

Through the Teeth of the Taniwha: A Painted Journey of Reconnection to Te Ao Māori

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Abstract

Guided by the concept of wā, this abstract painting project explores my journey to reconnect with my Māori whakapapa, and considers how these discoveries might negotiate and interact with my Pākehā heritage. Being of a bicultural identity in two opposing worlds, the feelings of belonging and disconnection are very apparent to me. Through visits home to ‘sites of whakapapa’ in Taranaki, and focusing on my awa, Waingongoro; the weaving of intergenerational narratives inherent within ancestral knowledge, and the embodied experiences have become the material for my abstract paintings. Through the means of painted studies and large-scale canvas paintings, I explore how painted layers, composition, and a personal visual vocabulary of Indigenous mark-making can co-create a methodology of whakapapa. This process aims to help me engage in the reclamation of my identity and Māori language to gain an understanding of *Ko Wai Au?*

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

7th May 2026

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To my koko and pāpā, you have both made an immeasurable impression on my identity within te ao Māori, and I hope this journey adds to your mātauranga Māori kete just as much as you've filled mine. To my māmā, you understand me in a way that makes me feel so seen. Your kindness and intelligence continue to keep me motivated. To Casey, you heard all the complaints, tears and excitement. Your patience and loving understanding have been a place of solace and comfort throughout the ups and downs of this project. Thank you for letting me yap to you all day, every day, and for picking me up when I was down.

Pepeha

Ko Taranaki taku maunga
Ko Waingongoro taku awa
Ko Aotea taku waka
Ko Ngaruahine rāua ko Ngati Ruanui ngā iwi
Ko Ngāti Tū taku hapū
Ko Ngarongo rātou ko Oeo ko Waiokura ngā marae
Ko Jeremy Kotahi Aranga Robinson taku pāpā
Ko Jennifer Maree Robinson taku māmā
Ki te taha o taku pāpā, ko Tutahi Aranga Steven Frances Robinson rāua ko Kaye Robyn Robinson
aku mātua tūpuna
Ki te taha o taku māmā, ko Kem Price rāua ko Jocelyn Gladys Price aku mātua tūpuna
Ko Mía Caitlin Mahana Robinson ahau
No reira, ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa



Figure 1. Taranaki Maunga, taken during my March home visit to Taranaki, March 2025. Photograph by Mía Robinson.

Preface

I was 4 or 5-years-old, newly moved to the UAE (United Arab Emirates), and being put in the spotlight during a school morning assembly. I didn't know what the teacher thought I should know about, but I knew the feeling of embarrassment and shame. My teacher, a fellow New Zealander living overseas, called me up to sing the song that goes, "there was a taniwha swimming in the Moana," even though I didn't know the next line or name of the song. Regardless, she wanted me to perform for the school, and I didn't know what I was doing.

I now know what I felt was whakamā. Whakamā over my lack of knowledge around Aotearoa and waiata Māori, whakamā over being presented in front of everyone like an entertainment act, whakamā over the disappointment from my teacher after exclaiming about my Māori heritage when I didn't deliver. Whakamā.

This was the first moment I remember being aware of the responsibility I held towards Māori representation. I didn't know what to do with it, or how to explore it.

Introduction

Guided by the concept of wā, *Through the Teeth of the Taniwha: A Painted Journey of Reconnection to Te Ao Māori*, is an abstract painting project exploring the journey to reconnect with my Māori whakapapa and consider how these discoveries might negotiate and interact with my Pākehā heritage. The title of this research project draws from my vivid childhood experience of whakamā (shame), as well as the taonga my koko (my pāpā's father) gifted me by a tohunga whakairo (master carver) when I was two years old. A hei matau (fishhook) carved in bone, the chosen marks and patterns were intended to reflect my personality, which was still emerging. The hei matau shape has the widely recognised symbolism of safekeeping during travel and connection to te moana (the ocean). However, this form and the niho taniwha (teeth of the taniwha) marks that are scratched into the outer sides were shared with me by my koko to symbolise grasping for knowledge. It is this grasping for knowledge that has shaped the research project I am undertaking.



Figure 2. My hei matau bone carving from my whānau, 2025, photograph by Mia Robinson.

Growing up overseas in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, my childhood was far different to that of my koko and pāpā. Their shared narratives and experiences became my access point for this research journey. My koko grew up in Hawera, and currently resides in Ngāmotu (New Plymouth), Taranaki, and my pāpā who also grew up in Taranaki, currently lives in Abu Dhabi. I was born in Palmerston North and moved to Abu Dhabi with my family at four years old, moving back to Aotearoa at 18 in 2022. Although, I am grateful for the opportunities and experiences I was privileged to receive in Abu Dhabi, my exposure and understanding of te ao Māori was reliant on my parents, who were also physically distanced from their familiar surroundings.

Moving back to Aotearoa towards the end of my teens made me viscerally aware of the lack of knowledge I had regarding te ao Māori. My mum, Jenny, who provides a thread of my Pākehā heritage, has always been supportive of my bicultural heritage with her implementation of te reo

Māori at home. With kupu (words) integrated here and there, and through encouraging the values of manaakitanga, kotahitanga and whanaungatanga, my parents helped to cement my right to my Māori identity. However, I always felt something was missing. The environment I was surrounded by, though culturally diverse, could only see my skin colour, and not my whakapapa. These encounters sowed the seeds of doubt and inadequacy, which is one of the key inquiries of this painting-practice-led research. In my final year of my Bachelor of Visual Arts (2024), I started to address the use of abstract painting as a language to express feelings that were difficult to comprehend or communicate. However, writing the proposal for my Masters application marked the start of this painted journey.



Figure 3. My koko and dog Albie in front of our awa, 2025, photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 4. Family photo in Abu Dhabi at Christmas, 2024, photograph by Casey Roma

Initially I thought that relying on and exploring my koko and pāpā's stories would give me the momentum and pathway for my own journey of reconnection, as they had grown up in Aotearoa. However, as the research continued through abstract painting and kōrerorero (conversations), I realised the journey of reconnection to te ao Māori was non-linear and personal; you can't rely on someone else's experiences to satisfy your own diasporic inquiries. Abstract painting has become the method I find most effective to explore and work through the emotions of holding a bicultural identity. The watercolour and acrylic studies aid this unravelling process, documenting the initial experiences I have had with my sites of whakapapa. For this exegesis and research project, I use the term 'sites of whakapapa' when describing the places in Taranaki that I visit, which have significance to my whakapapa, and therefore identity. Those places are my maunga: Taranaki; awa: Waingongoro; and marae: Ngarongo.

By making paintings activated through a state of wā, I seek to understand the intertwining threads of my identity as a Wāhine Māori; and how my bicultural identity of being Pāheke and Māori interact with each other in the liminal zone of Indian scholar and post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the 'third space'.¹ By visiting my sites of whakapapa and exploring the intergenerational narratives of my whānau, I am engaging with my own experiences, visually documented through small painting studies and large abstract canvases. By adhering to a whakapapa methodology, I create my own Indigenous mark-making language to reclaim a Māori visual language. Whakapapa, as a methodology, centralises a Māori way of knowing as the 'being' and 'doing' in this research project, offering a "framework for which knowledge of all things can be both ordered and contextualised across time," as outlined by Māori researchers Merata Kawharu, Paul Tapsell, and Paratene Tane.² A kaupapa Māori research paradigm also encourages tikanga (cultural protocol) to be upheld and facilitates whanaungatanga (relationships) within the genealogically ordered methodology of whakapapa. Through this methodology, ideas around wā (time and space) have become embedded as a key concept for the making process of these paintings.

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 32-33, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=653022>.

² Merata Kawharu et al., "Applying Whakapapa Research Methodology in Māori Kin Communities in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 19, no. 1 (2024): 65–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2023.2227232>.

Structure

In part one of this exegesis, I trace the journey of my whakapapa, highlighting the key understandings within the concept and methodology of whakapapa. Kōreroreo (conversations) with my whānau become an access point, pivoting the journey towards a more personal exploration, while acknowledging the influence that these intergenerational narratives have on my practice. I undertook visits home to Taranaki to explore the whenua my iwi is kaitiaki (caregiver/guardian) of, to find an understanding of the places I call my tūrangawaewae. These ventures helped me overcome boundaries I had towards the materials used in my paintings, tangibly working through the reservations about using whenua pigments and materials in the work.

Part two delves into the influence of wā in the making process: becoming a state or flow that facilitates my experiences in Taranaki, and painting in my studio in Tāmaki Makaurau. I discuss Homi K. Bhabha's third space through a Māori lens, and how this has influenced the way I paint. Guided by other Indigenous female artists, such as Jade Townsend and Lily Laita, and their views of cultural hybridity and vā or wā, my paintings gain traction through a kinship with their motifs. My personal visual vocabulary has become a product of the tension between the two cultural identities I hold, my painting practice documenting how they interact with each other.

Part three shares a journey through the visual language and Indigenous mark-making that populate my works. Through an understanding of my origins with abstract painting, and the shift to an Indigenous perspective of abstraction, my motifs engage with this narrative. The paintings develop and accumulate new motifs and marks as I continue this journey of reconnection; each home visit adds more to my vocabulary.

PART ONE

A high-angle, close-up photograph of a shallow stream. The water is clear, revealing a bed of smooth, rounded stones in various shades of brown, tan, and grey. The water's surface is covered in intricate, concentric ripples and reflections of light, creating a shimmering effect. The lighting is bright, casting soft shadows and highlighting the textures of the stones and the water's surface.

Figure 5. Waingongoro Awa, taken during my August home visit to Taranaki, August 2025. Photograph by Mia Robinson.

WHAKAPAPA

Whakapapa is integral to this research project, providing the lens through which I understand the importance of whanaungatanga with people, the whenua, and the moana. Western definitions might frame whakapapa as a genealogical lineage or family tree, but from a Māori worldview, whakapapa is understood to be more expansive. In *Going Home: The Importance of Reconnecting to Māori Culture through Whakapapa*, Erin Marie Lincoln (Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī, Ngāti Whātua) describes whakapapa as “the foundation that connects all Māori to one another and all Māori to their identity, knowledge and heritage.”³ Whakapapa centralises and supports a Māori way of knowing, being and doing, highlighting the connections that have been built over time with each other, and te taiao (the natural world). Linguistically, ‘whaka’ is a causative prefix meaning “to make” or “to cause” and ‘papa’ refers to layers or foundations, specifically in relation to the whenua and Papatūānuku (the Māori personification of earth mother), thereby together implying a building of layers.⁴ Within my painting practice, I implement the use of layering and personal motifs to highlight the presence of whakapapa. All of the project work is underpinned by whakapapa through the non-material materials of kōrerorero (conversations), whanaungatanga, and experiential knowledge.

Discovering the Whenua:

In the early stages of this research project, I was unsure where to start digging for resources and archival material of my whakapapa. The first step was to conduct informal conversations with my koko and pāpā, as their bloodline was where my Māori whakapapa flowed through. What I discovered in these kōrerorero as I asked questions, and listened to their responses, was the familiar feelings of whakamā and disconnection, an experience I knew all too well. Their stories differed in the contexts of their childhoods, but the notion of cultural identity struggles remained. I was reminded of Hana Burgess and Te Kahuratai Painting’s metaphor of whakapapa as an “ocean of time”, where they express that: “Each generation coexists like droplets immersed in the ocean of time. Knowledge of whakapapa allows us to navigate the intergenerational currents that constitute this ocean of never-ending beginnings.”⁵ From these kōrerorero, I became determined to navigate my “intergenerational currents” and experience of a bicultural identity without fear of doing it wrong, because my whakapapa held room for “never-ending beginnings.”⁶ It was then I realised the journey to reconnect with te ao Māori has no conclusion or endpoint; there is always something new to learn and gain.

³ Erin Marie Lincoln, *Going Home: The Importance of Reconnecting to Māori Culture through Whakapapa*, 2023, 2, <https://hdl.handle.net/10092/106480>.

⁴ “Papatūānuku,” He Kapunga Oneone, accessed April 8, 2026, <https://www.kauaeraro.com/atua/papatuuuanuku>.

⁵ Hana Burgess and Te Kahuratai Moko-Painting, *Onamata, Anamata: A Whakapapa Perspective of Māori Futurisms* (Economic and Social Research Aotearoa, 2020), 205, <https://hdl.handle.net/2292/63910>.

⁶ Burgess and Moko-Painting, *Onamata, Anamata*, 205.

Growing up in Abu Dhabi, the landscape and environment I became accustomed to contrasted with Aotearoa's whenua. Where my pepeha refers to my maunga (mountain) and awa (river), I was familiar with sand dunes and skyscrapers. Therefore, I felt the best place to start a haerenga (journey) of reconnection was to return to the whenua and whānau I whakapapa to. In Burgess and Painting's chapter "Onamata, Anamata: A whakapapa perspective of Māori futurisms," they maintained that "being in good relation (to your whakapapa) occurs in place."⁷ For many Māori the whenua they whakapapa to becomes an anchor point for their identity, grounding them throughout the turbulence of life. My anchor felt it had not been dropped yet. Instead, I was battling a separation from a land that my body intrinsically knew, but my consciousness longed to understand.



