I Roto I Te Tohu: An Exploration of Identity Through Heaven and Earth.

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Abstract

This practice-led research project explores my identity grounded by my whakapapa Māori and connection to God. I seek to find harmony between these two worlds, culture and religion, establishing wairua as the common thread that binds them both. I navigate the complexities of this multi-dimensional state of being through painting and videography; highlighting the wairua that exists in waiata, in the whenua and therefore within me. Using whenua pigments, collected from my mārae in Mōtukaraka, and documenting mundane moments of home life in Mangamuka, I ground my practice in whakapapa. These modes of making provide two different perspectives, a public perception and one that is more personal; showcasing how I engage with my whanau, in wairua and worship of Ātua Māori and God.

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,

07 May 2026

Acknowledgements

To my Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother who are patiently waiting for all of us to return home. Thank you for blessing me with all that I have in this life and all that I will receive in the next. Without you I wouldn't be.

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Introduction

This Practice-led research project explores identity through the interconnected relationships between whakapapa (genealogy) Māori, whenua (land), waiata (song), wairua(spirit) and whakapono (faith). Grounded within personal experience, this exegesis navigates the complexities of existing between multiple worlds while seeking harmony between Māori and Christian understanding of being. Rather than positioning these worlds in opposition, this project identifies wairua as the connective thread that binds them together, through painting, photography, storytelling and the gathering of whenua pigments. I investigate how identity is formed relationally through land, memory, and spirituality.

The project is structured within the three realms: Te Āo I Mua (The World Before) Te Āo Mārama (The World of Light), and Te Āo Wairua (The Spiritual Realm). These realms reflect a cyclical understanding of existence that moves between pre-mortal, mortal, and post-mortal states of being. Together, they provide the conceptual framework through which I examine my own existence and cultural reclamation. Through this structure, this exegesis explores how identity is continuously shaped through movement across physical, emotional, and spiritual realms. Central to this project is the understanding that knowledge is carried through relationships. Waiata, pūrakau (stories), and whenua, each operate as vessels of memory that preserve connections between people, ancestors, and place. Storytelling therefore becomes both a research method and a mode of cultural continuation of how memory shapes identity, while also acknowledging the responsibility of passing these stories forward to future generations. Painting functions as a process of spiritual and material engagement. By working with whenua pigments gathered from my marae in Mōtukaraka, the act of painting becomes an extension of whakapapa and kaitiakitanga. The whenua is positioned as a living collaborator and teacher within my painting practice. Alongside painting, photography serves as a method for capturing the wairua of everyday life in Mangamuka and Mōtukaraka. These images document intimate and mundane moments of home life, preserving the emotional and spiritual atmosphere that often cannot be fully expressed through paint alone. Together, painting and moving images form a living practice with grounded relationships, intuition, and care.

Figure 1. Close-up of painting



Chapter 1: Te Āo I Mua - The Pre-mortal Realm

The greatest poetic energy is devoted to the 'Waiata Tangi', literally translated to 'Weeping Waiata'. These songs are composed for grief, for the dead, other losses, such as crops, loss of whenua and illness. These waiata are sung at funerals by individuals and groups of people and also when it is appropriate to remember a person.

There is a world we inhabit before we come to earth. The world before, protected by a fragile veil, a spiritual realm containing the souls that are yet to manifest. In Māori kōrero tuku īho - 'Te Āo I Mua' is 'The World Before,' referring to a world of pre-existence. In the beginning there was Te Kore[1]. An infinite void that contained the constituents necessary for life to form but lacked organisation. Through the darkness of Te Pō, chaos turned into order in the light of Te Ao Mārama. In the stories of my Church, in the beginning, God created the plan of happiness (1 abr 3:22–26) This plan sent heaven into war where a third of heaven was cast out, whilst the rest descended to earth to receive their physical form. In both stories the world first began in chaos.

These origin stories reflect the uncertainties, the shame, the pain and the grievances that we experience when embarking on our journeys to know ourselves. Our origins shape who we are and continue to carve our stories throughout the rest of our lives.

I Roto I Te Tohu

I will begin by telling you the story of how I first entered this world.

In my whanau, my paternal grandfather, Orzogna Harris's (Zona) word was considered law. One rule he set in our family was "boys name boys and girls name girls." My papa Zona was adamant with this rule, and everyone followed suit.
One week before I was born, my papa Zona's brother, 'Honk,' was involved in a tragic forestry accident. Papa Honk suffered

[1] Peter Moana Nepia, "Te Kore - Exploring the Māori Concept of Void" (2012), https://hdl.handle.net/10292/5480.

severe third degree burns to 70 percent of his body and was rushed to hospital in Hamilton, where he lay in a coma.

The night my mother went into labour, the rain fell heavily, striking the car as my father drove to Hastings Hospital. Upon arrival, the doctor told my mother her contractions were too far apart. Sitting in a green armchair, my aunty Lilac sighed and said, "Ugh, we're going to be here all night," and stepped outside for a smoke. Before she could leave, the contractions intensified and then I was born. It took fifteen minutes, the fastest labour my mother had experienced.
The morning after I was born, my papa Zona received the call that his brother had passed. There are no words to describe the immense state of grief he was in. But I do know, he cried listening to a song in the car while traveling to work.

This part of the story will be told by the perspective of my parents

Dad's Perspective

"You were in my arms, wrapped tightly in swaddling clothing. As we stood at the Waharoa (entrance) of Rauhoto Marae, waiting to hear the karanga(call) for us to be called on, I could feel my heart pounding. Your mother stood beside me, holding your older sister's hand.

When the karanga began, we walked forward. I noticed a woman reaching out, motioning to give you to her. I ignored her. She then stepped in front of us and tried to take you from my arms. I raised my hand and said, 'Kāo.'(No) I refused to let you go and continued to hold onto you. She lowered her head and walked away.

As we moved onto the marae, I could hear whispers: 'That's the baby… the baby's here.'

The tikanga (protocol) on this marae is, the men move to the left to sit where the speakers address the manuhiri (visitors) and the women, if closely related to the whanau, usually go to the tūpāpaku (coffin/body). I did not follow the men, instead I went straight to papa Honk and stood before him.

I turned to your mother, handed you to her, looked at Papa Honk and began to tremble. I remember wailing; the heartfelt reaction came from the soles of my feet and throughout my whole body. I cried deeply and harder than I ever had for anyone.

Koro Taika, the Rangatira (leader) on the Taumata, acknowledged everything we did. I was not scolded for the act; I had committed, and no offense was taken.

When my father (Papa Zona) returned to the marae, he spoke with the men on the Taumata about you and the next steps for papa Honk." At the conclusion of the meeting everyone was called to gather on the Ātea (forecourt) where chairs had been set up.

Both tribes, Ngāpuhi and Tūwharetoa, were still negotiating. Ngapuhi said that they were taking papa Honk to the Far North, where he was from, but Tūwharetoa was still hesitant and undecided whether to release him to Ngāpuhi.

