasifika identity.

In the face of genocides, family albums become cultural archives. More honest depictions that, while curated, are not mediated through the neo-conservative narrative used to justify military capitalism. But the act of photographic archiving in *Anau* is not just one of remembrance or of preservation against ongoing catastrophe. In the act of reclaiming the instrument of narrative (here, the camera), these are documents of existence and endurance, at once insisting on the presence—and present—of Palestinian, Kūki ‘Airani Māori and Tahitian Mā’ohi peoples, and refusing the often violent and dehumanising “preconceived biases and conceptions”³ inscribed on these identities. This living quality manifests in the cyanotype print on fabric stitched into the textile works: a collage of tradition that is continued, as Ayah says, “in my own way” through the “fabric-work [whose] history [is] in both sides of my identity”. These photographs speak to the humanity of the individual, here embodied by the images of Ayah’s family members, and the vitality of the natural environment of Ayah’s ancestral lands.

1 “Sa Aking Mga Kabata,” *Kun sino ang kumathâ ng “Florante”*: kasaysayan sa buhay ni Francisco Baltazar at pag-uulat nang kanyang karunungan’t kadakilaan, ed by Hermenegildo Cruz, 1906.

2 Jilda Andrews, “Value creation and museums from an Indigenous perspective,” in *Museums, Societies and the Creation of Value*, eds. Howard Morphy and Robyn McKenzie (Routledge, 2021), 231

3 Ayah Zakout, in conversation with author, August 27, 2025.

In this metaphorical weaving of land, heritage and family, the inextricability of the cultural and familial, particularly for those of us of the diaspora, is laid bare. The cyanotype's pared back blue and white, ghostly and radiographic, feels to be a reflection of Ayah's introspection: how *anau* in all its manifestations haunts the artist.

Perhaps this is the condition of the Other inhabiting the nation-state of the Self? To be haunted just as you haunt. The incommensurability of living in 'the West', of being its subject, while at the same time embodying that spectre of the foreign. "Am I reborn as Other?"⁴

Again those lines of poetry come to me, reminding me of my inability to even express this Otherness in my own terms, defined only by a language of the coloniser. Am I less Filipino because I don't know Tagalog? Do I need it to gain a more complete understanding of myself, to be a more complete self? In *A Rhyme for the Odes* Mahmoud Darwish wrote:

I am my language, I am an ode, two odes, ten. This is my language.

I am my language. I am words' writ: Be! Be my body!

Is there a body without the mother tongue? "Is my *anau* less than my mother's?"⁵ *Anau* grapples with that by-product of linguistic imperialism: the diasporic anxieties of cultural in/authenticity. This preoccupation is present across Ayah's artistic praxis, culminating in the artist's 'cross-translations'. A particularly piercing yet playful example is *MOTHER/FATHER TONGUE INSULTS*, a quilt-like tapestry of yarn invoking the universal childhood game of Tic Tac Toe with its 3 x 3 square composition. At first glance, the textile piece renders a sense of comfort—the evocation of softness through the yarn's materiality, the adorably rendered animals on the far right panels, the muted pastel palette—lulling the viewer into a false sense of security. The realisation—as the work's title indicates—that the Arabic and Kūki 'Airani Māori words accompanying the animals are insults, rends the enveloping safety this piece seemingly provides. In this inversion of childhood innocence, conceptions of the diasporic home and family as place of refuge are called into question. Yet the refusal to translate into English is a refusal of 'Western' legibility. The dialogue between Ayah's native tongues insists on cultural self-determination just as it confronts the manifestations of generational trauma within our immigrant families.

For *Anau* /*anau*, a return to childhood also signifies a form of rebirth, an emphasis on joy and imagination that again overwrites societal narratives of what it means to be Palestinian or Māori and is thus a means of reclaiming autonomy.

But this too is complicated, as in the case of the painting *Rebirth*. Here, though the unicorn tucked under a quilt also harkens to the comfort of nostalgia and the freedom of childlike wonder, the disembodied blue hand silencing the unicorn denies the fulfilment of complete autonomy. Does the censorship in the painted text, "*I BELIEVE IN [] THE WAY I DID AT []*", gesture towards un-translatability? A refusal to be defined and bound in English as an insistence on opacity?