Figure 6. View of sand dune and hills in the UAE desert, 2019, photograph by Mia Robinson

Intentional Home Visits:

In March 2025, I gathered two of my closest friends, Tohu Harris (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahungunu, Te Whakatōhea) and Hope Korewha (Ngāpuhi-nui-tonu), as emotional support, and together we travelled down to Ngāmotu (New Plymouth) to visit my koko and grandma. Although this journey wasn't unfamiliar, having travelled from Tāmaki Makaurau to Taranaki every time my family and I came to visit Aotearoa, it was unlike the solo road trips I had taken since I had been back: the intention was to question and dig deeper on my tūrangawaewae. The itinerary was planned; my 'sites of whakapapa' were now the focus. First, we were to visit my maunga: Taranaki Maunga, then my awa: Waingongoro Awa, and finally one of my marae: Ngarongo Marae.

⁷ Burgess and Moko-Painting, *Onamata, Anamata*, 212.



Figure 7. My koko and grandma locking up Ngarongo Marae, 2025, Taranaki, photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 8. View of Taranaki Maunga from Ngarongo Marae, 2025, Taranaki, photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 9. Where the Waingongoro Awa meets Te Tai-o-Rēhua (the Tasman Sea), 2025, Ohawe Beach, Taranaki, photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 10. The ripples and stones of where the Waingongoro Awa meets Te Tai-o-Rēhua (the Tasman Sea), 2025, Ohawe Beach, Taranaki, photograph by Mia Robinson.

During this trip my koko became our tour guide, reminiscing about his childhood growing up on the grounds of the marae, pointing out the tree he used to climb. His relational connection to these sites painted the picture of what I might have experienced if I, too, had the opportunity to grow up on our iwi land. In that moment, those same feelings of disconnect started to creep in again, right until we traversed down to Ohawe Beach, where the Waingongoro Awa meets Te Tai-o-Rēhua (the Tasman Sea). As soon as I peered over the cliff edges and saw the tumultuous current of my awa, I felt an embodied and tangible connection to an area of the whenua I had not visited before. My hands and feet felt like they remembered the onepū (black iron sand) and stony waters, even though this was our first physical encounter. I now know that this experience was guided by my tūpuna, who had lived on and cared for this land. This singular experience changed the trajectory of my research project.

Ammon Ngakuru, a Ngāti Maniapoto, Te Roroa and Ngāpuhi multidisciplinary artist, explores how history, categorisation and value operate within a post-colonial context, specifically within Aotearoa. His AUT Honours' project, *Mangapapa Block 2: Site/ Archive/Installation*, followed Ngakuru's estranged relationship to a site of personal significance through archival materials from his grandmother, including photographs with hand notations written on the verso. In the project, Ngakuru establishes that his knowledge of the chosen site's physicality was limited, and that the project's inquiry began due to this limitation, acknowledging that the impossibility of knowing the site completely was always a consideration for his work. His discoveries unfolded from the archival documents, which served as a premise for his material responses and installations. The *Mangapapa Block 2* works consisted of sculptures; *There*, *Coin Work*, *Untitled (Pace Work One)*, *Talk Week Work*, *Untitled (Talk Week Version One)*, *Untitled (Pace Work Two)*, and a video *Pace Work* made to understand the site's physical scale, as mapped by his grandmother's footsteps, measurements which were found handwritten on the photograph's verso. Ngakuru frames this research project as an attempt at "gaining a view or sense of this site that still considers my relationship to it and the difficulty of knowing completely."⁸

Drawing on Ngakuru's process of understanding archival material from his grandmother, and acknowledging this difficulty of knowing and not-knowing, I frame the idea of archival material as whakapapa through whānau narratives within my own project. These intergenerational narratives guide my own mapping of my sites of whakapapa, and I acknowledge the continuous journey of reconnection that is in occurrence. This project will be ongoing like whakapapa, layers and findings will weave into paintings and layers or guide the next. The intention for this project is to continue gathering knowledge that grounds my identity in my Māoritanga, whilst also undoing the colonialist concept of blood percentage, and this idea of not being 'Māori enough.' For me, my painting practice documents the feelings of being an outsider to my own whenua, but also paints the slow acknowledgement and acceptance of Ngakuru's "difficulty of knowing completely."⁹ Although he

⁸ Ammon Ngakuru, "Mangapapa Block 2: Site/ Archive/ Installation" (Exegesis in support of practice-based Dissertation (Visual Arts), Auckland University of Technology, 2014), 7.

⁹ Ngakuru, "Mangapapa Block 2: Site/ Archive/ Installation," 7.

ultimately decided to investigate from afar using the challenging physical distance as a conceptual element, my art practice follows a more direct engagement with my sites of whakapapa, driven by a desire for tangible interaction with the mauri (life force) and sensorial elements of the whenua.

Interactions with the Whenua:

A few months after the first visit home, in June 2025, I travelled up to Mangamuka with Tohu Harris, to support her upcoming exhibition, *Te Iringa a Tūpoto* (2025), and attend her Auntie Nikau Hindin's (Ngai Tūpoto, Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi) wānanga on harvesting whenua. Hindin, as an artist, predominantly works with aute (barkcloth) and natural pigments, contributing to the revitalisation and re-learning of their materiality and cultural importance in Aotearoa. Her practice involves harvesting, stripping, beating, and soaking the aute fibres, as well as the harvesting and processing of whenua pigments, which she uses as paint on the aute.¹⁰ I was unsure what the wānanga was going to bring to my own practice, as I've had reservations about using whenua in my paintings. I felt I didn't have a strong enough claim or authorship to take from a place I hadn't built a long-standing relationship with. However, like my March visit home to Taranaki, this experience changed the way I viewed the land and my connection to it.

Before we started the wānanga Nikau shared the principles of harvest, and the importance of adhering to this tikanga. She said we must:

1. Seek permission
2. Go at the right time (season/tide)
3. Only gather what is needed
4. Process everything immediately and correctly, “dispose” of byproducts properly
5. Finish the job
6. Honour the resource
7. Give back and share

Although I still choose not to actively use whenua pigments and process the uku (clay) as Nikau does, these principles remain highlighted in my methodology. Participating in this harvesting wānanga widened my view of using materials from the earth, from a selfish act to a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship with the land. You're not stealing or cutting it from its source but rather practising what our tūpuna have been doing for years as kaitiakitanga, respecting the beauty of the natural resources we have around us. This understanding translated into my own work through establishing principles for my painting and layering practise that I now adhere to. Each painting starts with a swirling motion, emulating the awa's tumultuous currents, and then layering in a whenua-based colour palette with the motifs I have developed. Those motifs (which I discuss in

¹⁰ “Nikau Hindin: Kōkōrangī Ki Kōkōwai,” The Dowse Art Museum, June 12, 2024, <https://dowse.org.nz/exhibitions-and-events/exhibitions/2020/nikau-hindin-kokorangī-ki-kokowai>.

Part three) include the motions of my awa, a whakapapa presence of multiple dispersing dots, ancestral narratives, and the niho taniwha pattern.



Figure 11. Processing of uku in bucket, 2025, Mangamuka, image courtesy of Tohu Harris.



Figure 12. Tohu harvesting uku from the riverbed, 2025, Mangamuka, photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 13. Straining of uku through muslin cloth, 2025, Mangamuka, image courtesy of Tohu Harris.

Going through the tangible experience of harvesting clay on the riverbed bankside in Mangamuka, processing it in buckets and muslin cloth, and forming discs to fire on the open fire, allowed me to tangibly work through the boundaries I had constructed for myself. I didn't feel it was appropriate for me to keep any of the whenua we had processed, as we weren't on my iwi's land or harvesting from my marae. Instead, the colours of the uku remained in my consciousness and brought in the blues to expand the project's colour palette. When I paint with the browns, oranges and blues of my store-bought paints, I am aware and actively remembering pulling these colours from the ground, rubbing them between my hands, removing them from underneath my nails, and cleaning the uku thoroughly, over and over again.

There is comfort and familiarity that comes from my chosen colour palette of burnt oranges, reds, greens, ochres, browns and blues, connecting me back to my tūpuna and the intergenerational knowledge that feels inherent when I use them. The Toi Māori Aotearoa Colour Palette, developed by Aalto Paint in collaboration with a team of cultural experts, artists and curators in 2002, consists of 21 selected hues crafted to represent Papatūānuku's pigments.¹¹ The palette emphasises customary colours found in wharenui around Aotearoa as well as the familiar colours of the whenua. I had gravitated towards the colours present in this palette without realising this resource existed. Discovering the paint samples brought validation to the feelings I was already experiencing in my painting process. For me, the earthy, warm-tone palette unifies the experiences of my sites of whakapapa, and the layered painting process upholding the mauri and mana of the whenua.

¹¹ "Toi Māori Aotearoa Palette," Aalto Paint, accessed March 16, 2026, <https://www.aaltopaint.co.nz/inspiration-articles/history-toi-maori-palette>.



Figure 14. Toi Māori Aotearoa Colour Palette Paint Swatches, 2025, photograph by Mia Robinson.

Returning to the Whenua:

Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Ngā Rauru artist, Raukura Turei, in her practice, uses the whenua as a conduit to her emotional states, and as an ode to her whakapapa. Through a process of building layered grounds of oil paint, natural pigments and oil sticks, then sifting onepū (black iron sand) over the wet surface, she says she enters a meditative state.¹² By carving out abstracted painted landscapes reminiscent of a wāhine's body, the repetitive movements using oil sticks allow Turei to return to her thoughts and be immensely present. Each handful of the earth she paints with connects her back to her ancestors, including Atua Māori (Māori Gods).¹³ Turei's 2022 work, *He Tukana III*, reflects her emotional reconnection with whakapapa during new motherhood in the Covid lockdown. Just before Turei was born, her kuia (grandmother) prematurely passed away when fishing on the rocks at Te Henga (Bethells Beach), Hine-Moana carrying her away. Hine-Moana (female atua of the sea) connects Turei back to her kuia, with the experience and practice of collecting whenua, a process of "finding [the] material means to connect to my grandmother's presence on the earth."¹⁴ Turei expresses that the act of collecting and engaging with the whenua and moana has "the ability to strip away the generational trauma that has calcified itself between lost whakapapa and a stolen generation."¹⁵ For me, returning to my iwi's land and building whanaungatanga with the whenua dilutes the whakamā that sits so uncomfortably in me. There, I collect experiences that keep me present in my Māoritanga when returning to the studio to paint.

¹² "Artist and Architect Raukura Turei's Work Is an Ode to Her Whakapapa," Homestyle, January 19, 2022, <https://homestyle.co.nz/artist-raukura-turei/>.

¹³ "Watch 'Tukana' - S1, E1 | MĀORI+ | Whakaata Māori," accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.maoriplus.co.nz/show/tukana/season-1/episode-1/play>.

¹⁴ "Texture of Practice: Raukura Turei," The Vessel, accessed April 9, 2026, <https://vessel-magazine.no/issues/3/embodiedknowledge/texture-of-practice-raukura-turei>.

¹⁵ "Texture of Practice."



Figure 15. Raukura Turei, *He Tukana III*, 2020, oil, raw pigment and onepū (black sand) on linen, two panels, 90 x 60cm each; 90 x 120 cm overall.

After the trip to Taranaki and the wānanga in Mangamuka, I overcame some of my self-imposed media-based boundaries and decided to experiment with the collected onepū (black sand) from Ohawe Beach, where my awa meets the moana. I had initially collected the onepū in my March home visit to bring physical reminders of my trip back to Tāmaki, but the whenua became another access point in my journey. Experiencing the whenua kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) removed another layer of whakamā as I could now recall the physical typography of my awa, an image that stays constant in my mind when painting. I felt a closeness and growing relationship to my awa, and now when I recite my pepeha, I visualise collecting the onepū, feeling the cold-water wash over my feet retracing the meandering flow of the awa. These memories remain as grounding points in this journey.

In the studio in Tāmaki, I started exploring the onepū presence in my paintings, enjoying the element of light it brought to the works. I would layer glue in the form I found best suited the composition and then sift the onepū on top, collecting the remaining grains for later use. The iron in the onepū sparkles when you shine a light on the painting's surface and introduces a sculptural relief and spatial element. The raised lines of sand in *Abi Kā Roa*, 2025, formed by glueing the sand onto the canvas brings the onepū outward and invites the viewer to oscillate between the two surfaces of the painting, as it catches the light from different angles. The use of onepū in my *Talk*

Week works, *Abi Kā Roa*, *Mangōpare*, *Te Kore* and *E toru ngā porohita*, offered a way to bridge that physical gap between my making in Tāmaki, and my collecting experiences in Taranaki.



Figure 16. Mia Robinson, *Abi Kā Roa*, 2025, oil paint, acrylic paint and onepū on raw canvas, 55 x 65cm.

Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, Tainui artist Brett Graham's 1998 sculptural work *Tū Pasifika* has similar ideas of grounding, and reclaiming a disconnection. Currently, at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, *Tū Pasifika* claims the floor space of the ground-level exhibition, *Taimoana Coastlines: Art in Aotearoa 2024–2027*. Its bulbous form of laminated wood and pine is reminiscent of the *punga* (anchor stone) used by Māori during voyages. Coupled with the title, *Tū Pasifika*, and its floor placement, the piece echoes the concept of *tūrangawaewae* (a place to stand) raising a political statement regarding the reclamation of land, but also the presence of Māori artists and makers within large art institutions like Toi o Tāmaki.¹⁶ Encountering Graham's work provoked ideas for me around engaging with the *whenua* directly as a material in the work, as a method to reinforce *tūrangawaewae* in my own project.

¹⁶ "Voyage and Discovery," Museums of Auckland, n.d., accessed March 16, 2026, <https://museumsauckland.com/voyage-and-discovery/>.

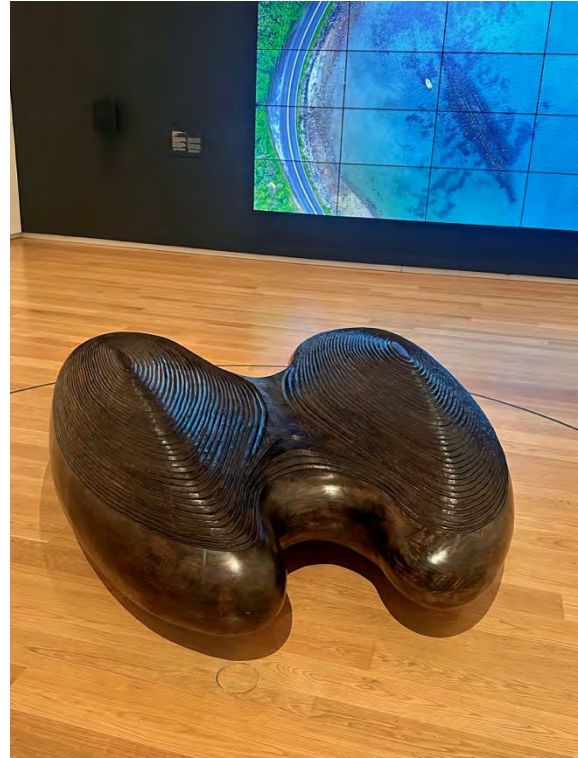


Figure 17 and 18. Brett Graham, *Tu Pasifika*, 1998, laminated wood and pine, 2220mm, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased in 2001, photographed by Mia Robinson.

In late August 2025, my grandparents in Ngāmotu cut down a large tōtara tree in their backyard in preparation for their upcoming renovations. This tree had stood shading the greenery and foliage of the garden for most of my father's childhood and thus was a staple in the garden. To connect the distance between Tāmaki Makaurau (where I have predominantly been painting) and Taranaki (where I whakapapa to), I asked to have some branches and logs cut from the tōtara tree to utilise in my art practice. The raw bark and intricate knots that wrapped around the tōtara were the elements I wanted to maintain when considering how the timber could be brought into my practice. It was important to me that the tōtara remain in its natural form, its origin recognisable for my whānau, embracing the raw bark which will dry and decay, and potentially flake off over time.



Figure 19. Cross-section of tōtara tree. August 2025. Photograph by Kent Robinson.



Figure 20. View of tōtara tree from behind the fence. August 2025. Photograph by Kent Robinson.



Figure 21. Tōtara and pohutukawa wood in trolley. March 2026. Photograph by Mia Robinson.

My grandfather in Tāmaki (my mum’s dad) was a builder and has a wealth of experience and knowledge in handling timbers. So, I worked with him in his garage to create the initial tōtara supports for my paintings using the tree’s branches and logs. I drew up a couple of plans, with us together finally settling on a groove, a long rectangular channel to hold a painting vertically, that would be chiselled out by hand. Including another strand of my whakapapa in my practise, stretching to my Pākehā lineage on my mother’s side, was a special experience. By continuing to value the whakawhanaungatanga (the process of establishing relationships) of this project and my whakapapa methodology, the processing of the tōtara was another outward and tangible method of the bicultural negotiation that occurs internally for me. I was conscious of the journey the tōtara logs had also taken, mirroring the travel I take from Taranaki to Tāmaki when returning from my home visits. The tōtara had grown alongside and knows the whenua of my rohe (tribal homelands) in a way that I haven’t experienced yet, but by undertaking the same travel, I feel the tōtara becomes a reflection of my tūrangawaewae.

In doing this, the tōtara both as a material and object has also become a conceptual element that physically supports and holds the canvases, grounding them in my tūrangawaewae. The whenua, an anchor for Māori identity, is expressed through the use of tōtara in my work; it has become a support structure for the painted embodiments of my journey, in turn grounding my process and inquiry.



Figure 22. My grandpa cutting the tōtara in his garage. February 2026. Photograph by Mia Robinson



Figure 23. Chiselling out the grooves for the paintings in my grandpa's garage. February 2026. Photograph by Kem Price.



Figure 24. Side view of tōtara supports holding Waenganui, oil on canvas, 20 x 25.5cm each, 2025. Photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 25. Front view of tōtara supports holding Waenganui, oil on canvas, 20 x 25.5cm each, 2025. Photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 26. Mia Robinson *Waenganui*, oil on canvas, 20 x 25.5cm each, 2025.

PART TWO



Figure 27. Mia Robinson, *Watercolour study of ana*, 2025, watercolour on paper, 14.8 x 21cm.

STATE OF WĀ

During an early kōrerorero with my koko in March 2025, I asked him how he felt his identity within te ao Māori was situated. He began by sharing how he saw his personal nature and his Māori nature as being separate, sometimes merging, but mostly presenting themselves within different scenarios. He felt his personal nature had more Pākehā characteristics, developed through his time in the Army, valuing discipline, structure and his inquisitiveness, whereas his Māori nature holds a more laid-back “she’ll be right” attitude, which comes out on the marae or during hui. For myself, I see my Pākehā nature and Māori nature as being interconnected, both working together internally. Although I feel more confident in Pākehā spaces, I have always felt the influence of my Māori whakapapa, from the values instilled in me as a child and the holistic Indigenous perspective of the world’s ecosystem.

‘The Third Space’:

Homi K Bhabha, a postcolonial theorist, developed a perspective on culture and identity that has provided a similar lens for me to understand what it means to hold a bicultural identity. His book *The Location of Culture* challenges ideas of fixed and binary views of culture and power, and coins the two project-related terms “cultural hybridity” and “the third space.”¹⁷ Bhabha maintains that the concept of cultural hybridity is the outcome of the merging of different cultural identities to form new hybridisations, which occur within a liminal, in-between zone he labels the third space. He argues that negotiations between cultural identities and ideas occur within this space, with neither presenting dominance over the other.¹⁸ For my practice the concept of the third space has become a site of productive tension in my paintings, where the learned and embodied knowledge of each part of my cultural identity is outwardly worked through by the gestural paint marks, my personal mark-making vocabulary, and the familiar colours of the whenua. I see the layering of paint as a temporal accumulation that echoes the whakapapa, which is always present and informing my making. The lived experiences I have from my sites of whakapapa collate the memory, sensation and material engagement with place, becoming learned knowledge that is negotiated on the canvas.

To understand the influence of Bhabha’s concepts in a Māori context, Georgina Tuari Stewart’s book *Māori Philosophy: Indigenous Thinking from Aotearoa* has been an important perspective. Stewart argues that mataūrangā Māori should be understood as a philosophy, more than just knowledge, and she also acknowledges the tensions of living between Māori and Western worlds.¹⁹ Stewart describes Māori identity as something unfixed, and the conceptualisation of Bhabha’s third space through a Māori lens, as forming only after two phases: the “autochthonous whole culture prior to

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 32-33, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=653022>.

¹⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 33.

¹⁹ Georgina Stewart, *Māori Philosophy: Indigenous Thinking from Aotearoa* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 9-10, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=6933700>.

contact” and that same culture “under erasure” through colonisation.²⁰ Only then can new and unanticipated cultural forms be made in this third space. Through my whakapapa and lived experiences, I inherit this tension and am always actively engaged in undoing this erasure, and unravelling the intersections of my bicultural identities. Through abstract painting and mark-making, I work through these feelings and document the process of negotiating the unfixed nature of my identity. In this way, the practice of painting becomes embodied knowledge-making.

Making through a State of Wā:

The manifestation of this transitional space aligns with the concept of wā, which I use to frame the transitional nature of the making process in my work. In a 2021 Vā Moana talanoa, artist Brett Graham (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, Tainui) and AUT’s Assistant Pro-Vice Chancellor (Māori Advancement) Dr Valance Smith (Ngāpuhi, Waikato, Ngāti Haina, Ngāti Pākehā) compare Sāmoan vā and Māori wā with both having roots in Indigenous Moana ideas around time and space. Specifically, in relation to the sacred space that connects people, places and things, these concepts uphold a sacredness that allows for the ease of transitions and connections.²¹ Wā can also signify transformation and connectedness, as seen in the shift from hine (girl) to wāhine (woman). Being a non-linear temporality, I see wā as lived and embodied, offering a spatial element for the relationships I hold between people, whenua and whakapapa. Graham and Smith also spoke about the takarangi spiral form, a Māori pattern featuring an intersecting double spiral that symbolises duality and the evolution of life, as well as representing “the passing of time, one generation to the next.”²²

Incorporating the takarangi as a methodological framework in my practice ensures adherence to wā in my paintings. Graham’s view of the takarangi representing “the passing of time” supports the project’s considerations of time through whakapapa and the ongoing nature of my reconnection journey. I use my small painting studies on paper in a more diaristic manner, documenting my initial experience of each site of whakapapa before the landscapes or experiences are abstracted and developed into larger-scale canvases. In this way, I see these studies as a conduit for the unravelling feelings that occur when reconnecting to my Māori identity. Working within abstraction, therefore, becomes important to the project’s aims, helping me to articulate feelings not fully comprehended or difficult to explain in the spoken vocabulary I hold. In doing so, my mark-making vocabulary enables an explanation in painted form, vocalising my internal findings. In my art practice, wā represents the moment in which ancestral narratives, place, and bodily memory merge and weave together. Like the takarangi Smith describes, the porohita (circle motif),

²⁰ Stewart, *Māori Philosophy*, 28-30.

²¹ Valance Smith, “Interview with Valance Smith,” interview by Brett Graham, *Vā Moana: space and relationality in Pacific thought and identity interviews*, Vā Moana - Pacific Spaces Research Cluster, Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, 11 February 2021, <https://www.vamoana.org/talanoa>.

²² T.A.C. Royal, “Interview with Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal,” interview by Brett Graham, *Vā Moana: space and relationality in Pacific thought and identity interviews*, Vā Moana - Pacific Spaces Research Cluster, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 25 March 2021. <https://www.vamoana.org/talanoa>.

which visually locates the key narratives that inform my thinking, utilises the circle's endless form, expressing the idea that this journey is constantly developing and continuing.



Figure 28. Mia Robinson, *Porobita*, 2025, acrylic on paper, 150 x 95cm.



Figure 29. Mia Robinson, detail image of *Porobita*, 2025, acrylic on paper, 150 x 95cm.



Figure 30. Mia Robinson, detail image of *Porobita*, 2025, acrylic on paper, 150 x 95cm.

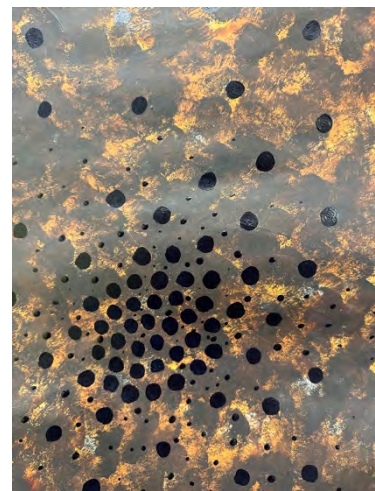


Figure 31. Mia Robinson, detail image of *Porobita*, 2025, acrylic on paper, 150 x 95cm.



Figure 32. Mia Robinson, *Watercolour Studies*, 2025-26, watercolour on paper, 14.8 x 21cm each.



Figure 33. Mia Robinson, *Painted Studies*, 2025-26, watercolour on paper, 14.8 x 21cm each.

Acclaimed Samoan writer Mauaiaivao Albert Wendt defines *vā* as “the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities ... the space that is context, giving meaning to things.”²³ A visual expression of *vā* can also be seen in the late painter Lily Laita’s artwork. Laita has Sāmoan, Māori, and Pakēhā whakapapa, which her work navigated using abstracted forms, landscapes, and Pacific motifs to explore *vā* and notions of intuitive, learned knowledge. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (Marutūahu, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāpuhi), an academic and composer, coined the term ‘in-bodied knowledge,’ which I can see in relation to the intuitive, learned knowledge Laita painted with. Royal described in-bodied knowledge in relation to the expansive memories *tūpuna* had when recalling whakapapa. They could retain vast amounts of knowledge and list this knowledge without repeating themselves. Being in-bodied knowledge meant it was held innately within them. Laita’s earlier works utilised long lengths of black builder’s paper, which she initially used to encourage the painted marks and expressive images to emerge from the dark, feeling the influence of her ancestors as ‘in-bodied knowledge’, and allowing the paintings to become embodied encounters. By embracing the process of making, Laita layered her cultural, historical and personal motifs, and accessed *vā* beyond the physical picture plane.²⁴ Her works functioned as storytelling, narrating the exploration of how “temporal and spatial nuances of *vā*”, the space between, have shaped Moana identity – particularly in relation to the common diasporic experience of the Moana community²⁵.