Once the wānanga (discussion) concluded, all those present were called to take their seats on the Ātea. Koro Taika opened the gathering with a karakia (Prayer) and a Waiata Himene (Hymn). He then offered a mihi (speech) before handing the floor over to your Papa Zona."

Mum's Perspective

"During this time, you and I were the only ones inside the wharenui (meeting house). You were wrapped in white from head to toe. I heard your name mentioned so I picked you up, took a seat, and positioned us near the doorway of the whare.

There were many people gathered to celebrate and honour the life of your Papa, Honk. His coffin, with the lid on, was placed just outside on the mahau (front court of the wharenui). Close whānau surrounded him there, while the wider group of mourners were seated.

This was his final resting place before we uplifted him to take him home to Mangamuka in the Far North. You slept through it all.

Your Papa Zona, later spoke about his journey at the time. He was traveling on the Auckland motorway when he received the phone call that his brother had passed away. At that very moment, the song 'I Roto I Te Tohu' was playing on Radio Tautoko, the station based in Mangamuka, that your papa always listened to.

His first thought was of you, knowing you had just been born. Then he felt a strong wairua (presence) and from that moment, your name came to him, **Tohu Wairua Aroha.**

Once Papa Zona named you on the Marae, the hui concluded with karakia and the waiata, which you were named in light of."



Figure 2. Childhood photo of me

I Roto I te Tohu

"I roto i te tohu o te mo nga whakawaitanga
Ka toro te ringa o te Ariki
Ka hi to ake te manawa
He tohu, he tohu wairua
Tiaho mai ra nga whetu
He aha rawa kua puawaitia
Te tohu o te arikinui"

This story traces my physical origins. The events that occurred before and after my birth form the framework that shapes this project.

Tohu Wairua Aroha is my name - Gift/Sign of Spiritual Love. I was born in a time of conflict and grief. My Papa Zona gave me this name during his brother's tangi. In that moment I became a reminder of him (Papa Honk) and the inevitability of life and death. My name and the memory of Papa Honk lives on each time *I Roto I te Tohu* is sung.

During my naming, Papa Zona spoke to everyone in Te Reo Māori, saying "Mate atu he toa ara, mai he toa" which translates to 'When one warrior falls, another rises.' This whakatāuki (proverb) is used to honour a highly regarded person while ushering in the next generation. This positions waiata tangi used to remind us of our tūpuna and rātou kua whetu rangiatea 'those who enter 'Te Āo Wairua' and travel to become stars'



Figure 3. My Cousin in the Sun



Figure 4. Ātea of Mangamuka Marae

Whakamā

During the development of this project, I uncovered a hidden sense of shame surrounding my Māoritanga. This created constant hesitation within my practice and affected my ability to create freely. This shame became very overwhelming that I found myself unable to paint. I turned instead to photography and videography, relying on them as my primary modes of making.

In the article 'Whakamā': culturally determined behaviour in the New Zealand Maori written by Perminder S. Sachdev [2] whakamā is described as a 'psychological and behavioural construct' for Māori people and like all Te Reo Māori kupu, the meaning of whakamā holds multiple dimensions and exists on a range of emotions. In this text, they deem it an important inquiry of research as it helps to understand the interactions between Māori, Tauiwi and the overall behaviour of Māori in certain contexts.

In another article titled, 'whakamā: The Truth in White Lies' by Jani Katarina Taituha Wilson[3] examines the deeper meanings of the term *whakamā* presenting it as a significant



Figure 5. Front Door of Mangamuka Marae

barrier to Māori potential, especially for rangatahi (Māori youth). The kupu (word) whakamā carries multiple layered meanings. They explain that whakamā is comprised of the words ‘white’ and ‘clean’, and when these kupu are put together it means to be whitened clean. It reflects the process of the blood draining from the face, whakamā also means to be ‘embarrassed’ or ‘ashamed’

Through this period of whakamā, I found myself trying to measure my own ‘Maoriness’, constantly seeking permission from people who I deemed worthy to be allowed to speak on all things pertaining to Te Āo Māori.

It became challenging to speak about my project and I often spoke in a doubtful tone. I am both Māori and Pākehā, and this I know. However, I struggled to navigate the state of Rangirua (two minds) uncertain of which one to follow. This tension revealed an internal battle within me - a cultural battle to unravel the Pākehā strands woven through my Māori mind. I refer to the ‘Pākehā strands’ as Western systems that have influenced the world around me and my thinking.

The strands seem to tighten whenever I spoke about things my Māori mind knew to be true. As a result, the need to prove my 'Māoriness’ became a fixed idea, deepening the doubt I carried within my work. I found myself caught in a continual cycle of colonising my thoughts and attempted to reclaim and re-indigenise them. Although confronting this shame was uncomfortable, it was necessary, as it led me to ask questions such as:

[2] Issac Warbrick et al,. “Indigenising ‘Research’ and Reconnecting Knowledge to Place – Indigenous Compositions, Songs, and Chants as Research Methods,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24, (2025): 1-8. DOI: 10.1177/16094069251337216

[3] Issac Warbrick et al,. “Indigenising ‘Research’ and Reconnecting Knowledge to Place – Indigenous Compositions, Songs, and Chants as Research Methods,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24, (2025): 1-8. DOI: 10.1177/16094069251337216

- Am I Māori enough?
- What is it to be Māori?
- Why do I carry shame?
- Where did my Māoritanga go?
- How do I return?
- Why do I doubt Māori knowledge?

These questions sat at the centre of my internal conflict and in the search for answers to these questions, I came across a TEDx talk titled 'Indigenous Knowledge Has Value' by Curtis Bristowe[4]. He begins with the following statement:

'Indigenous knowledge has value; Indigenous knowledge has worth. Most importantly, Indigenous knowledge can provide answers and solutions to contemporary problems.'

This immediately sparked my interest as it was the optimal response to my internal conflict about worthiness as an Indigenous woman within a colonial system.

In many academic and creative spaces, these knowledge systems continue to be misunderstood, marginalized, or treated as symbolic, rather than authoritative (Smith, 2012). This creates a tension between lived Indigenous knowledge and institutional expectations of what counts as 'valid' knowledge. Through this, I engaged with that tension by examining questions of epistemological authority and using practice-led research to support the restoration and strengthening of cultural identity.

Bristowe later explains that systems created and established by dominating powers produce inequality, environmental degradation, exploitation, and disconnection, and that the

[4] TEDxtalks, "Indigenous Knowledge Has Value | Curtis Bristowe | TEDxRuakura," Youtube, September 9, 2016, https://youtu.be/c-PwEnC-Rj8?si=fkqjE1EVlEd0OLI-.

solutions to these issues cannot come from the same systems that created them. He argues that this is where indigenous knowledge has value.

Bristowe's kōrero helped me understand that many of the doubts I carried were not created individually, but through colonial systems created to disempower and disconnect Māori from their language, knowledge systems, and cultural identity. Bristowe's words reframed my shame, allowing me to recognise that the tension I experienced within my practice was tied to a larger history of colonisation rather than a lack of authenticity as Māori.

