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| 20
18

Curating EAST 2018

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A Starting Point

Hastings City Art Gallery's invitation to curate *EAST 2018* came with the challenge to re-envision its conventional regional review format with the goal of emphasising a more direct engagement with practitioners and place. This is no easy task but a worthy one that could prove valuable for artists, designers and the public to understand the region in new ways. I write now to share some initial thoughts and to start a conversation with artists and designers to help evolve the premise of *EAST*.

Traditionally regional reviews function as a type of prospecting for contemporary talent or an open door for anyone interested in participating. Yet more often than not they become overpopulated with art that asserts a regional identity bound to quintessential icons of local culture and industry. Such representations are easily understood and enjoyed but they usually fail to reflect the more complex reality of the context in which they are made.

Similarly, the Heretaunga Hawke's Bay region is a place rich with complexities that resist singular representations. The most apparent case in point is the controversial urban boundaries of the Napier and Hastings Districts. Dubbed the 'Twin Cities' or the 'Bay Cities' these two urban zones that divide up the Heretaunga Plains are legally distinct but are physically indistinguishable. The dichotomy is made all the more unusual given the fact that the Hastings District is geographically much larger in size and encircles the more densely populated city of Napier.

Historically the people of Hawke's Bay and their relations also transgress such arbitrarily defined regional boundaries. The clearest example of this is the tangata whenua Ngāti Kahungunu whose span covers a vast geography including but not limited to Nūhaka and Wairoa to as far south as Wairarapa. I understand that the relationship to this whenua is the result of strategic intermarriages made first by their tupuna Kahungunu who travelled the coast forming marital bonds with various hapū — a strategy strengthened generations later by Te Huki who the late Ranginui Walker claims was a

key ancestor in the unification of the sub-tribes, not by making war but by making strategic political marriages. The strategy was known as 'Te Kupenga a Huki', the net of Huki, which he set throughout the tribal domain.¹

This network of kinship is compellingly illustrated by the installation of Ngā Pou o Heretaunga in front of the Hastings City Art Gallery. These pou represent 18 ancestors each positioned facing towards the direction of their marae.

Hawke's Bay's boundaries are also expanded in space and time by the region's geology. The limestone peak Te Mata-o-Rongokako is an exemplary geological feature in this respect. Te Mata is the region's tallest vantage point measuring 399 metres above sea level and was formed over millions of years by many sedimentary layers and was pushed up by an earthquake fault line that runs as far south as Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington.

Perhaps the Bay's geological deep time is also the reason for its magnetic pull that draws people in. The obvious evidence of this is the region's rich alluvial soil that has given rise to an agricultural sector that attracts scores of seasonal workers. A lesser-observed example is the Bay's lifestyle allure that has beckoned many creative practitioners over time. The region's strong architectural history attests to this with nationally recognised buildings designed by arts and crafts proponent James Walter Chapman-Taylor and those designed by the late modernist John Scott.

Chapman-Taylor's presence in the Bay was also significant due to his participation in the 'Havelock Work' a project part of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn—an alternative movement stemming from the UK that was as much artistic as it was spiritual and whose 300 local devotees totalled close to a quarter of Havelock North's population in the 1910s.² The idyllic landscape of the Bay also attracted the likes of other alternative counter culture movements such as the 1970s traveling group Blerta whose members actor and musician Bruno Lawrence, film-maker Geoff Murphy, cinematographer Alun Bolling and others established a commune called 'Snoring Waters' in Waimārama. Further nationally respected creative figures drawn into the region range from nineteenth-century painter Gottfried Lindauer to the potters Bruce & Estelle Martin, the sculptor Para Matchitt, designer David Trubridge and writer Alan Duff.

The Bay is also a place of departure for many creatives who have left out of necessity to further their careers or who have desired a more metropolitan environment to work in. Notable Hawke's Bay exports include painters Rita Angus, the architect William Bloomfield³ and writers Noel Hilliard, Lauris Edmond and Barbara Anderson. Other influential Hawke's Bay exports include Te Aute College alumni Sir Āpirana Ngata (Ngāti Porou) and Sir Te Rangi Hīroa (a.k.a Peter Henry Buck; Ngāti Mutunga) who went on to shape the Māori cultural renaissance and bi-cultural politics of New Zealand.

It is hard to resist the desire to unite this rich cultural history of the Hawke's Bay into one cohesive regional narrative that would so easily fuel parochial pride. However, to do so would force yet another arbitrary logic upon a more complicated terrain not unlike the invisible border that distinguishes Napier from Hastings.

If we must attempt to make some rational sense of these rich but diverse creative legacies a more honest approach would be to understand them as part of a vast net of land and human relations not unlike the kinship strategy of Te Kupenga a Huki. For the purposes of *EAST 2018*, this rubric of people, place and time provides a helpful way through which one might meaningfully select artists and designers beyond a single curator's personal taste or judgement—as is often the case with regional reviews. This approach is similar to what artist Trevor Paglen has coined 'experimental geography' that assesses, from a geographer's lens, how humans create and are in turn created by context. Paglen explains:

A geographer looking into art would begin with very different premises than those of an art critic. Instead of asking "What is art" or "Is this art successful" a good geographer

might ask questions along the lines of “How is this space called ‘art’ produced”. In other words, what are the specific historical, economic, cultural, and discursive conjunctions that come together to form something called “art” and, moreover, to produce a space that we colloquially know as an “artworld”. The geographic question is not “What is art” but “How is art”.⁴

The Hawke’s Bay’s creative past and present are similarly produced by rich contextual convergences caused by waves of people intersecting within space and time. Therefore, for *EAST 2018*, I propose to engage in conversations with artists and designers who have a connection to the people, place or times of the Hawke’s Bay no matter how lateral — you need not to be born or to have lived in the Hawke’s Bay only confident enough to claim some meaningful connection.