Like Laita, for me, *vā* or *wā* is a state of making, becoming, and creation through construction and deconstruction, within which my works emerge. My painting process intersects with the mana of the whenua, my sites of whakapapa, and through the embodied experiences of myself and my *tūpuna*. The abstracted forms in the paintings aim to emulate the *awa*’s movement, the ebb and flow forwards and backwards, revealing sections of the layers. The process innately becomes reciprocal, with the act of painting being my act of giving, and the intergenerational knowledge of the whenua and experiences around me being what I receive. This reciprocity adds to the layers of whakapapa and is reflected in the layered approach I employ when I am painting.

²³ Albert Wendt, “Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body,” *Span* 42–43 (April–October 1996).

²⁴ “Before We Learn to Talanoa,” Tautai Pacific Arts Trust, accessed April 6, 2026, <https://www.tautai.org/before-we-learn-to-talanoa>.

²⁵ Bernida Webb-Binder, *Pacific Identity through Space and Time in Lily Laita’s Vā i Ta*, 2009, 25, <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/14681>.



Figure 34. Lily Laita, *Tinā ma tama* and *you'll never know*, 1997-1998, acrylic, oil and oil pastel on black builders' paper, 245 x 125 cm each, 'Before we learn to talanoa' exhibition at Tautai Pacific Arts Trust.

Cultural Hybridity:

Multi-disciplinary artist, curator and writer, Jade Townsend (Ngāti Kahungunu, Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi) challenges what can be understood as contemporary toi Māori through her painting and sculpture practice. Her works use “unity-by-way-of-materiality” to explore the intersections of her Māori, Pākehā and British heritage, navigating the ebbs and flows of her bicultural identity.²⁶ Townsend’s 2026 exhibition, *From the Lion’s Mouth*, at Te Whare o Rehua Sarjeant Gallery in Whanganui, recalls her time during the Tylee Cottage Residency in 2024. Townsend’s residency was also a return to her own whenua, having been born and raised in Whanganui before moving to Liverpool in her teens and returning to Aotearoa in 2020. Her movements and return to her tūrangawaewae I find to be similar to my own experience. The acrylic-on-linen paintings hold her “whānau-oriented narratives and stories from sites of significance” within Whanganui, specifically the awa, the wishing well, Rotokawau Virginia Lake and the Higginbottom Fountain.²⁷ Her feathery painted motifs merge Māori patterns and hints of Māori mythology to emulate the memory of these sites. Townsend expresses that “water is the binding thread throughout the series,”²⁸ a notion that resonates with my own works, being influenced by my awa. For *From the Lion’s Mouth*, the paintings were made and installed in the gallery with site-specific considerations in mind, and the aim to invite people into an in-between space. Townsend compared this intended experience to

²⁶ “At Home and in the Studio: Jade Townsend,” Objectspace, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.objectspace.org.nz/journal/at-home-and-in-the-studio-jade-townsend/>.

²⁷ “Jade Townsend: From the Lion’s Mouth / 22 February – 14 June 2026,” *Te Whare o Rehua Sarjeant Gallery*, January 19, 2026, <https://sarjeant.org.nz/gallery/jade-townsend-from-the-lions-mouth-22-february-14-june/>.

²⁸ “Jade Townsend: From the Lion’s Mouth.”

stepping into a church and feeling the tangible thin space between the spiritual and physical worlds – “where you feel like you’re in the veil.”²⁹



Figure 35. Jade Townsend, *Beneath the Bridge to Nowhere the taniwha frolic*, 2025-26, Acrylic on linen in hand-carved sapele frame by Emile Drescher, 1250 x 850 x 55mm.

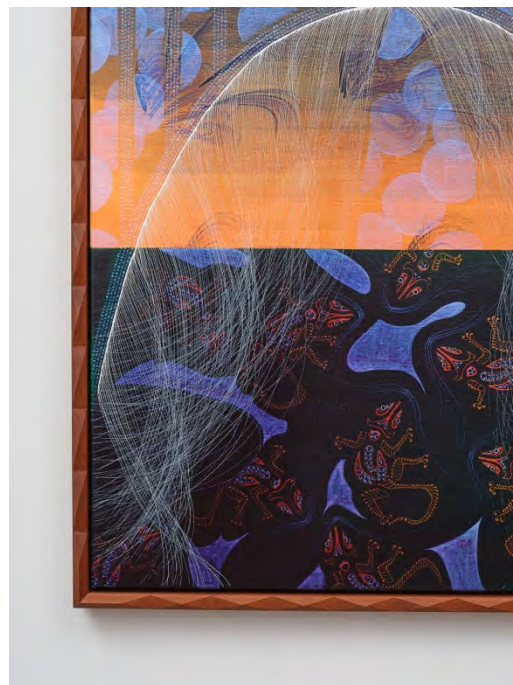


Figure 36. Jade Townsend, *Beneath the Bridge to Nowhere the taniwha frolic*, 2025-26, Acrylic on linen in hand-carved sapele frame by Emile Drescher, 1250 x 850 x 55mm.

A similar strategy was employed in her 2025 exhibition, *Thin Places* at Season Gallery, where Townsend utilised an infinity loop motif to express the duality and connectedness of her cultural identities.³⁰ In the works *Awarua* (2025) and *Alloy* (2024), two striking polished stainless-steel sculptures, the infinity loop presents as a symbolic exploration of her multiple whakapapa lines, and of how mythology-building can occur through materials. *Awarua*, as a floor-based work, urges the viewer to emulate the loop form as they move, weaving around the piece and following the trace of each form. In doing so, this makes you aware of the “evolving narrative of dual consciousness” that Townsend grapples within her works.³¹

²⁹ Taiuru News, *Jade Townsend Opens Powerful New Exhibition at Te Whare o Rehua in Whanganui*, 2026, 03:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wwAd-iGPMs>.

³⁰ Jade Townsend, “Te Ao Mahora Wānanga Symposium – Jade Townsend,” (conference presentation, Te Ao Mahora Wānanga Symposium, AUT, Auckland, March 27, 2025).

³¹ “Jade Townsend, *Thin Places*,” Art News, April 8, 2025, <https://artnews.co.nz/exhibition-listing/jade-townsend-thin-places/>.



Figure 37. Jade Townsend, *Awarua (two rivers)*, 2025, Polished stainless steel, Dimensions variable, Season Gallery.



Figure 38. Jade Townsend, *Alloy*, 2024, Polished stainless steel, stripper's pole, rock, resin, 2220 x 510 x 120mm.

When working in a state of wā, whakapapa becomes integral and innately holds ideas of time through the layers of past, present and future, which are never disconnected but instead directly inform one another. The subject matter in my paintings aims to visually communicate, via abstract motifs and hints to the landscapes of my whakapapa sites, drawing from the tactile experiences that occur in the sites of whakapapa. For example, my largest work to date, *Beside and In-between* (November 2025), and my diptych *My Two Threads*, were painted to evoke the riverbed and the flowing current of my awa, Waingongoro, but also to extend the mauri of the place through a playful gesture of the raw canvas wrapping around the stretcher bars, motioning to my sitting alongside the riverbank. Upon closer examination, the composition of *Beside and In-between* oscillates between a cross-sectional view and an aerial view, creating a slippage and space between place and bodily memory. I deliberately paint in different directions or motions for each layer, some taking a more gestural and expressive movement, and others becoming a translucent glaze over the canvas. I aim to allow the paint strokes to build and fold into and upon each other, interweaving amongst the layers, which continues this feeling of wā. My hope is that the layers enact multiple threads of time that negotiate with one another within the composition and reduce the spiralling sense of time that is wā.



Figure 39. Mia Robinson, *Beside and In-between*, 2025, acrylic and oil on raw stretched canvas, MVA November Exhibition Practice, 290 x 240cm.



Figure 40. Mia Robinson, *Beside and In-between*, 2025, acrylic and oil on raw stretched canvas, close-up image.



Figure 41. Mia Robinson, *Beside and In-between*, 2025, acrylic and oil on raw stretched canvas, front view of canvas wrapping around stretcher bar.

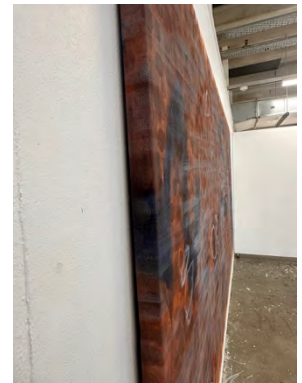


Figure 42. Mia Robinson, *Beside and In-between*, 2025, acrylic and oil on raw stretched canvas, side view of canvas wrapping around stretcher bar.



Figure 43. Mia Robinson, *My Two Threads*, 2025, acrylic on raw stretched canvas, both canvas 80 x 125cm.

By remaining in a state of wā throughout the painting process, I find I can navigate the complexities of disconnection and belonging. The project is always grounded in whakapapa with knowledge, both embodied and learned, continually interacting and negotiating my cultural hybridity I explore through paint. For me, the works enact the space between, as my personal mark-making language and motifs become a form of Indigenous storytelling — not fixing identity but documenting its continual negotiation and reconnection. The making process is influenced by whakawhanaungatanga, reconnection through gesture, bodily memory, and whakapapa within a third space, and by the notion of wā, which enables my paintings to become a lived and layered practice of cultural negotiation.

PART THREE

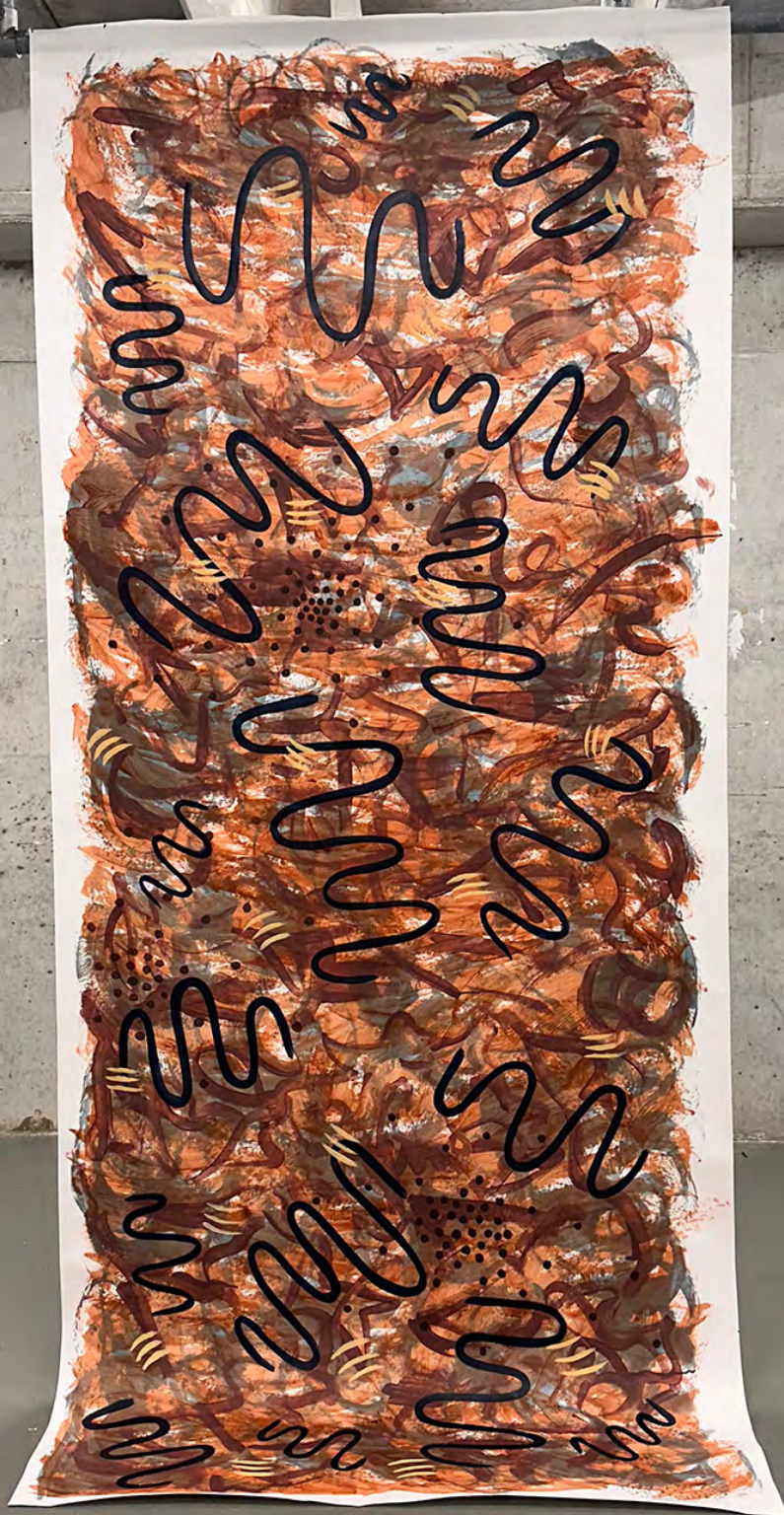


Figure 44. Mia Robinson, *Heke*, 2025, acrylic on paper, install view from MVA October Critique, photograph by Mia Robinson.

