

## **Sriwhana Spong**

Born 1979, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; lives and works in London

### ***The painter-tailor* 2019**

single-channel 16 mm film transferred to digital video, digital video, sound, 32 mins

Sound design: Owen Pratt

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

*The painter-tailor* constructs a family portrait around the courtyard of the artist's ancestral home in Sanur, Bali. It was filmed with the aid of family members and Alaska, the family dog.

The film repeatedly returns to a painting by the artist's grandfather, I Gusti Made Rundu (1918–1993), which hangs in one of the bedrooms. In attempting to learn more about both this painting and the family she never grew up with, the artist weaves a net from the impenetrable knots and dizzying loops of family narratives, in which fragments relating to the effects of colonisation, invasion and tourism accumulate.

Footage of a scrapbook, viewed online, hovers over a portrait of I Gusti Made Rundu, discovered inside a scrapbook owned by art historian Claire Holt (1901–1970) and housed in the New York Public Library Archives. This screen recording of the artist flicking through its pages is accompanied by the sounds of bat echolocation captured during early morning walks with her father. These cries, used by bats to navigate and hunt, parallel Spong's own attempts at orienting herself through family stories, anecdotes, and the things held on to, like her grandfather's painting which her father refuses to sell.

## **Ni Ketut Murki and Sriwhana Spong**

Ni Ketut Murki, born 1949, Bali, Indonesia; lives and works in Bali

Sriwhana Spong, born 1979, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; lives and works in London

### ***Untitled (aun-aun) 2025***

canvas, rice paste, pencil, pen, paint

Courtesy of the artists and Lett Thomas, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland

Spong's grandfather Made Rundu returned to the Kamasan painting tradition (a classical Balinese narrative painting style) in his later works. Within this tradition, the *aun-aun* is a repeating decorative pattern that structurally occupies 'negative' space, expressing the continuous vibration of energy. In his final painting, Made Rundu transformed the *aun-aun* into mosquito-like insects. The motif and this metamorphosis are explored by Spong in the exhibition through sculptures, drawings, sound and film. In 2025 Spong learned to draw the *aun-aun* from Ni Ketut Murki, a master painter in Bali, during which the two artists made this collaborative work.

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### ***Quarrelling Bees 2026***

electroplated pomelo skins, copper wire, liquid electrical tape, contact microphones

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland

The title of this work refers to the Balinese gamelan, an orchestra in which instruments are tuned in pairs, where one instrument is intentionally tuned slightly higher than its partner. When played together, this slight pitch difference creates a rapid acoustic beating effect known as *ombak* (wave), which produces a shimmering, vibrant sound often described as sounding like a swarm of quarrelling bees. The title also refers to Spong's painter grandfather Made Rundu who translated the traditional *aun-aun* motif into swarming insects in his paintings.

Spong has electroplated the peeled skins of pomelos which curl in a way reminiscent of the arabesques used in the Baroque period (c.1600–1750), defined by abundant decorative aesthetics. Spong invokes the Baroque in reference to the essay 'Baroque as a World Philosophy' (1957) by Martinican writer Édouard Glissant (1928–2011). He understood the Baroque to be a cultural movement defined by excess and proliferation which countered the rationalism of Western thought privileged since the Renaissance. The Baroque contained a 'core hybridity' that Glissant said worked 'against the rationalist claim to penetrate the mysteries of the known in one single, incisive, uniform movement.' He used it in his writing to apply a politics of plurality and complexity to race, gender and class.

The work's titular reference to quarrelling bees is actualised by three contact microphones, two placed against the sculpture and one on the ventilation duct on the ceiling of the adjacent corridor. Contact microphones translate vibrations into sound, capturing the invisible presence of sound waves through contact with solid objects. The sounds generated by the pomelo skins and air duct bridge intangible and material dimensions, offering sensory knowledge as a means to navigate unfamiliar terrain.

