

# PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL

5 August - 18 September 2022

Curated by Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua

## A critical response by Hana Pera Aoake

In Pauline Kahurangi Yearbury's 1976 book, *The Children of Rangi and Papa*, there is a painting illustrating the separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku by their children. In it, Rangi and Papa's faces are anguished and contorted and their arms are outstretched. They are screaming in agony, forever reaching for one another's embrace. The tragedy of their separation also heralds the potential for the new, the capacity to encapsulate the past, the present and future, and entwine them in ways that aren't linear. When I first saw *PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL* by Heidi Brickell (Te Hika o Papauma, Ngāti Apakura, Ngāti Kahungunu, Rangitāne, Rongomaiwahine) I immediately thought of the dynamism and potentiality of Yearbury's work, but also of the adaptability and ingenuity of Māori artists in being able to retell these pūrākau in subtle and generous ways.

*PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL* is a series of works that defy categorisation. They were made in a process of tying together, rather than making carved lines. These angular works, canvas adhered to plywood, float between the floor and the roof; they contain shapes that resemble an unfurling koru, kōwhaiwhai, the hands of Papa and Rangi stretched out towards each other, or the rolling waves as waka cross from Hawaiki to Aotearoa. These canvases have been painted green, brown, purple, pink—colours of the whenua—and the many colours for blue, for which there are hundreds of different words in te reo Māori. These colours blur together, sometimes looking like the night sky and at other times appearing like lichen or moss or microbes, our earliest tūpuna, who, 3.5 billion years ago, looked much like blue-green coloured algae. Cutting between and around these canvases are rākau intricately wrapped in cotton twine. At times these are hung like a ladder and other times appear as bones. Deliberate cuts into the works are square and rectangular, perhaps referring to Tāwhirimātea's eyes; others are koru curling up towards Tamanuiterā or the shape of the jawbone of Māui's grandmother Muri-ranga-whenua. Light dances in between these gaps. *PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL* is responsive to the architecture, meaning it is adaptable. This is particularly evident in the way it has been reconfigured for The Physics Room, which is a smaller space with a wooden floor in contrast to the spacious concrete site at St Paul St Gallery, in Tāmaki Makaurau. In neither of these two sites does it rely on a singular viewpoint, rather, the whole installation appears to move as the viewer navigates the space, even though it is stationary.

Motifs in the work subconsciously and consciously link to Māoritanga. Māori artist John Bevan Ford described the way contemporary Māori artists draw from these deep whakapapa connections when he wrote “...even when not used directly, the proven symbols of the past provide models by which new symbols can be judged...”<sup>1</sup> Heidi prepares her canvases by ripping them, like preparing harakeke. Heidi also moulds shapes like arrows that point across the pictorial plane and across the gallery floor, recalling kōwhaiwhai and forms of koru inherent in whakairo. These lines of colours in Heidi’s work make me think of the way koru is in constant motion, representing the chaos of change and calm of the everyday. The koru symbolises that there is always a point of equilibrium—a state of harmony in life. This form appears in the work in less obvious ways too, for instance the circular coiling of cotton twine around rākau sticks. This way of working is intuitive; the knots, waves, curves, and lines emphasise whakapapa. Whether this be the voyaging histories of all tūpuna, both Māori from Hawaiki or Pākehā from Europe, or the deeper histories like the lifecycle of the tuna or the way kererū spread kākano across the whenua.

Heidi has stated that seeing the whare whakairo, *Ihenga*, at Tangatarua marae on the Waiariki Institute of Technology campus in Rotorua by Lyonel Grant offered a model of thinking through different modalities to retell stories of our ancestors and embed them within what we experience. Heidi notes that, “...the way a whare tipuna functions as a sort of a psychological space, albeit a shared, communal one, is something I’m figuring out in my personal practice. How art can reflect an authentic mind-space, for someone living simultaneously in Māori and Pākehā worlds.”<sup>2</sup> In this way it allows things to be slowly excavated from the whenua of your mind, a pick and mix of different methodologies. Not unlike our tūpuna, Heidi is always exploring new methodologies, guided by the most suitable materials, and not driven by excluding anything. It makes me think of the collisions of culture pre and post 1840 in Aotearoa, where hapū began an exchange of ideas, technology and commerce. Contact with Pākehā at that time exposed Māori to new technologies for land production, and between 1800 and 1850 the agricultural and horticultural base of Māori expanded as hapū added new crops like wheat and potatoes to their plantations.<sup>3</sup> This also saw ancient inter-hapū trade networks flourish, extending all the way to Australia and California.<sup>4</sup> We have always experimented and tried our hand at using new technologies and sought ways of connecting with other cultures, why would this be any different for artists like Heidi?

*PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL* is the result of playing with materials and not limiting to the organised chaos of what emerges. As just one example of this way

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1 John Bevan Ford, “Introduction”, *Maori Artists of the South Pacific*, Katerina Mataira (ed.), Nga Puna Waihangā New Zealand Maori Artists and Writers Society. (Auckland: Woolmore Printing Ltd., 1984), 9.

2 From the original exhibition text written by Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua, St Paul St Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau, 2022.

3 Moana Jackson, “Land Loss and the Treaty of Waitangi”, *Te Ao Marama: Regaining Aotearoa: Māori writers speak out* (Vol. 2), Witi Ihimaera (ed.), (Singapore: Reed Books, 1993), 72

4 Ibid.

of working, this work began as an explorative painting process by using things like rabbit skin glue, which involves cooking granules of rabbit fat and was a technique used on old archival materials to stop them retaining moisture. This process allows for whatever is beneath the surface to show, by peeling away what is left underneath. Other techniques used include the application of pigment and egg tempera, inspired by friend and fellow artist Owen Connors. This process was used in ancient civilizations, including in the Fayum mummy portraits, produced in Egypt from around the 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD. It is perhaps best known from the early Christian period in Europe.

In the foreword for *The Children of Rangī and Papa*, Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan (Labour Member of Parliament for Southern Māori 1967-96), describes the intention of Pauline Yearbury's illustrations to create a space "...between the European style of realism and the traditional Māori carving." Yearbury sought to bridge worlds and open up a dialogue between Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pākehā. Much like Yearbury, Heidi holds close to the pūrākau and intricacies of te reo Māori.

While writing this, I thought a lot about the residue of glue and the fraying pieces of canvas in Heidi's work and how this might suggest ways in which we try to put things back together or to reclaim that which was taken through the process of colonisation. I also thought that perhaps these reveal shifts in time, or Māori conceptions of time, as nonlinear and marked by dualities. Dualities are a constant framework for Māori from Te Kore to Te Ao Mārama, Te Pō to Te Ao, Pākehā to Māori, te reo Māori to English. What is the middle ground?

Heidi's work seeks to operate in the in-between, a space of potential, where we can exist as a poi that stretches between Ranginui and Papatūānuku, but under capitalism in a colonised Aotearoa. Through whakapapa there is an ontology where we can describe ourselves as belonging to, and being of, many bodies, both alive and dead, and also of the whenua, a maunga and a body of water. However the reality is that it is so difficult to escape the pressures of individualism, and those of late stage capitalism. It is integral though that we understand these structures and functions of capitalism, for at the end of the day it is those structures and functions which must be subverted and destroyed if we are to ensure that our world and all life in it survives.<sup>5</sup> These pressures often culminate in a feeling of doom fatigue, the inevitability of the end of the world. It's important to remember that for Indigenous people there have been many world endings, even if this anxiety lingers.