The profusion of poetry in *Anau* thus comes as no surprise. As the most malleable of the literary mediums, poetry affords a freedom. Welcomes a re-writing. If we must navigate the world in English, why not make it in our own image? Exorcise its connotative demons and resurrect its syntax from somatic slumber.

4 Zakout, conversation.

5 Zakout, conversation.

Anau invites us to literally tear apart the english alphabet, to grasp the weight of each letter and create a poem with our hands in the participatory piece, *Mubaarak*.

Challenging the “casual consumption”⁶ cultivated by a gallery space, Ayah shows how the dichotomy of villain/victim is made possible by the passivity of the audience. A passivity cultivated from the uncritical and incurious habits of mere consumption encouraged by capital, satiated by expedient narratives that erase complexity. And isn’t complexity a form of haunting, its tangledness a recurring ghost demanding attention?

To unsettle this passivity, *Mubaarak* disrupts the divide between audience and art through its interactive element—an infraction of that boundary that protects the viewer, allows for the continuity of passivity through distance, through a demarcation of difference. *Mubaarak* disturbs the prevailing “contradictory role”⁷ of victim-barbarian that Indigenous Peoples around the globe are often cast as, by allowing the audience inside the complexity of *anau*.

ngiyanga mayinybu ngurambangbu gila ngiyanhiguna ngurrbuldhuray burrambinya
language in people and Country thus we all (but not you) an intense closeness
have being eternal.

In our people, is our language, language is in our Country, and so we are bound eternally.

As in the *Anau* cyanotypes, the colour blue appears in Wiradyuri/Gamileraay poet, Tracy Ryan’s *minganydhu ngindhumubang/What am I without you?* First published online by literary magazine, Meanjin, in this poem the blue is just legible against the screen’s white background, representing a “transliteration process”⁸. The blue—ghostly, compared to the bolder black lines of english and Wiradyuri—has the appearance of otherworldliness. Perhaps a haunting can be something similar. Not a representation of death but a fashioning of another world, a horizon, a possibility. To write a future into being from our reimagining of the language imposed on us. This remaking forms an added dimension in *Anau* /*anau*. In painting, stitching, crocheting and photographing text, there is an insistence in the physical iteration of the words. A transposition from the white page into a material reality. In *Good Heart (good mother)*, Ayah writes:

Spelling my name wrong so we can call it our language, and I was naïve to agree to it.

Again, *Anau* /*anau* avoids easy solutions. These quilted lines on fabric, far from the softness its material evokes, prevents us from getting too comfortable with the tools of our oppressors. How the redistribution of sensibility⁹, and visibility, comes with a price.

What else is transformed when we translate Tagalog to english? Surely the translator, as much as the translated, is changed. At least affected in some way. But stitched beside these words is Ayah’s childhood drawing—an intervention against cynicism.

6 Zakout, conversation.

7 Jackson Lears, “The Righteous Community,” *The London Review of Books*, July 24, 2025, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v47/n13/jackson-lears/the-righteous-community>

8 Tracy Ryan, “minganydhu ngindhumubang / What am I without you?” *Meanjin*, Autumn, 2025, <https://meanjin.com.au/memoir/minganydhu-ngindhumubang-what-am-i-without-you/>

9 Jacques Ranciere in *The Politics of Aesthetics* as first encountered by the author via Ian McLean, in a discussion regarding the appropriation of Aboriginal art in an Australian context

The poem's reminder of assimilation's false promise is countered by the drawing's presence as a fulfillment of the artist's dreams. A reminder that hope shouldn't be abandoned. The embroidered line in *in Pōpongi Meitaki* (*you bank my hair*):

Anau. I am still here.

resonates stronger. The raised words—literally projecting off the plane— demand attention. In the material letters the spirit of anau is solidified.

I suppose those lines of *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* will always haunt me. I don't translate them—I don't want to kill the poem's soul. But maybe you already understand what it means?

Gabe Tejada is an emerging writer living, working and musing on unceded Wurundjeri country.

The Emerging Writers Program was established in 2015 with the aim to provide publishing opportunities for emerging arts writers. This program is run in partnership with unProjects and in 2025 is supported by Creative Victoria.

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