## **Sriwhana Spong**

Born 1979, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; lives and works in London

### ***Instrument C (Frances) 2017***

aluminium, flora, cord, shoelaces

### ***Instrument D (Vera) 2018***

aluminium, steel, lacquer, plastic, wood

### ***Instrument B (Vivian) 2016***

wood, synthetic polymer pipes, rubber, aluminium

### ***Instrument E (Tina) 2019***

bronze

### ***Instrument F (Alice W) 2019***

glass, rope, felt

### ***Instrument H (Monster Chicken) 2021***

bronze, cable ties

### ***Instrument K (Joko) 2022***

steel, fabric tape, piano strings, aluminium pull tabs

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

Since 2016 Spong has created a series of sculptural instruments that together form an ever-expanding personal orchestra inspired by the Balinese gamelan—an ensemble of percussive instruments traditionally tuned to a pitch specific to the village to which it belonged. Each of Spong’s instruments is named for a collaborator, interlocutor, family member or friend.

Spong writes, ‘I see my instruments as records of the places I make work in and the people I collaborate with. Each instrument is named after someone. [...] *Instrument D (Vera)* (2018) is named after my friend Vera Mey, and consists of a set of chimes made from aluminium-cast French fries. It draws on the use of common food items, like fries, by my family in Bali as daily offerings through which everyday substances are transformed into a site of communion and a medium of contact with the sacred.’

At MUMA, the instruments will be activated by invited musicians at moments during the exhibition. *Instrument C (Frances)* and *Instrument F (Alice W)* will be played by members of the MUMA team at intervals according to a score determining when each instrument is struck.

## **Sriwhana Spong**

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### ***Instrument L (Made Rundu) 2026***

untreated pine, untreated recycled rimu, plastic (ABS and acrylic), recycled sheet metal, plywood, aluminium, electronics, guitar strings

Commissioned by Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, and Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

This commission is supported by the Henry Moore Foundation.

This is the most recent instrument to join Spong's gamelan and is titled *Instrument L (Made Rundu)* in recognition of Spong's artist grandfather. Designed by Aotearoan composer and musician Lachlan Anderson and instrument maker Ryan Nicol, who also fabricated it, the instrument uses a spinning magnate to vibrate the strings, the pitch of which can be adjusted.

The instrument proposes a sonic dimension to the aun-aun motif and its metamorphosis, in the work of the artist and her grandfather, into insects and mist. Anderson has used this instrument to create a soundtrack for Spong's new film, *AD*, shown in the adjacent gallery.

## **Sriwhana Spong**

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### ***Villa America 2012***

silk hand-dyed in Fanta

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

Spong has used soft drink and tea to hand-dye silk textiles in reference to products capitalised upon by colonial trade and corporate globalisation, raising issues of consumption and resource exploitation in Bali and around the world. This series of works is influenced by American author and musician Ian F. Svenonius' essay 'The Bloody Latte: Vampirism as Mass Movement' (2006), which defines colonists' voracious appetite for raw products as 'colonial bloodsucking'.

Some of the textiles are tied with 'unmeasured ribbons'. These ribbons refer to practices encountered by Spong during a 2023 artist residency in Siena, Italy. The writing of anthropologist Ernesto Martino (1908–1965) on southern Italian folk lore describes the tradition of asking the shopkeeper to cut the ribbon at random for sacred purposes. Negotiation with the shopkeeper about how to cut and price the ribbon disrupts the usual commercial relationship. Such unmeasured ribbon evoked the infinite or chaotic and was used during ritual ceremony to protect individuals from the 'crisis of presence'—a psychological state where a person feels their sense of self or reality dissolving due to trauma or grief.