But what about the potential in whakapapa or kinship? In her essay, *Family Value: Towards a Kinship Beyond the Forms of Capital*, Joanne Baumgärtner writes,

Capitalism has imposed its idea of kinship upon the world and acquired a totality in which it is easier to imagine the apocalypse, than any alternative. If the material basis of kinship seems immovable, maybe the agents it

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5 Pita Rikys, "Essays Towards Revolution in Aotearoa", *Te Ao Marama: Regaining Aotearoa: Māori writers speak out* (Auckland: Reed, 1992, vol. 2), 238.

ties together don't have to be. If material has originally been present when kinship relations were formed, it is not so hard to imagine that those materials could not only be mediators but also subjects of kinship relations... If resources, products and surplus value are not allocated through kin, but make kin, these kinship structures become about the distribution of relationships.<sup>6</sup>

What Baumgärtner suggests here is very much aligned with Heidi's work. Making kin is a way of forming relationships, or whakawhanaungatanga. It is a means of drawing a connection and of sharing with other living beings rather than holding power over a material object as an individual. It is a way to exchange hau with others rather than exist solely within the lonely confines of capitalism.

This is not to say that there is not a constant tension within *PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL*. There is always going to be an inadequacy of language and the ways in which the translation between te reo Māori and English will never quite be able to articulate the right meanings. The tension between being Māori and living in this settler colony and this tension between speaking two very different languages is palpable in Heidi's work. How is it that we came to this point where, despite it being an official language of Aotearoa, we don't all speak Māori? Of course there are many policies to suggest why, but in the early settlement of Aotearoa, te reo Māori was the dominant language. During the early stages of contact, colonists and missionaries became fluent speakers of Māori, but they were of course motivated to become fluent: the colonists wanted our land and the missionaries wanted our souls.<sup>7</sup> Once they got what they wanted they no longer needed to speak Māori, let alone ensure that the language survived.<sup>8</sup>

In one conversation I had with Heidi, she describes thinking about Tūmatauenga (the atua of war) during the creation of much of this work. One cannot but think about how Tūmatauenga wanted to not just separate his parents, but kill them. There is no way to kill or undo the past, but rather we must fight to sit in the inbetween space. The word in the show's title Pakanga means to fight, battle or wage war. This war is internal, and represents the burden of belonging to Tangata Tiriti and Tangata whenua. In a kōrero with curator Cameron Ah Loo-Matamua, Heidi spoke about the kupu ariā, which describes the physical manifestation of atua. In *PAKANGA FOR THE LOSTGIRL* not only do I imagine the separation of Papatūānuku and Ranginui, but of the stalemate in the battle between Tāwhirimātea and Tūmatauenga, of Rona trapped in the Marama for her rudeness and all the stories of Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga.

We are the sum of all our tūpuna and so are the languages within which we

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6 Joanne Baumgärtner, "Family Value: Towards a Kinship Beyond the Forms of Capital", *The Material Kinship Reader: Material beyond extraction and kinship beyond the nuclear family*. Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards (eds.), *Onomatopée 208*, Rotterdam NL, 2022: 65.

7 Timoti Kāretu, "Tōku Reo, Tōku Mana", *Te Ao Marama: Regaining Aotearoa: Māori writers speak out* (Vol. 2), 224.

8 Ibid, 224.

communicate, whether we express our ideas in te reo Māori or in English. Kupu have been transmuted through our bodies and across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. One of these, significant in Heidi's project, is the kupu hinengaro, meaning mind, thought, intellect, consciousness, awareness. This kupu is written as finagalo (Sāmoa), hinaaro (Tahiti), and hinenao (Marquesas). Our pūrākau are similar too, sharing figures such as the figure of Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga, the cheeky pōtiki who broke the rules to give us more sunlight, fire and who appears once in every cycle of the marama after being crushed by Hine-nui-te-pō. These stories, and our story of creation of Tāne Mahuta and his siblings pushing his parents Papatūānuku and Ranginui apart, encourage us to always be evolving, always experimenting and shifting between dualities, never static, but in perpetual motion.

In a time where things feel unfixed and uncertain and the earth is literally spinning faster, Heidi's work makes me remember to consider the interstices of all human and non-human life and ways of reframing the world that might *unsettle* the dominant settler ideology. It makes me think too, about the ways in which we can exist, and the ways language might help achieve new freedoms from the constraints of dominating ideas of what and who I am supposed to be. Perhaps we could be like the worms eating Cook's Endeavour at the bottom of the moana, utilising what we have around us, both to sustain us and to excavate new meanings and ways of being in the world.

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