MARK-MAKING

Mark-making is generally understood as the composition of “different lines, dots, marks, patterns, and textures we create in an artwork.”³² These various marks can be utilised in a controlled and calculated approach or in a gestural and loose manner, but they work collectively to communicate the artist’s perspective or emotions. My interest in mark-making lies in how abstract marks might visually help me navigate the reconnection journey and the lived experiences of my sites of whakapapa. By examining the Western lens of abstract expressionism, and through an Indigenous Māori perspective, I continue to position how these abstracted marks can aid my reconnection as a central inquiry in the project.

Western vs Indigenous mark-making:

Within a Western art historical context, mark-making is “closely associated with Abstract Expressionism, a post-World War II American art movement characterized by the use of abstract forms, gestural brushstrokes, and expressive colour palettes to convey the artists' emotions and inner psychological states.”³³ Key practitioners such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning pivoted towards action painting, whereas artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Mark Rothko aligned with colour field painting, exploring emotional resonance through expansive and floating fields of colour.³⁴ While Abstract Expressionism emphasises gesture as an extension of the body and an exploration of the human psyche,³⁵ I approach the use of gesture and personal Indigenous mark-making as a collaborative method with my whakapapa and tūpuna, who innately guide me. Abstract Expressionist artists let their unconscious thoughts and emotions guide their creative process; however, I am conscious of my choice to stay close to the state of wā in the process, making it an intentional act. In the context of my practising, the idea of Indigenous mark-making was brought up in a kōrerorero with artist, Claudia Jowitt, during my *Talk Week* session in July 2025. Jowitt, a Tāmaki Makaurau-based artist of iTaukei (Fijian) and Pākehā descent, provided insightful analysis regarding the idea of Indigenous mark-making not being a fixed visual language, but one grounded in lived experiences and the cultural context it explores.

³² “Mark Making Coursework Guide,” Tate, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/student-resource/exam-help/mark-making>.

³³ Donna L. Roberts, “The Psychology of American Abstract Expressionism,” *International Journal of Art and Art History*, ahead of print, June 1, 2023, 9, <https://doi.org/10.15640/ijaah.v11n1p2>.

³⁴ “Color Field Painting | MoMA,” The Museum of Modern Art, accessed January 26, 2026, <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/color-field-painting>.

³⁵ Donna L. Roberts, “The Psychology of American Abstract Expressionism,” *International Journal of Art and Art History*, ahead of print, June 1, 2023, 9, <https://doi.org/10.15640/ijaah.v11n1p2>.



Figure 45. Mia Robinson, *E toru ngā porohita*, 2025, oil on canvas, 30 x 25cm.



Figure 46. Mia Robinson, *Mangōpare*, 2025, Oil and onepū on canvas, 50 x 45cm.



Figure 47. Mia Robinson, *Te Kore*, 2025, oil and onepū on loose canvas, 160 x 100cm.

The intergenerational narratives of my whānau, which are the ‘non-material’ materials in my paintings, become a point of collaboration, lived experiences, and an expression of whanaungatanga. By highlighting a communal story and identity, Indigenous mark-making takes on the nature of storytelling, manifesting into a document of history, guiding the generations to come regarding the natural and spiritual worlds. Gerald McMaster, a renowned Plains Cree curator, artist, and author, critiques the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in shaping narratives around abstraction in his research article, *Maskibkiy-Mâmitonéyihcikewin: The Abstract Art of Jason Baerg*. In discussing Baerg’s drawing, painting and new media installations, McMaster argues that Indigenous art is inherently abstract and can be understood as “a mode of expression that is constant, full of meaning and characterized by place,” evident across practices such as pictographs, tattoos, painting,

carving and cultural procedures.³⁶ Plains Cree medicine-thinking also understands knowledge as being directly tied to the land, where indigenous expressions, especially paintings, must situate Indigenous presence, and this “echoes through ancestral time”³⁷. McMaster suggests that these forms demonstrate how Indigenous abstraction operates as an ongoing, generative practice, whereas Western traditions often position an end.³⁸ In my own practice, this perspective resonates with my experience of bicultural identity and desire for reconnection. Through expressive gestures and culturally embedded motifs, my paintings adopt a storytelling quality, seeking to create points of familiarity for those navigating the Māori–Pākehā diaspora.

Lambros Malafouris, a Greek-British cognitive archaeologist, positions mark-making as “the creation of a perceived anomaly, or felt difference, on or in a surface.”³⁹ He considers it fundamental to human becoming, arguing that it is “the principle mode of our species’ capacity for material signification and creative material engagement.”⁴⁰ Rather than reducing meaning to a symbolic representation, Malafouris suggests that meaning emerges through the act of making itself. Working with this lens allows my mark-making to be understood as a site of becoming, where identity, and gained or embodied knowledge emerge through tangible engagement with material and place. Each painting session in the studio, or during my home visits to Taranaki becomes part of my ongoing process of locating myself within te ao Māori. I see the marks materialising as expressions of whakapapa by means of my personal motifs and my understanding of the bicultural identity I hold.

Creating my own visual language:

To document and effectively communicate my personal grappling with cultural hybridity, I have developed my own visual language/painting vocabulary, informed by artists who also navigate abstraction through Indigenous and diasporic perspectives. Claudia Jowitt explores her reconnection to her Fijian heritage through the lens of abstraction. Her sculptural paintings, detailed with shell, coral, masi, and seaweed nested within thick piped lines of paint and resin, use a pastel palette of blues, greens, pinks and creams as well as piped textures to visually place her practice in an oceanic context. For Jowitt, these detailed reliefs become a “physical representation of the lived experiences and reminders of her whakapapa.”⁴¹

³⁶ Gerald McMaster, “Maskihkiy-Mâmitonêyihcikewin: The Abstract Art of Jason Baerg / Maskihkiy-Mâmitonêyihcikewin : L’art Abstrait de Jason Baerg,” *National Gallery of Canada Review* 13 (September 2023): 63–82, <https://doi.org/10.3138/ngcr.13-005>.

³⁷ McMaster, “Maskihkiy-Mâmitonêyihcikewin.”

³⁸ McMaster, “Maskihkiy-Mâmitonêyihcikewin.”

³⁹ Lambros Malafouris, “Mark Making and Human Becoming,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 28, no. 1 (2021): 95–119, 98.

⁴⁰ Malafouris, “Mark Making and Human Becoming,” 95.

⁴¹ “Melanie Roger Gallery: Claudia Jowitt | Uana: Carried by the Waves | Dowse Art Museum,” Melanie Roger Gallery, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://melanierogergallery.com/news/2025/claudia-jowitt-uana-carried-waves-dowse-art-museum>.



Figure 48. Claudia Jowitt, *Uana III*, 2025, acrylic, spray paint, Fijian vau & masi, silk yarn, pāua shell, cawaki (sea urchin) shell from Savusavu, button sea snail shells, ringed topped & money buli (cowrie) shells, moulded acrylic, bronze pigment & cultured pearls on mounted panel in painted frame, 640 × 890 × 45mm, photograph by Sam Hartnett, Melanie Roger Gallery.



Figure 49. Claudia Jowitt, *Voka II*, 2023, acrylic with Fijian vau & masi, thread, bronze powder, clay forms, pāua shell, ringed topped buli (cowrie) shells & cultured pearls on framed canvas, 464 × 386 × 55mm, photograph by Sam Hartnett, Melanie Roger Gallery.



Figure 50. Installation view of Claudia Jowitt's *Uana IV*, 2025, acrylic, spray paint Fijian vau & masi, painted cotton offcuts, bronze pigment, flax yarn, pāua shell, cawaki (sea urchin) shell from Savusavu, ringed topped money, eroded & Isabella buli (cowrie) shells on linen, 1030 × 2430 × 60mm in two parts, photograph by Sam Hartnett, Melanie Roger Gallery.

The marks I use in my painting practice draw from the flowing water of my awa, the riverbed stones, the patterns within my own tāmoko and taonga (bone carving necklace), my Māoritanga and whakapapa, to allow myself and viewers to visually connect to the whenua I depict. The influence of the Waingongoro awa's form and shape, and the taonga it is, continues to manifest into and influence my personal visual vocabulary. For Māori, awa are considered living taonga, holding their own mauri (life force) and expanding beyond a natural resource. Although they hold

sustenance regarding kai (food), they are also linked to Māori identity, with many considering “their personal health and the health of the Iwi to be linked to the health of their water bodies.”⁴² My awa/tuna motif emulates the awa’s curve and meandering; painting it repeatedly across surfaces highlights its presence in my consciousness. The three porohita/dot motif developed into this dispersion of smaller porohita radiating outwards from a central point, becoming a visual expression of the expanding, and growing knowledge base I am gaining access to. Layering these with moments of repetitive marks, single-colour washes or fast brush strokes, the painted layers fold into one another and emulate the interwoven moments of learning and reconnecting with my Pakēhā and Māori identities. The visual language I paint with is a personal form of reclaiming te reo Māori and extends my Māori language understanding as a painterly expression.

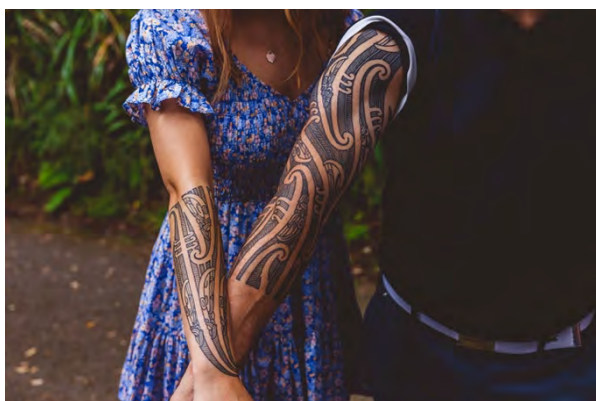


Figure 51. My pāpā and my tāmoko by Tristan Marler, 2023, photograph by Ryan Polei.



Figure 52. My tāmoko by Tristan Marler, 2023, photograph by Ryan Polei.

In a similar manner, Etel Adnan, Lebanese American poet and painter, used her method of painting as a non-linguistic mode of expression where compositional colours and lines became words that allowed her to work through the dispossession of her native Arabic language. She expressed this standpoint through painting, saying she no longer needed to write in French, the mandated language of her education in Beirut, but that “I was going to paint in Arabic.”⁴³ In *Mount Tamalpais* (1985), her use of geometric shapes of raw oil paint applied with a palette knife suspends the image of Mount Tamalpais (California), encapsulating the memory and spirit of the site rather than the literal terrain. My use of abstract organic forms has also become a way of encapsulating the feelings and generational memory of the places I paint, rather than a purely descriptive visual landscape. Painting these forms in a gestural manner to emulate the movements of my awa, I use the canvas as a site for processing the complicated nature of reconnection and the associated emotions. My disconnection from Aotearoa, due to growing up overseas, meant the Māori language and tikanga weren’t a learned habit as a child, and this project has been a method to ‘redo’ that learning.

⁴² “The Importance of Awa to Māori,” Learnz, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.learnz.org.nz/rivers211/discover/importance-of-awa-to-m%C4%81ori>.

⁴³ “Etel Adnan,” White Cube, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://www.whitecube.com/artists/etel-adnan>.



Figure 53. Etel Adnan, *Mount Tamalpais*, 1985, oil on canvas, 148 x 125 cm, gifted by the artist to Sursock Museum.

Howardena Pindell, an African American abstract painter, paints about ideas of communal trauma by focusing on her life experiences. Pindell's work is profoundly personal and political, providing a "diaristic account of her own biography as a means to interrogate broader issues of social justice."⁴⁴ A significant experience that changed the trajectory of her work was an encounter she and her father had at a diner in Kentucky, Ohio, during segregation in the 1950s. Ordering two cold root beers, they were met with glassware that had a red dot applied, marked to ensure that dishes of Black customers would not get shared with the White customers.⁴⁵ To combat the trauma of this experience, Pindell started a series of 'red dot' collaged paintings, one of which was exhibited at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki's show *Pop to Present* in 2025-2026. Pindell's large canvas work, *Untitled* (1972-73), had an immense presence in the gallery space due to its commanding size, 222.25 × 231.46cm. Her dot motif was stencilled with red spray paint across the painted ground, with the punched paper holes collaged on top. Through the painted layers and density of cut and painted circles, the work emulates confetti and a starry night sky, projecting Pindell's intention to remake and enrich a traumatic shape. For Pindell, encountering a coloured shape that symbolises racism and trauma in a new context, signals that paintings can be a tool of reclaiming and undoing. These works are a form of visual healing from the racism and segregation that Pindell personally experienced. Although I would not claim that the motifs and marks I paint with compare in magnitude to Pindell's experiences of racism and her mark-making signifiers, I do understand the therapeutic nature of a repetitive mark as a mode of reclaiming identity. I think my repetitive motions can be seen as a counter to whakamā and a mode of undoing, physically painting through the difficult experiences.