The entirety of Bristowe's korero emphasizes the idea of survival. To put things into perspective, this TEDx talk was made in 2016, 9 years before the hīkoi took place. Many of the colonial systems, he refers to, were established over 154 years ago. Yet we continue to engage in these systems. Relying on systems that we know are failing; we are bound to repeat history.

I am particularly interested in the solutions Bristowe offers to these consistent issues. An alternative solution in the form of Indigenous knowledge is that Indigenous knowledge has value, serving as a fine-toothed comb, untangling and detaching the Pakeha strands that imbue doubt into every decision made within my day-to-day life and practice.

While Bristowe's words initiated this internal shift in perspective, the hīkoi transformed that understanding externally.



Figure 6. Bastion Point Sea of Flags

Hikoi Mo Te Tiriti

A nine day march began from Te Rerenga Wairua (Cape)[1] and concluded at the parliament steps in Wellington. One of the largest protest marches that had taken place in Aotearoa. The protest was a stand against the Treaty Principles Bill which threatened Te Tiriti o Waitangi's founding document. The petition signed by 200,000 people officially defeated the passing of the Bill by the Second Reading.

November 13th 2024, The sky wanted to rain that day as I joined my whanau and travelled to Bastion point. Black, white and red in my line of sight, I had never seen that many flags before. As we walked, we sang, karanga weaved in between the crowds breaking through the waiata. At that moment everybody moved together as one and I couldn't help but be proud, proud to be part of this movement, proud to be Māori. The pride I have for my culture, birthed the drive for this practice-led research project.

Ashamed of bleeding

After months of being unable to paint, this painting was the first work I created. It emerged from the shame I carried as a 'Reo-less Māori.' I am proud to be Māori, deeply proud, yet there is still a shame I feel in not being able to fluently speak my native tongue. I recognise this feeling of shame, not only within myself, but within the people around me, especially my family.

How can you have shame for not knowing your language if it was taken from my people?

I attended English-speaking schools most of my life, where Te Reo Māori was never presented as something essential or necessary. At the time I saw little significance in learning my language because the environment around me did not value it. I wanted to blend in with those around me, many of whom presented as Pākehā, which led me to question, why should I present myself any differently?

It was only after leaving those institutions that I began to realise the extent to which colonisation had shaped my thinking and way of life. I understood that I needed to decolonise my mind. Accepting and embracing my Māoritanga has become one of the most difficult journeys of my life, which is why this project became such an emotional challenge to paint.

This painting became the first step toward acknowledging that part of me.



Figure 7. 'Ashamed of Bleeding', Oil on Canvas

The importance of Stories and Storytelling

In the book '*E Pā To Hau': Philosophy and Theory on Dispossession, Elimination, Grief, Trauma and Settler Colonialism in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Hemopereki[5] Simon writes that although individuals hold responsibility for remembering, it is the collective that shapes memory through shared experiences and cultural practices that either sustain remembrance or contribute to erasure.

I was raised in my Grandparents house and in this household I was surrounded by people who lived storied lives, spoke through stories, and answered questions with stories. As a child, listening to my Papa Zona retell the same story over and over again often felt like a chore. Today, however, my papa Zona is fighting dementia. He gets lost in his words, overlapping timelines, and often forgetting the ending of his kōrero. It was while trying to decipher his kōrero that I began to understand the importance of storytelling. Regret now lingers in the back of my mind as I attempt to recall the very story my Papa Zona shared with me years ago.

Stories preserve the memory of people and become a way to connect and collect knowledge. which allows us to maintain relationships with those who have passed beyond the veil. I can attest to creating a closeness with whanau I have never met in this life because I know them through stories passed down to me. In turn, I found myself sharing these same stories with my younger cousins, continuing the cycle of remembrance in the hope that those memories, and the people within them, will continue to live on.

In the book written by Issac Warbrick, *Indigenizing 'Research' and Reconnection knowledge to place — Indigenous Compositions, Songs, and Chants as Research Methods*[6]*;*

[5] Hemopereki Simon, "'E Pā To Hau': philosophy and theory on dispossession, elimination, grief, trauma and settler colonialism in Aotearoa New Zealand," *SETTLER COLONIAL STUDIES* 13, No.3 (2023): 373 DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2023.2195062

[6] Issac Warbrick et al,. "Indigenising 'Research' and Reconnecting Knowledge to Place – Indigenous Compositions, Songs, and Chants as Research Methods," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 24, (2025): 1-8. DOI: 10.1177/16094069251337216

"Storytelling and story practices are time-tested, culturally relevant tools for preserving and sharing knowledge, and valuable as; "Storytelling is particularly potent as a method of decolonising research"

From my own understanding of these two texts, I have identified the significance of storytelling in preserving memory, through waiata as a method of dissemination and indigenisation.
Waiata as a form of storytelling, acts as a resistance to colonial indoctrinations that seeks to undermine and confine Indigenous knowledge to the past. These stories bridge the past and present linking us to our Ātua and whenua while creating a holistic body of knowledge that grounds meaning and reinforces identity.

There is a responsibility within this process of storytelling to develop a storied memory[7] passing knowledge on to our future generations ensure the survival of our culture. This idea became increasingly significant
"We extend our left palm upwards, to symbolise reaching back to receive teachings from the Ancestors and those who have travelled before us. We are given the challenge and opportunity to live these teachings. We also have a responsibility to pass those teachings to others who may also be the younger generation, which is shown when we put our right palm downwards. In the circle, we join hands in respect, reverence, and cooperation."
This quote positions storytelling as a cycle of receiving and returning. We inherit stories from those before us, carry them within ourselves, and eventually place them into the hands of those who come after. Through my paint process, gathering stories from my whānau has become a way to generate imagery for my paintings. My paintings are place-based and often depict landscapes and environments that I whakapapa to. Through painting, I attempt to translate inherited narratives and experiences into visual form. The process becomes a way of

[7]Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork* (UBC Press, 2008), https://www.ubcpress.ca/asset/9270/1/9780774814010.pdf.

reconnecting with whanau and whenua to understand my identity through the memories embedded within place. By getting to know them. I come to understand myself.

Chapter 2: Te Ao Marama – The World of Light – Mortal Realm

Te Āo Mārama refers to 'The World of Light'[8] and the Mortal plain where our spirits roam in physical bodies. As beings comprised of flesh and blood, we rely on the whenua and its constituents to sustain us throughout our mortal lives. Within Te Āo Māori, this world emerged through the great separation of Ranginui and Papatuānuku, an act that brought forth Te Ira Tangata and the beginning of existence[9]. Similarly, within the teachings of my Church, there was a separation between humanity and our Heavenly Parents as we descended to earth for us to gain a body and mortal knowledge (Alma 42.5, 8). Both narratives position separation as a necessary act of creation, a transition that allows life and understanding to emerge.

