

JHANA MILLERS

Christopher Ulutupu

What's the worst you could do?

From early on, Christopher Ulutupu's practice has used the conventions of cinematic storytelling to interrogate the relationship between place and indigenous identities. He employs a cast of actors consisting almost entirely of friends and family in his work. These actors sing, dance, and perform, often hamming it up for the camera set against dramatic or surreal landscapes. Previous works see Christopher's mother dropped off by helicopter atop Aotearoa's Southern Alps, while another sees an indoor volleyball court turned into a spotlight stage for an imaginary girl group. Many of these works have used landscape as a prop. Christopher upends much of landscape's imbued cultural value in order to subvert the expectations of his characters' experiences on screen, in particular playing with the idea of the visitor or the tourist.

What's the worst you could do? was shot between Whakatū, Nelson and Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Wellington, both locations a kind of hometown for the artist. Christopher teases out this duality, using similar tactics as previous works to unearth the potential of discordant storytelling. A series of acts consisting of two adjoining scenes play out side by side, each vignette often at odds with the action next to it. One vignette shows an energetic dancer against a backdrop of rainbow tinsel, while the adjoining screen has three boys eating ice cream in front of a fire. All the while Samoan disco blankets the two scenes. Another pairing consists of a Lynchian lip-sync performance to Grease's *There Are Worse Things I Could Do* while a car slowly burns next to it. These two sets of scenes in particular seem to imply an active versus passive dynamic, performer versus audience. However, the relationship between each pairing are merely implications. Each set of scenes are paired according to an internal logic privy only to the artist himself, each offering a different set of suggestions on how to read the whole.

I first started speaking to Christopher about this work for a show I curated at Te Tuhi titled *The Inner Lives of Islands*. The premise of which was to explore storytelling instincts from artists from across the Asia Pacific. It was the anecdotes of intercultural and international sharing of soap operas that propelled the exhibition, in particular hearing stories from friends and family about the popularity of Filipino soap operas in Samoa despite language barriers. *What's the worst you could do?* was initially to see Christopher revisit a script he wrote in 2012 while still working in the film and theatre industry, a story about a solo mother seeking to save her family by way of a local talent quest. This was to be a marked change in Christopher's practice, relying in the past on employing spontaneity and improvisation on set. His script, however, fell by the wayside in the process of shooting. The result instead is a kind of half-return to his former career, more narrative than previous works but without the hallmarks of traditional filmmaking—dialogue, plot, character development. What's left behind is the construction of the filmed image. Lighting, framing and score heighten the work's sense of atmosphere, bringing to the fore feeling over logic.

While the central characters on screen are his friends and family, Christopher is also acutely aware of where the audience is placed. The fragmented storytelling of *What's the worst you could do?* allows audiences their own interpretations, to fill the gaps between scenes. By being selective with the tools of filmmaking he uses, he highlights the mechanisms by which stories are told and understood. *What's the worst you could do?* embraces the complexity of incoherence and acknowledges the fallibility of storytelling. What's revealing is how we make sense of these gaps and what those assumptions say about us.

Robbie Handcock, June 2022