⁴⁴ "Howardena Pindell," White Cube, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://www.whitecube.com/artists/howardena-pindell>.

⁴⁵ "In the Studio: Howardena Pindell," White Cube, 2024, 04:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uYhzSviCvQ>.

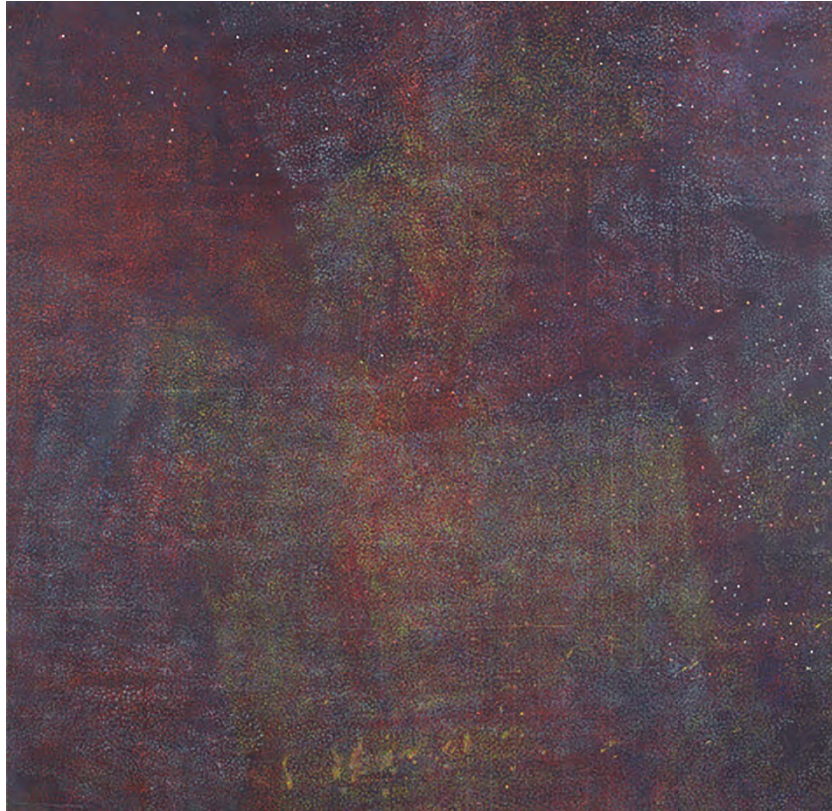


Figure 54. Howardena Pindell, *Untitled*, 1972–73, Acrylic and cut and punched papers on canvas, 222.25 × 231.46 × 4.45 cm, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2017.8.

By physically engaging with the sites of my whakapapa, most notably my awa, Waingongoro awa, I feel I can tangibly connect and then transfer these experiences into the personal visual language I have created, which carries a meditative state when making.

Some of the key recurring marks in my paintings:

- Awa or tuna marks: these marks emulate the flow of the awa, and the taonga it holds. Through the tapu (sacred) nature of water and the resources it holds, the awa becomes a taonga.
- Repeated dots: this began as a three-dot/porowhita/spherical motif that populated the earlier works. It then developed into a dispersal of smaller dots, although it is still often composed in a configuration of three dots to signify the earlier motif and link to whakapapa. The initial dots represented the three generational narratives that guide and inform this project (koko, pāpā and me). Now, it hints at the wider intergenerational knowledge informing this mahi.
- Niho taniwha: The claw-like scratches/marks on the inside of my hei matau (fish hook) bone carving were intended to represent my grasping for knowledge. I find this symbology to be a full circle moment when looking at the kaupapa and intention for this project. I continue to yearn and grasp at the straws of knowledge that I have available to me, sometimes encountering frustration at the limited amount of information I can find, and

other times being overjoyed by the whānau who appear and share insightful knowledge — such as tūpuna Te Rei Hanataua (leading chief of Tangahoe hapū of Ngāti Ruanui) — and resources that I was unaware of.

These marks I employ in my paintings function not only as records of process, but also as embodiments of my lived experiences spent with the whenua and on the edges of the awa at my sites of whakapapa. By abstracting these experiences into painted forms, the paintings aim to hold and transmit the mauri of each site of whakapapa. Mauri is essentially the life force of a being, object or place, and as Hirini Moko Mead (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Tūhourangi), a prominent Māori anthropologist and historian, explains in his book, *Tikanga Māori: living by Māori values*, “mauri symbolises a marvellous active sign of life [...] something separate from the body. The mauri becomes an attribute of the self, something to nurture, to protect, to think about.”⁴⁶ Starting with the visits to Taranaki, collecting onepū and tōtara, experiencing the whenua’s sensorial elements, and establishing these factors within my reconnection journey by adhering to the state of wā, my painting process maintains and nurtures the mauri of each moment of connection. I intentionally think about how the mauri of my sites of whakapapa can be tangible for me, and for the viewer when encountering the paintings. This is where the painterly motifs and whenua-based colour palette merge with the whakapapa narratives and emulate the scenes of my awa.

The development of Māori mark-making:

My engagement with Indigenous mark-making is grounded in an exploration of Māori mark-making and its history, as well as the shift towards more contemporary forms of toi Māori today. Traditionally the forms of tāmoko (tattooing), whakairo (carving), kōwhaiwhai (painting), and raranga (weaving) were used to document whakapapa and cultural histories, often in relation to creation stories or Māori spirituality. These traditional forms of toi Māori involve carefully calculated marks, achieving a symmetrical form based on observations of te taiao (the natural world). Mead explains that “whanaungatanga embraces whakapapa and focuses upon relationships” positioning Māori value systems as fundamentally relational.⁴⁷ Within this framework, Māori visual patterns emerge from interconnected relationships with people, whenua and te taiao (the natural world), translating environmental forms into a culturally embedded visual language. For example, motifs such as the koru, based on the unfurling fern frond, can depict new beginnings and growth.⁴⁸

Whilst these artforms are grounded in symmetry and repetition, they are intended to be evolving, which is evidenced in Māori artist and curator Nigel Borell’s art practice (Pirirākau, Ngāi Te Rangi,

⁴⁶ Hirini Moko Mead, *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori Values* (Huia Publishers, 2016), 59, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=4783665>.

⁴⁷ Mead, *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori Values*, 40.

⁴⁸ “The Meaning of the Koru,” Mountain Jade, accessed March 29, 2026, <https://www.mountainjade.co.nz/pages/greenstone-meanings-and-designs/koru-spiral>.

Te Whakatōhea, Te Rarawa, Ngāti Apakura, Ngāti Matawhaiti), providing a key example of how contemporary Māori artists are challenging these fixed definitions of ‘Māori art.’ Borell argues that when you understand that “Māori art practices are, and have always been, innovative, moving and developing, then your practice can become boundless.”⁴⁹ In this way, Borell uses Māori terms that describe or action the painting process to guide his making. During his Master’s project at Elam, University of Auckland in 2003, the Westernised art terms of ‘gesture’ and ‘mark-making’ didn’t associate with Borell’s viewpoint and understanding of the thinking behind his paintings. Instead, the marks were tuhituhi (write or draw) and panipani (to smear, apply or spread), which became action words that directed Borell’s marks in his mahi.⁵⁰ Borell’s method of making is relatable to American artist Richard Serra’s *Verb List* (1967), which Serra describes as “actions to relate to oneself, material, place, and process.”⁵¹ The list is like a conceptual toolkit of actions. While Serra positions artmaking as a series of physical actions enacted upon materials, Borell’s practice can be seen as applying this notion within te ao Māori. Where Serra applies the verbs “to mark” or “of layering” as a materially driven action, Borell’s gestures have a relational quality to the whenua, intergenerational knowledge and whakapapa.

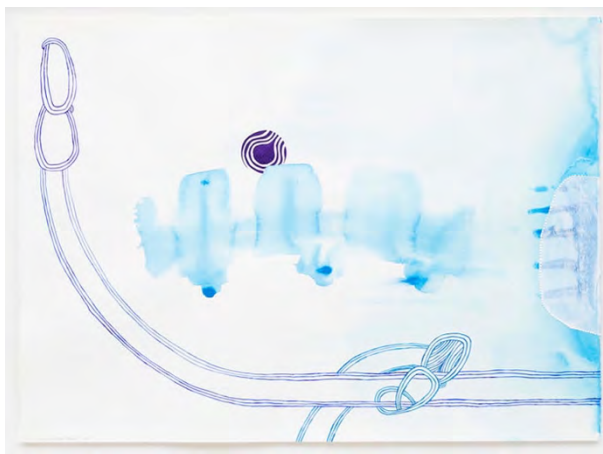


Figure 55. Nigel Borell, *E Manu rere II*, 2021, acrylic dye and watercolour on paper with silk brocade, 560 x 660 mm, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2021.



Figure 56. Richard Serra, *Verb List*, 1967, pencil on two sheets of paper, 25.4 x 21.6 cm (each).

By maintaining Borell’s notion that “Māori art practices are, and have always been, innovative, moving and developing,” I began to question why I felt abstract marks resonated more within my practice than the traditional geometric patterns present in toi Māori⁵². Berlin-based visual artist and critic Jan Verwoert examines abstraction in *The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts*, describing the method of abstract painting as valuing the “latencies of thoughts, memories,

⁴⁹ Huhana Smith et al., eds., *Taiāwhio II: Contemporary Māori Artists: 18 New Conversations* (Te Papa Press, 2007) 33-47.

⁵⁰ Smith et al., *Taiāwhio II*, 36.

⁵¹ “Richard Serra, *Verb List*, 1967,” The Museum of Modern Art, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/152793>.

⁵² Smith et al., *Taiāwhio II*, 36.

and feelings as a source that is inexhaustible precisely because its content can be neither instantaneously nor ever fully actualized.”⁵³ What becomes “inexhaustible,” “nor ever fully actualized” in my own abstract painting practice is this journey to reconnect with te ao Māori and my whakapapa. The journey of reconnection is reminiscent of the porohita (circle) motif that I frequently paint, as seen in *Niho taniwha* (2025), emphasising the continuous nature of this inquiry, without a perceived end or beginning. Verwoert furthers this idea, stating, “the space of abstraction is an echo chamber in which each enunciation resonates with intuitions of the yet unthought and the presently forgotten.”⁵⁴ I see this concept occurring in my own works through the intuitions guided by my whakapapa, and the tangible experiences with the whenua and my sites of whakapapa.



Figure 57. Mia Robinson, *Niho Taniwha*, 2025, oil on canvas, 30x40cm.

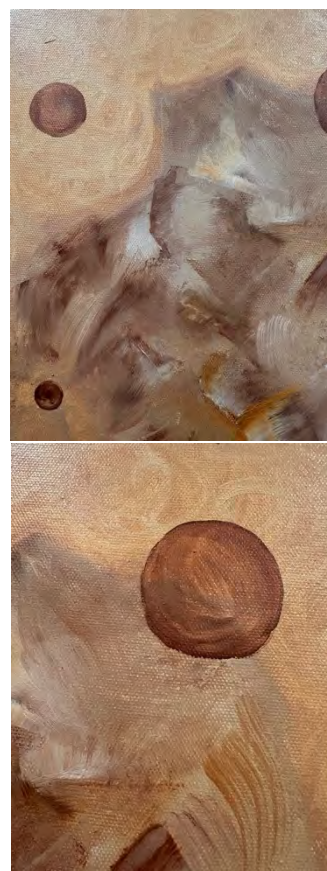


Figure 58 and 59. Mia Robinson, Details shots of *Niho Taniwha*, 2025, oil on canvas, 30x40cm.

This notion of the “yet unthought” elements of paintings could be seen in Ammon Ngakuru’s 2026 exhibition *Telltale (a dog)*, at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery. The artworks created an unsettling space of ambiguity through shifting painted motifs that were recognisable elements yet often placed in a scene of instability. I was unable to grasp the exact setting the painted motifs were

⁵³ Jan Verwoert, “The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts” (New York: New Museum Digital Archive, October 11, 2007), 93, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/print-ephemera/13272>.

⁵⁴ Verwoert, “The Beauty and Politics of Latency,” 93.

situated in, and instead was drawn to the uncomfortable compositions, like the pained guarana plant in *Reflected Poorly (Guarana)* (2026), with the black seeds bursting through the red-skin exterior evoking the pupils and iris of the eye. By doing this, Ngakuru actively works against the ease of readability and urges the viewer to feel rather than understand.

I immediately noticed the installation strategy upon entering the gallery space. The paintings were presented low to the ground, creating a more approachable and immediate viewpoint. His painting *The Inside of a Cannon* (2026) is a large-scale work, 2500cm by 2000cm, that presents as a pale blue vastness, which expands beyond your peripheral vision as you came closer. On encountering the painting, I became enamoured by this misty blue field that activates the unsettling tone of the exhibition, the painted house silhouettes floating and finding no foundation to sit upon. The fast-paced brush strokes blurred my vision, making the viewer (me) focus on the recognisable beach houses, yet unable to locate their origins. In *Telltale (a dog)*, Ngakuru activates an in-between space that “can be defined by its indefinability and contradictions,” prompting the viewer to sit with the works, and feel the exhibition, rather than searching for understanding.⁵⁵



Figure 60. Ammon Ngakuru, *The Inside of a Cannon*, 2026, oil on canvas, 2500 x 2000mm and *A Dog*, 2026, oil on canvas, 450 x 350mm, *Telltale (a dog)*, Te Uru Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Image by Samuel Hartnett, courtesy of the artist, Te Uru Gallery and Coastal Signs.