In the book *"Religions of the World: A Cultural Introduction to the Making of Meaning*[10]", written by, Lawrence Eugene Sullivan. Sullivan states "*life is considered to have emerged through the actions of primordial beings, ancestral spirits and deities, who bestowed upon humans the role of steward and guardian to their creations" (* Sullivan*, 2012)*

This understanding places Te Tāiao, the Natural World, as something formed from celestial and ancestral hands. A realm designed in a state of divine perfection and therefore deserving of respect. As recipients of this carefully created gift, humans inherit the responsibility of kaitiakitanga. Our whenua is an ancient tūpuna and we need to treat it as such. Wright further explains that "*The land is considered a portal or link to the original life-force energy of ancestors." (Sullivan, 2012)*. The

[8] New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, "Te Ao Mārama – the Natural World," teara.govt.nz, September 24, 2007, https://teara.govt.nz/en/te-ao-marama-the-natural-world.

[9] Ministry for the enviroment , "Te Timatanga O Te Ao Māori Mana Tu Mō Te Taiao ," Ministry for the Environment, April 7, 2021, https://environment.govt.nz/te-ao-maori/te-timatanga-o-te-ao-maori/.

[10] Lawrence Eugene Sullivan, *Religions of the World : An Introduction to Culture and Meaning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

word ’portal’ is particularly significant, as it bridges the spiritual and physical realms, positioning whenua as a living connector between ancestors and identity. Within this chapter, my project emerges from Te Āo I Mua into Te Āo Mārama, leaving the dark and toward the light. Through this process, I am introduced to whenua processing and work in harmony with the land honoring the whenua as my mentor. This section documents the development of my practice through new understandings, experiments, and failures.

Figure 8. Au Moana and my Red Bands



Figure 9. My Aunties Straining/Cleaning the Au Moana.





Figure 10. The Moana at Mōtukaraka Marae

Ko Au te Whenua-Waiata Aroha

In the article Onamata Anamata, written by Hana Burgess and Te Kahuratai[11] refer to humans as the ‘younger brothers of creation’. We were the last thing to be created and as the younger brothers of creation we have the most to learn. This article advises us to look to our teachers (The creations that came before humans) for guidance, for they have been around far longer than we have.

If we choose to look at the land as something separate from us, there is a risk of negatively affecting one's wellbeing, not only your physical but mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Mana whenua and mana moana are integral to our existence. When confronting my own existence, I return home in my mind and then physically. I traveled to Mangamuka and made a conscious decision to be aware of my surroundings, to immerse myself in conversation, be involved with hapū events, and to learn about my whanau.

[11] Burgess, Hana, and Te Kahuratai Painting. “Onamata, Anamata: A Whakapapa Perspective of Māori Futurisms.” In *Whose Futures?*, edited by A.-M. Murtola and S. Walsh, Auckland: Economic and Social Research Aotearoa

In making this decision I took the advice of Hana Burgess and Te Kahuratai to look to our teachers and learn from them. Aunty Nikau Hindin became one of those teachers. In the middle of my thesis year we travelled up north to our marae in Motukaraka. There, alongside my whānau, we gathered Au Moana, a blue clay sourced from our ocean, along with other naturally occurring coluored clays. Through this process, I was introduced to the principles of gathering, which guided both our actions and responsibilities:

1. Seek permission
2. Gather at the appropriate time (season and tide)
3. Take only what is needed
4. Process all materials immediately and with care, ensuring by-products are returned or disposed of appropriately
5. Complete the process fully
6. Honour the resource
7. Give back and share



Figure 11. Three Mortar and Pestles with Yellow

After harvesting, the clay was washed and cleaned before being fired in an open fire. Once fired, the clay was grinded using a mortar and pestle, producing a fine pigment powder ready to use as paint.

Working with Aunty Nikau has been a privilege. The knowledge she has shared with me has been beneficial to my practice but also my overall connection to myself. Through her I have grown my understanding of the land and created a stronger relationship with my whenua. Another whenua artist who I gained knowledge from was Te Ara Minhinnick (Ngāti Te Ata)

In Ki Tua o Rehua (2024), Minhinnick transform the gallery into a physical and spiritual extension of her ancestral landscape. The installation consists of blocks of whenua, uku, and onepū sourced from the three waterways surrounding her kāinga in Waiuku. She refers to the land as "a site of evidence." This 'site of evidence' Minhinnick speaks of evokes an understanding within my journey to find oneself, to find myself in the land. What I mean by that is, the whenua becomes a witness to my existence, the land holds fragments of



Figure 12. 'Ki Tua of Rehua,' (2024) Te Ara Minhinnick

my identity. Through engaging with the land, I can collect evidence to investigate who I am.

Figure 13. Unnamed, Brown Kōkōwai from Motukaraka.



Figure 14. Unnamed, Red Kōkōwai





Figure 15. Unnamed Series of Paintings, A5

Drawing from the idea that 'land is a site of evidence' I began an on-going series of paintings using materials that were gathered from places connected to my home in Mangamuka. These works incorporate three different coloured clays and two plant pigments made from roses and green leaves. I chose to develop this as an ongoing series because my understanding of whenua, identity, and becoming is not fixed. Each painting becomes another way of returning home and learning from the land

I sit with the land, not as something to take from, but to be in a relationship with. What I gather is not stripped or taken, but gently received, then shaped with care allowing the earth to live again in another form. To work and learn from the land is a privilege but to know the land that I am learning from is indescribable. Through the words Raukura [12]

"*Working with whenua (soil) is almost this empowering notion of one handful at a time, one spoonful at a time you can really connect with the place that is yours*."

Through Raukura's practice I became aware of the privileges I possess. The privilege of being raised on my land, to know my marae and to know my Maunga. I have walked through the ngahere of Mangataniwha, had the honour of swimming

[12] Auckland Gallery Toi o Tamaki , "Artist Profile: Raukura Turei | Kāhua Ringatoi: Raukura Turei," Youtu.be, 2026, https://youtu.be/c7d6eWK6Jy8?si=y514Ef6ofM0_-V66.

through Tāpapa awa and fortunate to know my people and them to know me. These relationships which built me.

In the series *The stones remember, and I listen* by Sarah Hudson[13]. This series positions the whenua as a keeper similarly to Te Ara's views seeing the land as "a site of evidence" both emphasises knowledge is held by the land and can be used as a way to connect to cultural memory and the ways we belong.

We cannot always exist in perfect balance, but maintaining good relations is an ongoing, active process. It is through this process that balance can be restored. I came to realise that whenever I felt unsettled, my immediate instinct was to return home, not to do anything in particular, but simply to just be there.

As people, we encounter the world as being but one part of an intimate web of whanaungatanga, thus we have an obligation to maintain a balance of the whole. To do so, we must know our whakapapa and our place in the world. Our collective well-



[13] Sarah Hudson, 'Naoshima Artist in Residence and Setouchi Triennale ', Sarah Hudson, 2024, https://www.sarahhudson.co.nz/the-stones-remember.

being as a people rests on this concept. In knowing our whakapapa, we can come to know how to connect and be in good relationships with whanau and whenua.

Plant pigment and Ao Moana

After learning the process of whenua pigments, I started to wonder, what else could be turned into paint?