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***I used to weave crowns (for Dwight) 2016***

silk hand-dyed in Fanta and grape Fanta

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

MUMA

**Sriwhana Spong**

Born 1979, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; lives and works in London

***Ida-Ida 2019***

silk hand-dyed in Coca-Cola and tea

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

MUMA

## **Bapak Pontjopangrawit (and Javanese prisoners)**

Born 1893, Surakarta, Indonesia; died 1965

### ***Gamelan Digul 1926***

Javanese instruments, from materials to hand in the Dutch prison camp at Tanah Merah (for example, food tins, old doors, animal hides) in the jungle on the Digul River, West Irian (now Papua New Guinea)

8 instruments loaned from the full Gamelan Digul

Collection of The Music Archive of Monash University

Recognising the practice of gamelan performance, from which Spong draws inspiration, components of the Gamelan Digul from the Music Archive of Monash University are included in the exhibition. The gamelan is the traditional ensemble of musical instruments used mainly in Java and Bali, made predominantly of percussive instruments. The word gamelan is derived from the Javanese word *gamel* ('to strike').

This Javanese instrument was made in 1926 by Surakarta-born musician and political activist Bapak Pontjopangrawit (1893–c.1965) and fellow inmates imprisoned at the Dutch–Netherlands East Indies prison camp at Tanah Merah in the jungle on the Digul River, West Irian (now Papua New Guinea) for activism against Dutch occupation. It is constructed from improvised and rudimentary materials—food tins, old doors and animal hides.

Following the Japanese invasion of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) in 1942 the NEI government-in-exile relocated to Australia along with the prisoners who were interned at Cowra POW Camp in NSW. The Gamelan Digul accompanied them. The prisoners were freed after intervention from the Australian government, which was lobbied by the Civil Rights League. The Gamelan Digul was played in Melbourne during the Indonesian War of Independence and became a symbol of the movement. When independence was declared in 1945 some of the prisoners returned home to continue their activism. The Gamelan Digul was gifted to the Museum of Victoria in 1946 and later transferred to Monash University in 1976.

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### ***Untitled (trade wind) 2026***

charcoal on paper, tulle

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

This drawing emerged from Spong's repeated practice of the *aun-aun* motif with the intention of representing the wind. The recurring script-like marks are smudged by the artist's hand creating a mist on the paper. The title, *Untitled (trade wind)* alludes to the shape of the amassed marks which evokes a gust of wind or wind-filled sail, as well as to gradual cultural changes brought about by trade (via maritime routes) as a function of colonisation and globalisation. Spong was struck by the shapes of the sails depicted in the maritime paintings of J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) that she viewed at Tate, Britain; images of the vessels setting off towards colonial outposts of the empire.

The work is shrouded by tulle in a nod to *Veils* (2001), a book by French philosophers Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, which plays on the French words *la voile* (sail) and *le voile* (veil). Spong draws attention to the sail and the veil as devices of seeing and moving through the fog of the unknown.

## Sriwhana Spong

Born 1979, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; lives and works in London

### **AD 2026**

single channel 16mm film transferred to digital video, sound, 18 mins

Sound design: Lachlan Anderson

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

Commissioned by Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, and Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington

This commission is supported by the Henry Moore Foundation.

The method of painting the aun-aun motif sees colour laid down before a black outline, as a boundless form of red and blue. The colours evoke the elements of fire and water which together make steam, reminding Spong of the phenomenon of mist, the central element in her new film *AD*.

In developing *AD*, Spong turned to poetry; a form in which language retains a nebulous mist-like quality and resists dogmatic or ideological functions. She draws specifically on *Don Juan* (1818–24), the final work of Lord Byron (1788–1824). The poem was written during the Romantic period (c.1790–1850) which occurred simultaneously to the Industrial Revolution (c.1760–1840): a transitional time of unknown futures. In her book *Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*, Emily Rohrbach identifies in the Romantic period a 'poetics of anticipation' in response to the uncertain historical moment. *Don Juan* is carried by a digressive narrative structure and Byron said of his process, that as he wrote the poem, he was not aware of where it would lead; a literary walk into the mist. This indeterminacy was amplified by Byron's death before he finished the poem. In collaboration with an AI large language model, Spong has completed the seventeenth canto of the poem, and some of these stanzas appear as intertitles in her film. With the author dead, the female character of the poem, Adeline, becomes the protagonist.