⁵⁵ “Ammon Ngakuru Exhibition Telltale (a Dog),” Te Uru, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://teuru.org.nz/products/ammon-ngakuru>.

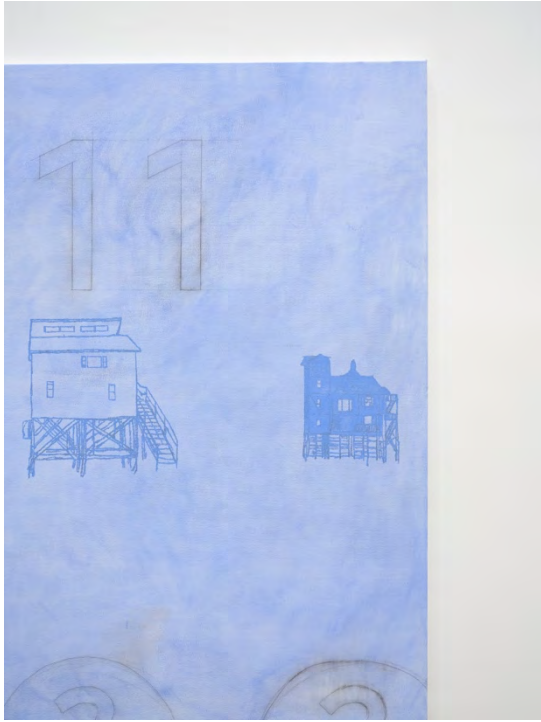


Figure 61. Ammon Ngakuru, *The Inside of a Cannon*, 2026, oil on canvas, 2500 x 2000mm, *Telltale (a dog)*, Te Uru Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Image by Samuel Hartnett, courtesy of the artist, Te Uru Gallery and Coastal Signs.



Figure 62. Ammon Ngakuru, *Reflected Poorly (Guarana)*, 2026, oil on canvas, 1500 x 2000mm, *Telltale (a dog)*, Te Uru Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Image by Samuel Hartnett, courtesy of the artist, Te Uru Gallery and Coastal Signs.

How I experience the abstract painting method in operation within my practice is in expressing those “yet unthought” elements within the work. As *Through the Teeth of the Taninwha* continues to unravel and discover thoughts and feelings of a bicultural identity through my abstract painting process and visits home, I continue to navigate and respond to the findings and developments of my journey of reconnection. With the mark-making mirroring each discovery in its developing forms, the marks aim to translate my body’s quick movements onto the substrate. Although the marks were initially very gestural, as the project has unfolded, more pictorial elements have been emerging. As seen in *What Lies Beneath* (2026), I feel my tuna/awa motif takes on a more representational quality, supported by the riverbed stones that are situated within this composition. As a result, I struggled with adding layers, as the work felt a bit stagnant through the process, and the pictorial motifs left less room for interpretation from my perspective. This was also evident in some of my larger paper works from my MVA Critique, like *Heke*, 2025 (part three cover page), which pushed me to embrace more ambiguous motif forms, taking more time to reflect on each addition before working back into the painting. Adhering to the wā through this more considered approach to painting has allowed elements of the gestural forms to reveal themselves and guide the next element of the layers. In parallel, each experience I have with the whenua guides the next, whether it’s new elements of the same site coming forward or new journeys to new places. The journey accumulates and continues.



Figure 63. Mia Robinson, *What Lies Beneath*, 2026, 160 x 100 cm.

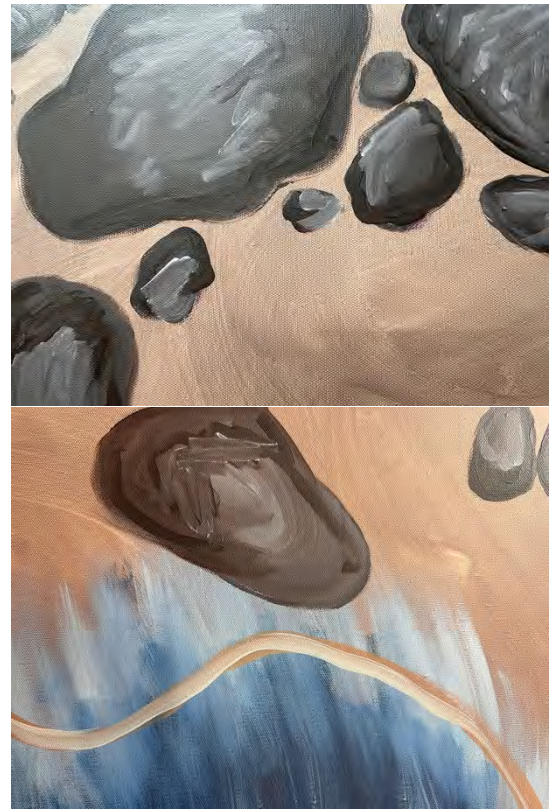


Figure 64 and Figure 65. Mia Robinson, Close-up views of *What Lies Beneath*, 2026, 160 x 100 cm.



Figure 66. Mia Robinson, *Bubbling up*, 2025, acrylic on paper, MVA October Critique.



Figure 67. Mia Robinson, Side view of *Heke*, 2025, acrylic on paper, install view from MVA October Critique, photograph by Mia Robinson.



Figure 68. Mia Robinson, Closer view of *Heke*, 2025, acrylic on paper, install view from MVA October Critique, photograph by Mia Robinson.

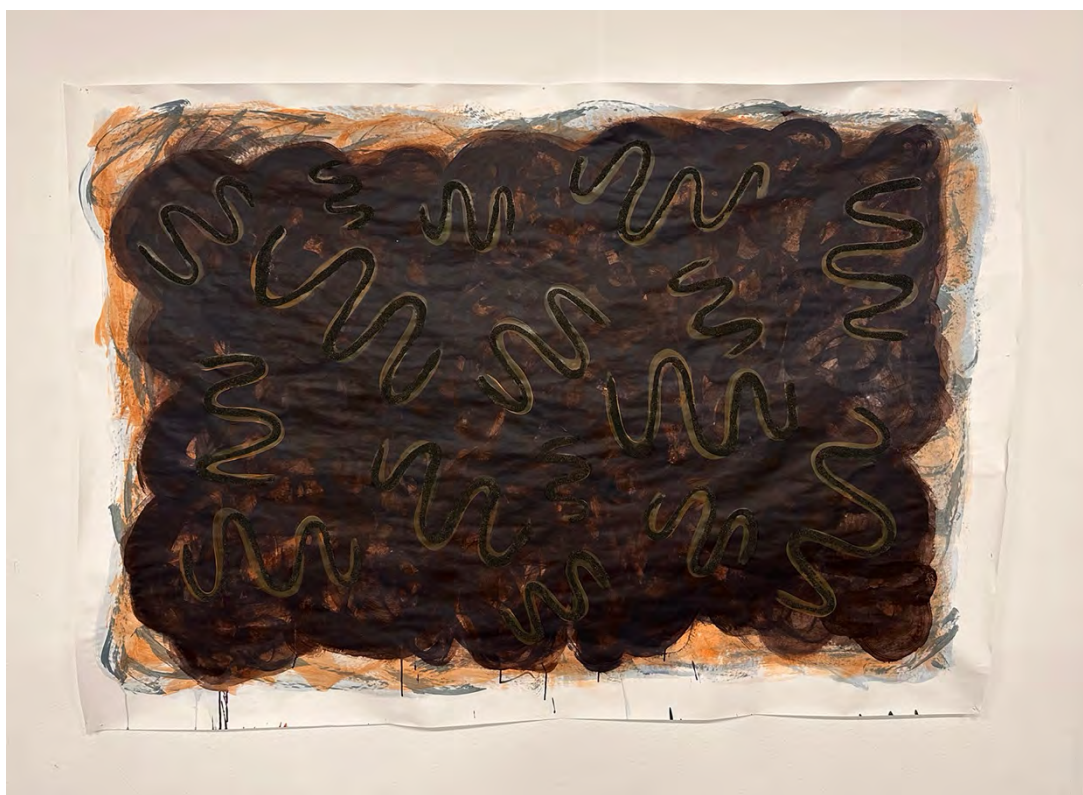


Figure 69. Mia Robinson, *Oneome*, 2025, acrylic on paper, MVA October Critique.

CONCLUSION

I had a recent encounter with a lovely kaumātua at my workplace. He then noticed my tāmoko and prompted me with the usual curiosities: Where are you from? What's your hapū? Who are your iwi? All questions I feel comfortable and confident answering lately. This kaumātua was very knowledgeable in whakapapa, remembering tūpuna and migration stories of his iwi that he thought might relate to my own whakapapa. In a situation like this, I would have previously gone quiet or defensive, ashamed of my unknowing and intimidated by his extensive knowledge. However, I remained attentive and enjoyed his long and winding tangents, admiring the passion he shared regarding his whakapapa. We discussed how I wasn't too sure of the connections he mentioned about his tūpuna to mine, as I was still learning the depths of my own identity. He softly said to me: "Oh, that's alright, you're still on that journey aye, the more you discover, the more you realise how much you don't know yet. I still have a lot to learn myself."

Those words settled comfortably within me, something I have been feeling throughout this painting project. The journey is continuous and evolving with no right starting point and "never-ending beginnings." Although this project physically began with the kōreroreo with my koko and pāpā, the feelings of whakamā and disconnect were conscious thoughts from a young age.

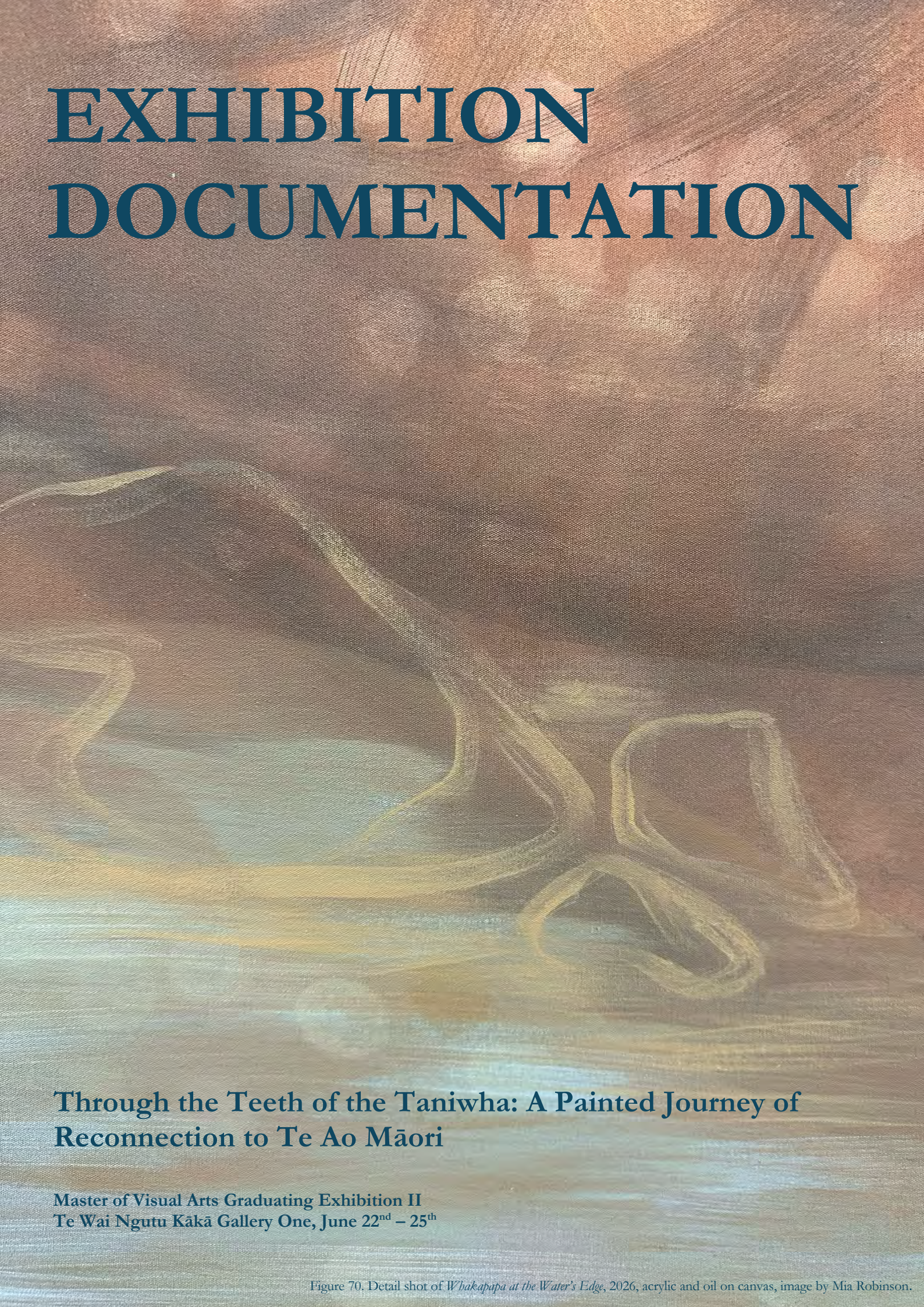
This particular journey has unfolded to display a number of moments that became turning points or waymarkers for me that aided the grasping for knowledge the project embraced:

1. Acknowledging my right to understand my bicultural identity, despite the physical distance from Aotearoa during my childhood and adolescence.
2. Seeking the intergenerational narratives available to me through my koko and pāpā, however, I realised I couldn't rely on just their stories to satisfy my own inquiries. These narratives were still woven into every embodied experience and painting I made, albeit my personal narrative became more prominent for me.
3. Home visits to Taranaki during this project; I made three intentional visits down to Taranaki, but also had my whānau visit me in Tāmaki to deliver tōtara, or discuss my progress throughout the year.
4. Building whanaungatanga with the whenua during my sites of whakapapa visits, as well as undoing the self-imposed boundaries of using whenua in my paintings through my experience at Nikau Hindin's wānanga.
5. Making and painting through the discoveries, through the feelings of disappointment or whakamā, and through the excitement. Carving out the tōtara with my maternal grandfather was a prominent negotiation of my bicultural identity.
6. Creating and growing my personal visual vocabulary of Indigenous mark-making that populates the painted studies and large-scale paintings; each motif having an accumulative nature, developing and changing as I gain more of an understanding of Ko wai au? Having

undertaken some te reo Māori during this project's duration, my reo has developed and given me more confidence in the writing and knowledge of Māoritanga.