A vase of flowers sat in the hallway of my studio. I wondered who they were meant for, why were they left there? I hoped they would be retrieved in the following days, but that was not the case. Weeks passed and every morning I was greeted by these abandoned flowers. I started to take care of them, changing the water weekly. Although without soil they could not take root and slowly started to wilt. By the end of the month the vase of flowers withered, and the dried petals fell to the floor, With the knowledge I learnt from whenua pigment processing, I collected the dried leaves of petals and applied the grinding process to the plant matter. I did not know what the outcome would be, but I didn't have the heart to throw them away.

The leaves felt like paper and took longer to grind than the whenua. As I grinded the leaves a bright green powder coated the mortar and pestle, I then carefully gathered the green dust into a shell.

At that time, I had no binder but I wanted to see how the colour would look on paper. I added water and used that liquid to create a painting. It worked.



Figure 17. Mortar and pestle with grinded up plant pigment.



Figure 18. Green Plant Pigment in Liquid Form



Figure 19. Hoihō, Plant Pigment on Paper

Now that I know that plants can be used as paint, I started collecting different flowers. Most of the flowers I gathered were gifted to me. I produced purples, greens, and yellows from roses. Although through collecting and processing these flowers and the Au Moana (blue clay), I discovered that plant matter fades quickly and the Au moana oxidases, so the blue kept losing its original colour. This discovery sparked an obsession with finding a way to retain the pigment.

I became desperate to preserve the colour and, in my eyes, I was continuously failing, because no matter how hard I tried, the colour kept fading. Through this frustration, my supervisor and I had a conversation in which she asked me a simple question: “Do you need to retain the colour?”

This question erased my desperate obsession and shifted my thinking towards the attributes of the material. The plants are a living material that comes with its own life cycle. In my attempt to retain its colour on the page I was interfering with its natural process. With this new understanding I learned to work with the material and not against it. By embracing the plants



Figure 20. Purple, Yellow and Red Roses



Figure 21. Raw Au Moana after Low Tide

nature to succumb to time helped me accept change and I saw the material and I as collaborators while painting.

I have always understood the world around me, as possessing a life of its own. While that life may not mirror my own, I have learned to honour and respect it as if it does. From treasured objects of childhood to the shells I admire washed upon the shore, each carries its own presence.

As a child, my mother taught me that when picking up a stone, it should always be returned to where it was found, out of respect for that stone and the wildlife. This teaching shaped my awareness of my surroundings and guided how I engage with the world around me. Through maintaining this reciprocal relationship with the natural world, we enable it to continue sustaining and providing for us.

Figure 22. Containers with Kōkōwai



Figure 23. Plant Pigment containers





Figure 24. Clay Disks in a Container



Figure 25. Au Moana in a Mortar and Pestle

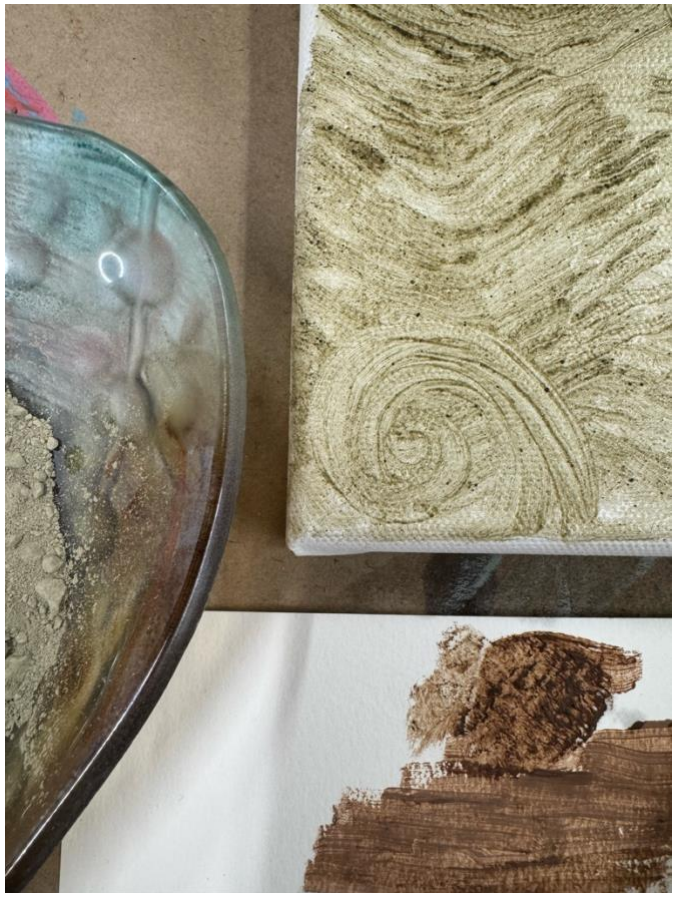


Figure 26. Au Moana on Canvas



Figure 27. Te Oho o te Wai, Au Moana and Rose
Pigment on unstretched canvas, 2026

This painting was created using Au moana and rose pigment on unstretched canvas. The inspiration for this work emerged during a trip my dad and I took to harvest Au moana from Mōtukaraka. Before arriving, we stopped at my awa, Tāpapa, where we shared lunch beside the river.

While we were eating, my dad threw a banana peel into the water. I looked at him unsure, but he reassured me, saying, "The eels will eat it - watch this, a big eel will come out and then all the other eels will follow." Just as he said, a large eel emerged from beneath the water, followed by many smaller ones. My dad then further explained that the oldest and largest eel risks it's life first, scouting and ensuring the area is safe for the younger eels to follow. That kōrero remained with me throughout the day as we continued on to Mōtukaraka, where we harvested and processed the clay together.

This painting was created using the clay my dad and I collected that day. It holds the memory of that experience and reflects the kōrero shared beside my awa.

In Verse (Genesis 2:7,):

"*Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being*."

Similar in Pūrakau, Māori stories of creation, Tāne Mahuta went to kurawaka, the sacred red earth of Papatūānuku (earth

mother) From this red clay, he formed the first woman, Hine-ahu-one whose name means “woman formed from earth” Tane then breathed life into her nostrils, and she sneezed “ Tihei mauri ora” meaning the breath of life[14].

As I paint with the whenua I am taking part in creation. as quoted previously “As the lord God formed a man from dust of the ground” and in the creation story “From this red clay, Tane Mahuta formed the first woman, Hine-Ahu-One whose name means “woman formed from earth” Just as humans were formed from earth in those stories, I am forming myself through earth on the surface of the painting. which depicts my pepeha, my home, and all the places that shaped me. My paintings become a site of creation, where identity is shaped through whenua.

Figure 28. Unnamed, Rose Pigment on Paper, A5, 2026



[14] Wiremu Grace, “A Trilogy of Wahine Toa / Māori Myths, Legends and Contemporary Stories / Te Reo Māori / Support Materials / Home - Mātauranga Māori,” eng.mataurangamaori.tki.org.nz, 2016, https://eng.mataurangamaori.tki.org.nz/Support-materials/Te-Reo-Maori/Maori-Myths-Legends-and-Contemporary-Stories/A-trilogy-of-Wahine-Toa.

