



Heidi Brickell, *Tangaroa-Collab on Rōkaunui*, 2023 (foreground) and *Double Mātou Burrowing Iho Like the Hā*, 2023 (background), installation view: *SpringTime is Heart-break: Contemporary Art in Aotearoa*, Te Puna o Waiwhetū Christchurch Art Gallery. Photo: John Collie.

‘I am probably most concerned with reconciling what it means for me to Indigenise, and to cultivate an imagination rich with mātauranga Māori that is free to celebrate and be enriched by mātauranga Tauīwi. Mātauranga is treasure.’ Heidi Brickell

# A Letter to Heidi Brickell

Tālofa Heidi,

I’m writing to you from the confines of my hotel room in Honolulu, Hawai’i, looking out to the concrete hinterlands of its central business district. I am here to visit the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts. There is a saying here, *Na ka Moananuiākea e ho’opili mai ia kākou*, *The great Pacific Ocean is what connects us all*, but it is hard to see the water behind the litany of skyscrapers and tempered glass outside my window. I am most definitely on an island right now, but it almost doesn’t feel like one from this perspective.

I’ve been thinking about our work together on *PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL* in 2022 since inviting you to be a part of *Aotearoa Contemporary*, and the many conversations we had leading up to and during its exhibition. It has always struck me that language is at the centre of your practice – that it is your first method of inquiry – so conversations with you are always exciting and rigorously circuitous. A single kupu (word) is never one thing to you, but a ‘copulation of ariā’ as you have said previously, a joining together of knowledges, places and narrative. It is a trajectory to be followed to its fullest potentials and not something to be closed off through the strictures of definition. On ‘ariā’, I enjoy that it can mean both: a concept or an idea, and a physical representation of an atua, a god. A confluence of the intellect, aesthetics and the divine. You find that within so many things across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa,

and I am recalling the etymological map you created of our islands through the shifting and shared kupu found in Aotearoa, Sāmoa, Tonga, Fiji and so on. Language is as much a record or tool as it is a complex space of its own play and transformations. There aren’t really boundaries here but connections to be activated, something which your work emphasises and has taught me to be comfortable with.

In *Wai Ata, Āta Whāia*, 2023–24, the installation you re-present and continue through *Aotearoa Contemporary*, you pull apart and reconstruct the words ‘waiata’ and ‘atawhai’. Waiata (song) becomes wai (water) and ata (reflection) and atawhai (kindness) becomes ata and whāia (to be followed, pursued). Through this work, you create your own visual song out of rimurapa (bull kelp), rākau (wood) and other industrial materials. I can remember when we last worked together that I foolishly tried to minimise your use of PVA, rabbit-skin glue, metal hooks and whatnot, because I was confused by what I thought was a violent difference among the materials. But what I understand now is that this confusion has to do with your radical embrace of te ao hurihuri (the contemporary world) and te ao Māori, and further out to Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa me ākea, the greater Pacific. You don’t hope for meaningful connection but rather to repair the poetics that are already there. Now looking out to



Heidi Brickell, *He Whetūrangi Rāwaho*, 2023, installation view: *SpringTime is Heart-break: Contemporary Art in Aotearoa*, Te Puna o Waiwhetū Christchurch Art Gallery. Photo: Heidi Brickell.

the vista of Honolulu’s mauna, interrupted by those totems of industry and still saddened by what I see, I am not dropping into nihilism or a feeling of futility that can sometimes pervade. I’m not optimistic either, but I am encouraged by the method of living through colonialism and capitalism that you offer to me, to us.

Sending hugs on the south-westerly wind and wishing you a good week.

Alofas,  
CALM

1. Heidi Brickell, quoted in ‘Spring Time is Heart-break’, *Bulletin*, 216, 1 June 2024, <https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/bulletin/213/spring-time-is-heart-break>, accessed 13 June 2024.