All of these elements have deepened the understanding of my pepeha. I now have the visual imagery of these personal experiences when reciting my maunga, awa, and marae. The compositions of my visual vocabulary and layered approach to painting continue to co-create a methodology of whakapapa. As this research continues beyond this project, these understandings will continue to unfold and be shaped by new encounters with whenua and whānau within the wā. The upcoming Masters exhibition, *Through the Teeth of the Taninaha*, aims to highlight these moments of recognition, understanding, and negotiation whilst acknowledging the ever-shifting intersections of time, space, and bicultural identity.

EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION



Through the Teeth of the Taniwha: A Painted Journey of
Reconnection to Te Ao Māori

Master of Visual Arts Graduating Exhibition II
Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One, June 22nd – 25th

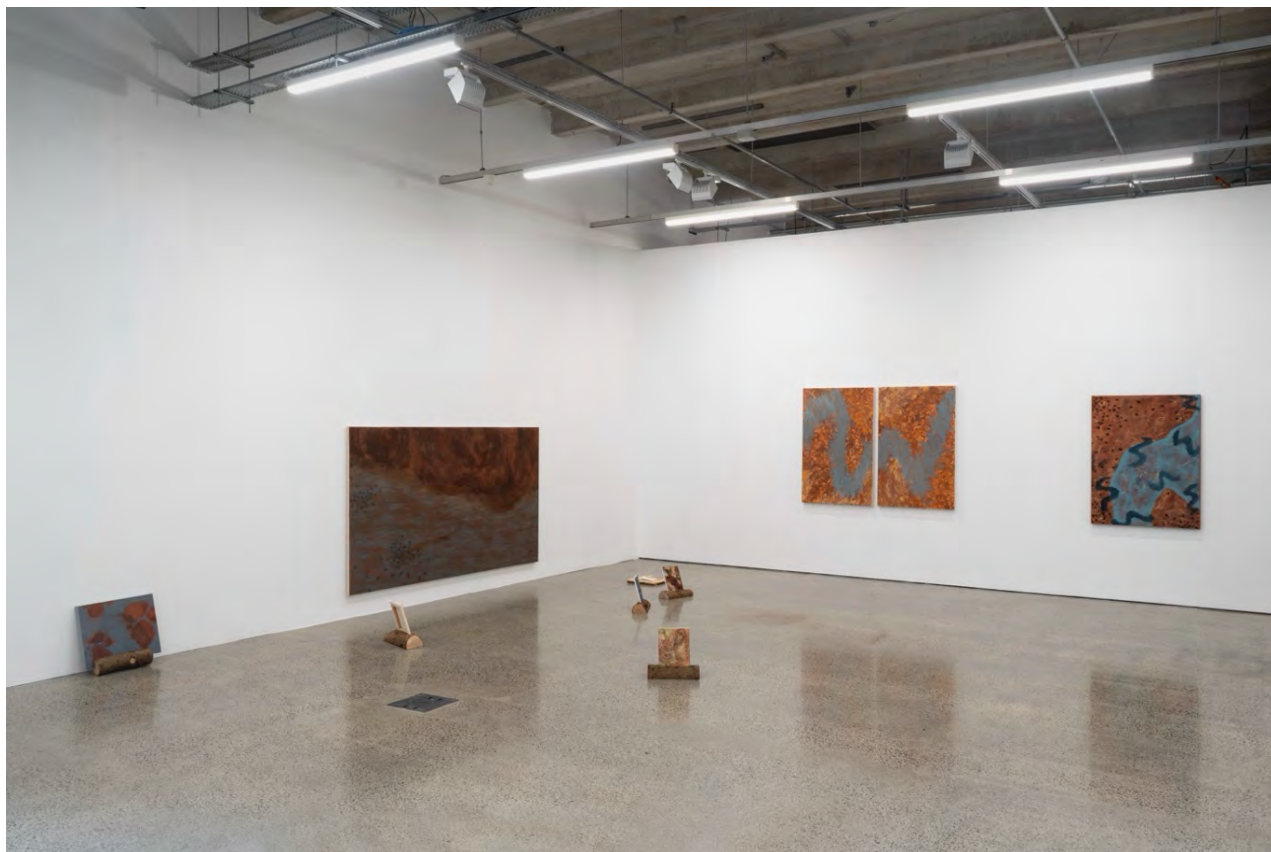


Figure 71. Exhibition Installation, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery 1, image taken by Paul Chapman.

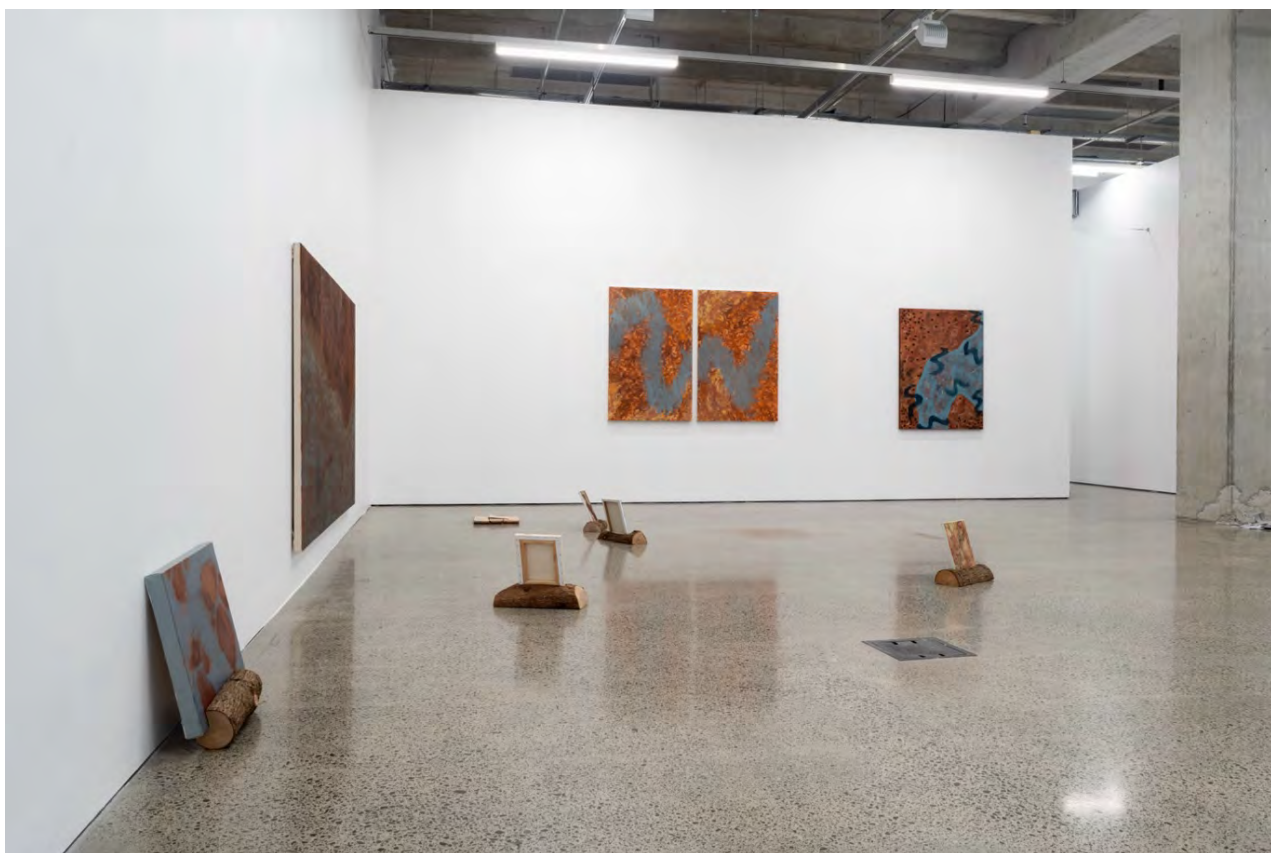


Figure 72. Exhibition Installation 2, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery 1, image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 73. *Waenganni*, oil on canvas sitting on tōtara supports next to *Painted Studies*, perfect bound paper booklet, on slats of tōtara with *Whakapapa at the Water's Edge*, oil and acrylic on canvas, hung on the wall behind, image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 74. *Whakapapa at the Water's Edge*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 290 x 240cm, 2026, image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 75. *Waingongoro*, oil on canvas sitting in a tōtara support harvested from my grandparent's backyard in Taranaki, 40 x 50cm, 2026, image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 76. LEFT: *My Two Threads*, acrylic on unprimed stretched canvas, each canvas is 80 x 125cm, 2025.
RIGHT: *What Endures*, acrylic, oil paint and onepū collected from Ohawe Beach on canvas, 121 x 90cm, 2026. Image by Paul Chapman.



Figure 77. *Huru*, oil on canvas sitting in a tōtara support harvested from my grandparent's backyard in Taranaki, 20 x 25cm, 2026, image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 78. *Mawhai*, oil on canvas sitting in a tōtara support harvested from my grandparent's backyard in Taranaki, 20 x 25cm, 2026, image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 79. Exhibition Installation 3, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery 1, image taken by Mia Robinson.



Figure 80. Detail shot of *My Two Threads*, acrylic on unprimed stretched canvas, each canvas is 80 x 125cm, 2025, image taken by Mia Robinson.



Figure 81. Detail shot of *Waingongoro*, oil on canvas sitting in a tōtara support harvested from my grandparent's backyard in Taranaki, 40 x 50cm, 2026, image by Mia Robinson.



Figure 82. Side view of *Waenganni*, oil on canvas sitting in tōtara support harvested from grandparent's backyard in Taranaki, 20 x 25cm each, 2025, image by Mia Robinson.

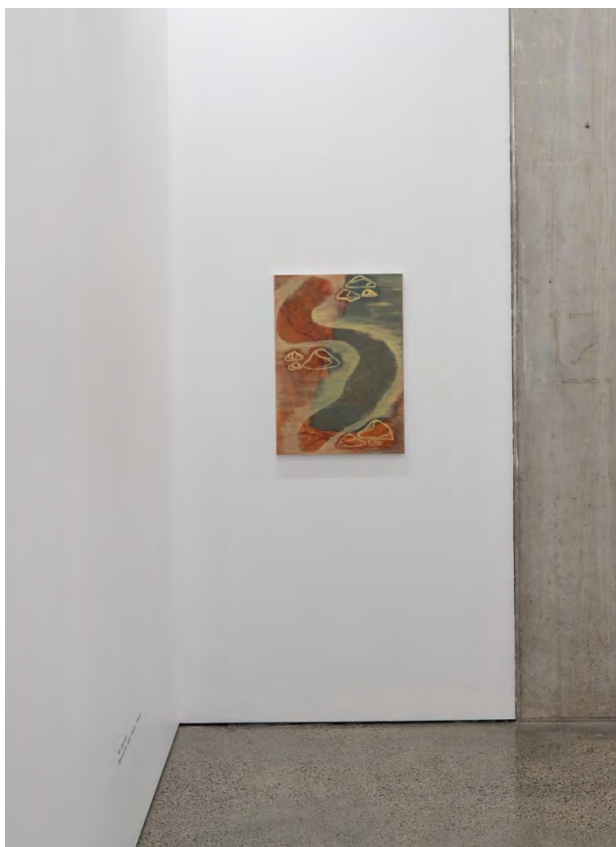


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