Chapter 3: Te Āo Wairua – The Spiritual Realm – Post-Mortal

The final realm is Te Āo Wairua. When mortal life comes to an end, the spirit separates from the body, leaving behind the physical vessel as it ascends to the spiritual realm.

Although Te Āo Wairua marks the conclusion of mortal existence, the spirit continues to exist beyond death. This realm signifies the end of our mortal life, rather than the end of being. While seeking to understand my identity, I came to recognise two worlds that exist as one within my understanding. yet are often spoken as being separate. Although I understand the controversy and mamae associated with the relationship between Christianity and Māori identity, this chapter explores my personal experience of being raised within both worlds.

Waiata Oriori

An oriori is a traditional Māori waiata often described as a lullaby. These songs were used, not only to soothe children, but to educate them. These songs teach the child about their whakapapa and responsibilities from a young age. Through these waiata, children learn who they are, where they belong, and where they are going.

In the article *Mapping Rematriation with Pūrākau: Seeing Indigenous Futures through Whakawātea and Noa*, Tanya Ruka[15] reflects on the question:

"How do we traverse the threshold between Te Ao Mārama and Te Ao Wairua as our tūpuna once did? How do we find our way to the unseen realms of Atua?"

Ruka speaks to the importance of understanding our whakapapa as descendants of the natural world. Our tūpuna understood the skies through pūrākau that documents time and

[15] Tanya Ruka , "Mapping Rematriation with Pūrākau: Seeing Indigenous Futures through Whakawātea and Noa," Circuit.org.nz, 2022, https://www.circuit.org.nz/writing-and-podcast/mapping-rematriation-with-purakau.

space, offering guidance on how to navigate both this realm and those beyond it.

Matrilineally interconnected knowledge systems, these stories were kept safe by our knowledge holders who sang them into the threads of our korowai and the fabric of our subconscious, held in stasis in Te Pōruru, a 'time' of waiting located within the realm of Te Ao Wairua

With in this essay Ruka, speaks of how water was birthed from the emotions of Te wehenga, the sepration of ranginui and papatuanuku. The pain, grief, and love that expressed created, Roimata (Tears, te wai) and Te whenua (The soil). Which together birthed the many forms of water. This article then goes on to say " water, then, is a Physical embodiment of emotion, and humans, as part of the water cycle, are extricably linked to this tapu whakapapa
The idea that wai comes from separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku places water within a whakapapa of emotion. This suggests that when you engage with water, Whether in whakawātea, karakia, or even everyday acts, you're entering into a relationship with ancestral emotion. This means healing and cleansing and emotional release through water a genealogical act, an act that returns something to its source. This story lead me to the question,

What does it mean to paint with water and land, collaborating with it as a living ancestor?



Figure 29. Pēpeha, Red Kōkōwai on paper, 2026

In my search for a common thread connecting these worlds, I came across the article *Whakairia Ki Runga: The Many Dimensions of Wairua* by Hukarere Valentine[16], which states:

"Wairua is fundamental to Māori existence."

This concept is central to both worlds through the understanding of wairua and the Holy Spirit. Within both my practice and daily life, these are experienced as one and the same. Spirituality is fundamental to Christian culture in much the same way that wairua is fundamental to Māori existence.

Spirituality is not viewed as separate from everyday life but as something woven into all aspects of existence. It shapes how people understand life, death, memory, whakapapa, and responsibility to whenua and community. Without acknowledging wairua, a Māori understanding of what it means to be human would be incomplete.

Within my practice, I engage with wairua as a mode of making. Before painting, I enter a state of stillness which allows me to become receptive to spiritual and emotional intuition. Wairua is a system of decision making. It determines the start of making. Painting with wairua involves allowing intuition, emotion, and spiritual awareness to guide the movement of the brush. Rather than imposing a fixed image, I respond to feeling and memory, allowing the painting to emerge through a relationship between body, spirit, and whenua.



Figure 30. Hole in the Rock, Au Moana and Red kōkōwai on wood, 2026

[16] Hukarere Valentine, Natasha Tassell-Mataamua, and Ross Flett, "Whakairia Ki Runga: The Many Dimensions of Wairua," *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 46, no. 3 (2017), https://www.psychology.org.nz/journal-archive/Whakairia-ki-runga-private-2.pdf.



Figure 31. Skin on spirit, oil on canvas, 2026

In terms of visual manifestations of wairua, the horse is a recurring motif, and kaitiaki (spiritual guardian) within my paintings. It serves as a protector and guide on the journey to discovery, and a companion that accompanies the viewer through the heavy histories carried within Māori culture. Safeguarding us from spiritual harm, the horse becomes a figure of trust as we navigate through political and disheartening muddy waters crossing sharp spiritual mountains along the way. Through this journey, it invites the viewer to deepen their experience of ambition, reflection, and exploration. Wairua is essential to wellbeing, providing a connection to Māori history and ancestors, and in this sense, forms a constituent of one's Māori identity.

Wairua is not static; it exists, a continuum with many facets. For some, wairua comes in a small subtle voice. For others, a persistent overwhelming thought, impression or feeling that needs to be acted on. Wairua can be seen, heard, or felt and exemplified in its environment and interactions.

The way of the spirit in matters realated to Māori, permeates our world so profoundly that to isolate and analyse it, is almost like threatening the very fabric itself. Spirituality and artmaking have formed an integral part of the Māori world view from ancient times until the present day.

If everything is infinitely and complexly in relation all the time, and the well-being of the whole is dependent on the well-being of its closely related components and vice versa, then that raises the questions: What relationships around me need tending too? Where is the imbalance and, how am I in that system?

These questions have led me to think more deeply about the relationships I hold with people and place, and how creative

practice can become a way of observing, tending to, and preserving those connections.

During this project, I have been using moving images as another mode of making. Videography has become a tool for me to immediately capture wairua and the preservation of the spirit in that moment. This way of making generates imagery that informs and shapes my paintings.

Documenting the mundane life of my home in Mangamuka and Motukaraka has been a long-standing practice. These recordings of quiet, everyday moments fill in the parts that I cannot paint, creating what I call “living paintings.” Both my whenua paintings and moving images are guided by wairua.

The use of whenua pigments grounds me in my whakapapa, while videography captures the people and places that shape who I am. Together, they create a holistic practice where painting and video inform and extend one another.

When paired with painting, video brings life to the work. It turns whenua into flesh, forming a living practice. Lively, organic materials combined with a “breathing” projection simulate life itself. Videography puts the viewer in a moment it becomes a moving painting, expressing more than I could achieve through paint alone. It provides a literal lens into the place I am trying to depict.



Figure 32. Photo of Moving Image, ‘Bloodlines on the Concrete, 2025’

Capturing people in their normal, non-performative ways has always been important to me. Moving images carry sound, and through them, viewers can hear, imagine, and even sense the smells of these spaces. The experience becomes more immersive than painting alone can convey.

It is important that the viewer understands where I am speaking from. When I speak of home, I want it to be seen and heard: the river, the people, the life that surrounds me. In painting, these elements are present but intangible; wairua exists as a state of being; something felt rather than fully controlled.