Shot on 16mm film, *AD* takes the form of a road trip, itself a cinematic form defined by journeys toward uncertain destinations. Filmed amongst the mist and ancient Hound Tor rocks at Dartmoor, Devon, England, the film invites an embrace of the unknown as a method for living in our own period of upheaval. The abstract footage in the film was produced by exposing the film to an electric current and recalls the energetic vibration of the *aun-aun* motif.

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### ***Horse Bit 1–11 2026***

charcoal on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

A chance encounter with a c.1450 book illustrating horse bit designs gave rise to this series of drawings by Spong. The bit sits in the horse's mouth and is attached to the reins to enable the rider to control the direction and speed of the horse. In the fifteenth century the horse was a function of labour, war, commerce and pageantry. These designs, recorded at a moment of transition between the medieval period and the Renaissance, are technologies of beauty and violence. The drawings connect to the taming of language, a product of the mouth, by AI large language models which Spong explored in her collaboration with AI in the making of her new film, *AD* shown in the adjacent gallery. The film features a wild horse free of a bridle and bit.

Spong interprets the graphic forms of the bits in charcoal, leaving traces of her movement as she draws and marking the paper in a way that evokes and further translates the way the *aun-aun* motif is employed in Kamasan painting as a representation of the invisible energy between figures in an image.

## **Sriwhana Spong**

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### ***Purple Raincoat (for Vasiliki) 2016***

silk hand-dyed in Coca-Cola and grape Fanta

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau

MUIMA

## **Sriwhana Spong**

Born 1979, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; lives and works in London

### ***Something-somethings 2026***

plastic net bags, unmeasured ribbons, bobby pins, horse-hair musical strings

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland

In the series of sculptural works hanging in the spine of the gallery, netting bags used to transport fruit and bobby pins for hair styling reference the devotional offerings made in the Balinese home of the artist's family. Often comprising everyday objects, the votives connect the ordinary with the sacred and reflect the philosophy that the value lies in the devotion of the giver rather than the extravagance of the offering. They hand on 'unmeasured ribbons' in reference to ritual practices of southern Italy where Spong undertook research in 2023.

### ***Something somethings (Scrying mirror) 1–18 2026***

tin can lids

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland

Polished tin can lids evoke the scrying mirror used for divination by mystic practitioners. These objects feature a highly polished, though not fully reflective surface that creates a mist-like image. Contemplating the mirror facilitates a lens into the past, present or future, though it is a foggy vision.

The title of this group of works—*Something somethings (Scrying mirror) 1–18*—was inspired by the words of Ni Ketut Murki, the Balinese master painter who taught Spong to paint the *aun-aun* motif. Murki described the *aun-aun* as, 'Something you see in the sky, but I'm not exactly sure.' The tin can lid sculptures shimmer in the dimly lit space of the museum like these sky 'somethings'. They are reminiscent of the way the *aun-aun* dots the canvas in Kamasan painting, and the circular embossing of their construction further evokes the spiral of the *aun-aun* motif.

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***Plantation economy (TM-10011861, TM-ALB-0349-53, RV-A20-48, TM-ALB-0426-14, TM-ALB-2146-40, TM-ALB-0426-6, TM-ALB-0426-2) 2026***

laser print on paper, incense burns, aluminium foil

Courtesy of the artist and Lett Thomas, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland

Sourced from the Collection Wereldmuseum in the Netherlands, the photographs used by Spong in the creation of this work were taken in Indonesia under Dutch colonial rule. The title of Spong's artwork refers to a keyword and collection object numbers affiliated with images in the collection database.

Each photograph follows a consistent format used by colonial botanists, capturing flora native to Indonesia isolated against a white sheet. Spong mirrors this technique in her film *The Painter-Tailor* in the adjacent gallery. Spong has burned holes in each image with incense, recalling Balinese spiritual practices of lighting incense as an offering in the home. As long as the incense continues to burn, a connection to the spirit world remains open. In opening this portal, each burn reveals aluminium foil lying behind the original photograph, suggestive of the unfailing vitality of the *aun-aun* motif.