Through this interdisciplinary practice of painting and moving images, I explore the fractured nature of identity, grounding myself in both place and spirit, and sharing the living essence of my home with others.



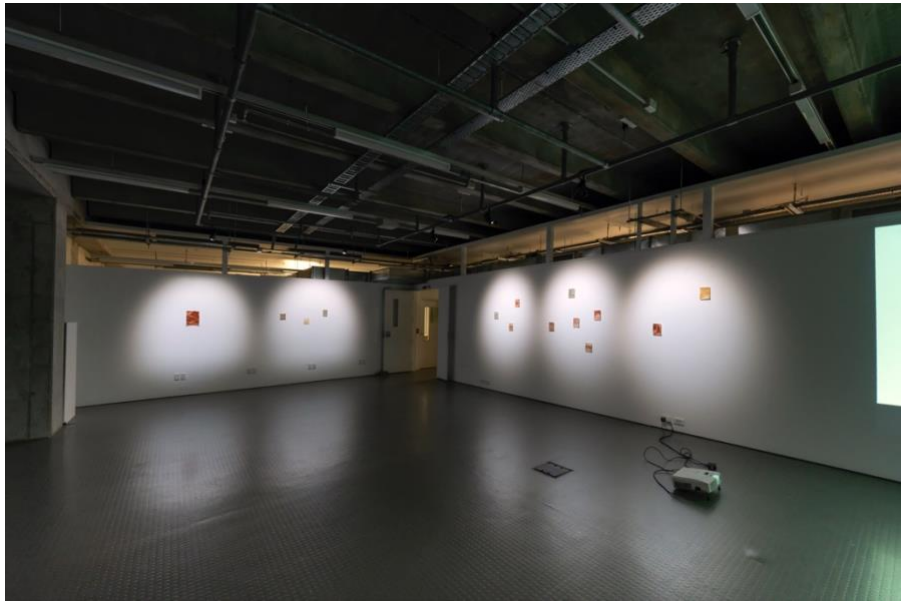
Figure 33. Eel Eating the Banana Skin



Figure 34. Uncle and his daughter at the Waharoa of Mangamuka marae



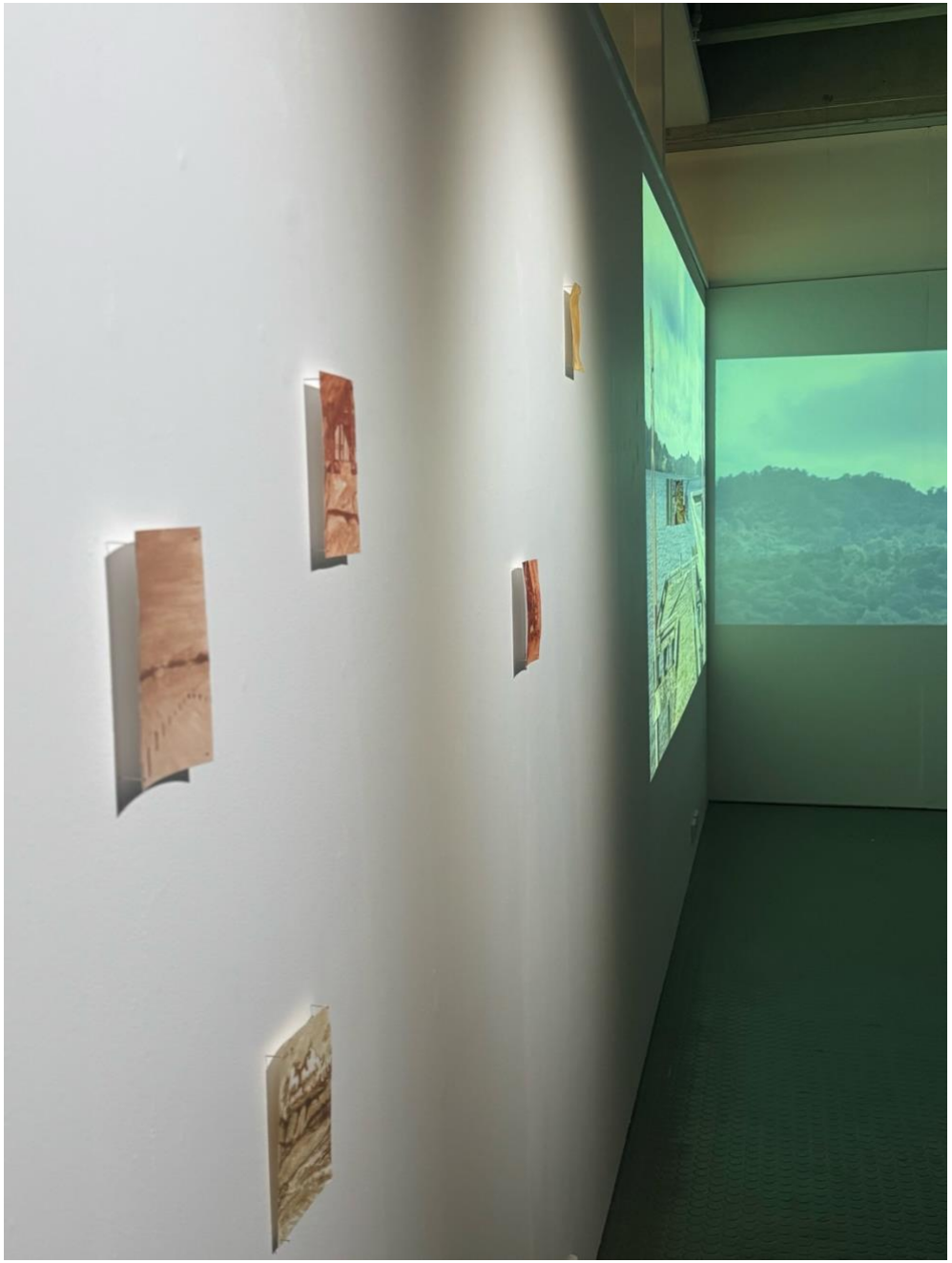
Figure 35. My little Cousin Walking on the Jetty at Mōtukaraka Marae

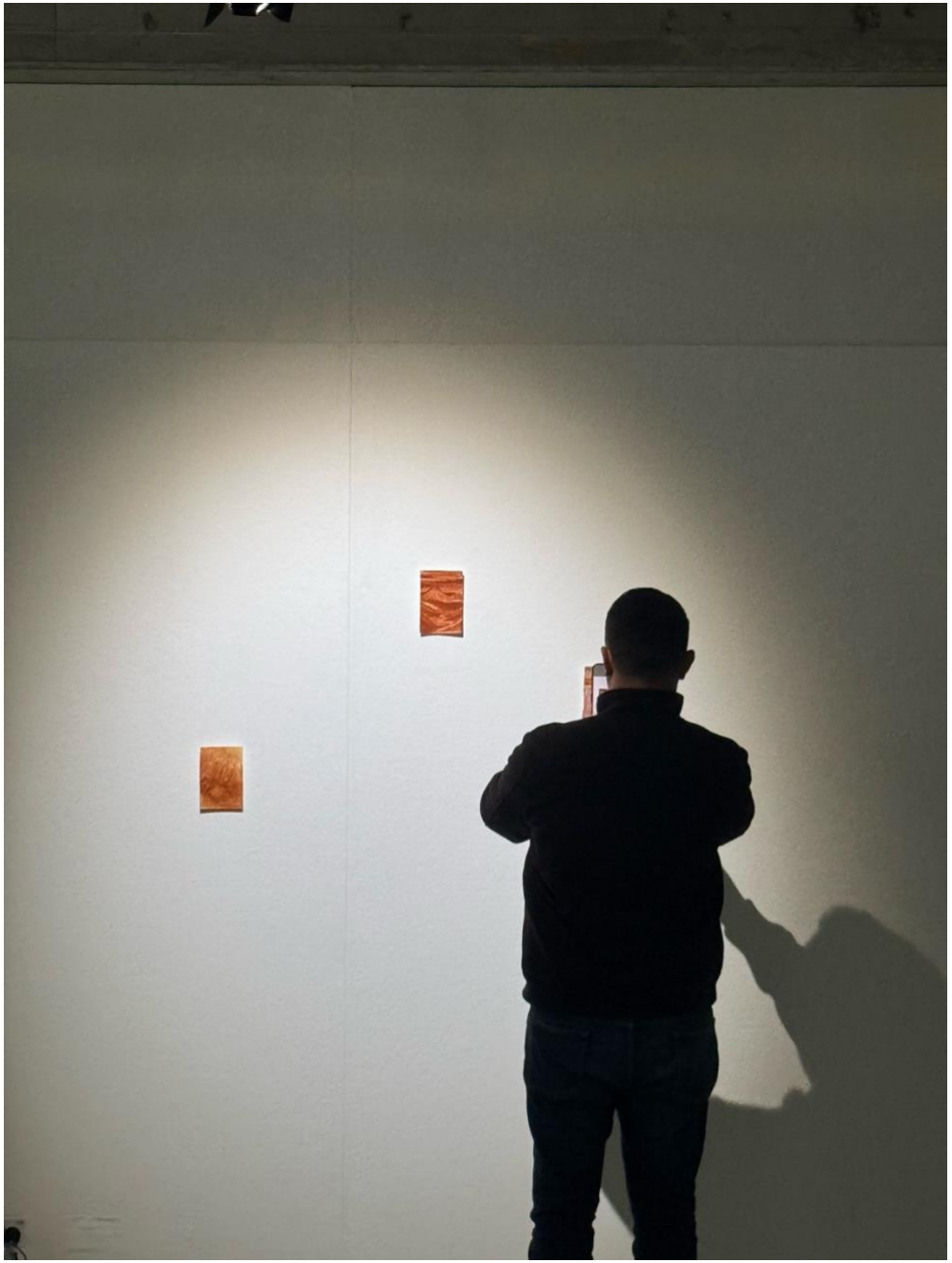




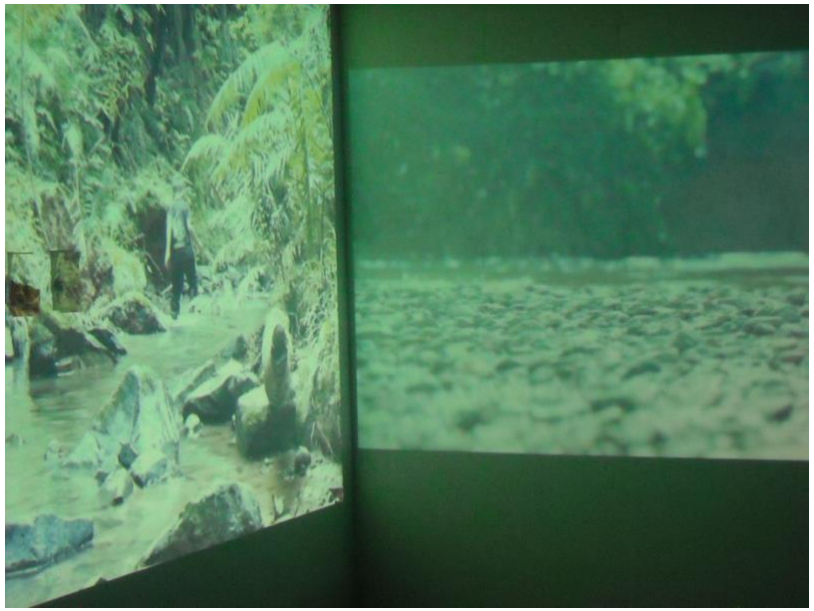

I would like it if papa could see me
march with my platoon,













Conclusion

“Mate atu he toa ara mai he toa,” ‘When one warrior falls another rises’

I started this exegesis with a story, the story of my name and the events that happened. My papa zona was there at the start of my life, and I was there at the end of his.

The completion of my exegesis concluded with the passing of my papa. He passed on the 3rd of June 2026 a week before my installation. This lose impacted me in many different ways and influenced the structure of my final exhibition, “Te Ara Tohu[17]”. My whanau and I lost not only a loved one but the life of a storied man.

In honour of my papa, Ozogna Harris; I want to dedicate this exergesis to his life and dedicate my life to carrying the responsibility of preserving his memory through the stories I tell.

The purpose of this exegesis, ‘I Roto I Te Tohu - An Exploration of Identity Through Heaven and Earth’ has been to explore the interconnected realms. Through Te Āo i Mua, this realm honours the memories, whakapapa, and ancestral knowledge carried forward by those who came before. Through Te Āo Mārama, Maintaning good relations with people and place. Through Te Āo Wairua, the spiritual connections between Atua, ancestors, the living continue to guide, protect, and sustain identity and wellbeing.

The research conducted responds to the ongoing impacts of colonisation on Māori identity, particularly experience of whakamā, disconnection, and cultural uncertainty. Through engaging with indigenous knowledge systems, this project challenges colonial frameworks that have historically undermined Māori ways of knowing. In doing so, this project positions indigenous knowledge as both valuable and necessary for understanding identity, wellbeing, and relational existence. This project is a testament to the inseparability of spirit, land, and self. It demonstrates that identity is not fixed but continually formed and re-formed through connection and

[17] Tohu Harris, ‘Kōrero Toi: Te Ara Tohu’, Debate-Mag, 14 July 2026, https://www.debatemag.com/single-post/kōrero-toi-te-ara-tohu.

creation. My paintings and moving images are invitations and offering of life into the world I call home, allowing others to see, hear, and feel the living essence of who I am and where I came from.

Ultimately, this project is an exploration of becoming. It is a journey toward understanding of who I am through the language of painting, the teachings from my whenua, the pūrakau of my whānau, and the guidance from the wairua.

In doing so, ‘I Roto I Te Tohu’ becomes a process to reconnection for the rising generation, particularly my children. My hope is that they may grow and live without uncertainty, struggle and disconnection to our God, whenua, culture and people.

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