An Exhibition in Conversation

*Whatu-ngarongaro he tangata, toitū he kāinga
(People pass away, but places still remain).*⁵

For me, the power of this whakatauki is held in its metaphorical dualism and the possibility of its many understandings. The word *whatungarongaro* can be translated as to disappear or non-renewable.⁶ *Toitū* can be translated as to be undisturbed, untouched, permanent, entire or to be sustainable.⁷ In other versions the word *kāinga* (home, settlement or dwelling) is substituted for *whenua* (land, territory or placenta).⁸ Considering these slight variations in meaning, this whakatauki could be understood in different ways from a lament for the dead and longing for home to a cautionary reminder of human mortality in comparison to the enduring deep time of the land.

Over the last few months the poetry of this whakatauki traveled with me as I traversed Hawke’s Bay and the country to meet with individual artists and designers to discuss the exhibition *EAST 2018*. Reflecting the diverse selection of practitioners, these conversations drew out many topics. We discussed tracing whakapapa and reliving childhood memories. We marveled at climate change data and mourned the death of fish and forests. We considered the rhizomatic nature of images, the ancient knowledge of Japanese kilns and debated the politics of everything from cigarettes to overlooked deities and architecture.

There was no one consistent topic across these conversations that could logically group the work of these creative practitioners. No single epiphany to which all thoughts converged. Occasionally, however, some details of the discussions did intersect. These points of connection seemed to resonate in a similar way to a whakatauki—humble yet manifold in meaning. In fact, the numerous messages bound within a whakatauki could easily be used as a lens to understand and link many of the artworks currently under production for *EAST 2018*.

Originally, I vainly attempted to craft my own whakatauki in order to draw out these other meanings but I soon learnt that the powerful brevity of proverbs are well beyond my ability or perhaps are even beyond the best efforts of one person and are best refined collectively over time. Instead I later decided to focus on three conceptual threads: people and place, information and knowledge, and civilisation and environment.

Together these conceptual pairings create layers on top of each other—networking the issues of social challenges and environmental degradation, the importance of whakapapa and questioning conventional knowledge structures. And as the artists’ projects develop and change so too could these concepts evolve in response. Perhaps this approach, of maintaining three

interwoven threads that make one rope, might enable the framework of an exhibition to accommodate flexibility to various perspectives while embracing simplicity and complexity in one measure.

Three Exhibition Texts:

The People/Place, The Infinite Library and The Dithering

The People/Place

*Whatungarongaro he tangata, toitū he kāinga
(people pass away, but places still remain)⁹*

The relations between people and place is explored through numerous artworks in *EAST 2018*. For some artists this relationship is imbedded within a knowledge of whakapapa that provides a strong understanding of how people and place are interconnected. Other artists consider the disconnection, loss or erosion of such relations. The above whakatauki is a helpful lens through which to explore these different sentiments. For we could understand the whakatauki as a reminder of how people create a sense of place in relation to the environment, its ecosystems and spiritual dimension. On the other hand, we could further consider this whakatauki as a lament for the fallible and transient qualities of human existence in comparison to the enduring wisdom and deep-time of nature.

For instance, **Natalie Robertson's** work (located at Hastings City Gallery and the MTG in Napier) provides a good entry point to consider the notion of whakapapa which the whakatauki alludes to. By tracing her family history across the Heretaunga Hawke's Bay region, Robertson located and photographed the wai marama (life giving water) springs that her distant ancestors would have gained sustenance from. The importance of water sources within whakapapa is equally a key motivation behind **George Nuku's** project. This collaboratively created installation addresses the ecological plight of Nuku's ancestral awa the Ngaruroro river and the disappearance of the Upokororo fish. **Jenny Gillam** also reflects on mortality and ecological issues through a video work featuring the Tukituki River that re-enacts a forgotten memory of her mother and alludes to recent evidence of water pollution.

A water-based narrative likewise appears in a series of photographs by **Terri Ripeka Crawford** which consider the transformative journey of Hinetitama (goddess of the dawn) within the rock pools of Kirihaehae in Mahia. **Jacob Scott's** contribution to the design of Napier's Marine Parade foreshore walkway (documented and exhibited at the MTG in Napier) similarly reflects on ancestral histories that locate people in relation to the environment.¹⁰ This extensive development incorporates pathways that direct sight and movement towards key landmarks that form Te Matau-a-Māui (Māui's fishhook) and also areas to rest, socialise and play. **Lara Lindsay-Parker** considers a comparable seaside foreshore but imbues it with a melancholic sentiment. Her videos depict a woman and a video player who reside at the water's edge indifferent to the encroaching tide.

The issue of feeling disconnected to one's identity and place is also explored in **John Brown's** series of paintings that attempt to piece together his Pākehā/Greek heritage and lost family history through an unusual mix of motifs and references. In comparison, **Ayesha Green's** painting provides a more tangible sense of whanau through a portrait of her grandparents that connects to a story of celebration and sadness. Such rich yet conflicted networks between people and place, could be further alluded to within **Martin Poppelwell's** painting which depicts an imperfect yet unified grid. Just as the above whakatauki provides a nuanced reflection on people

and place so too does Poppelwell's work, and other artworks in *EAST 2018*, insinuate a complex meshing together of relations. Through such ideas, we can start to understand the many flows of life that comprise Heretaunga Hawke's Bay within Aotearoa New Zealand and the world.

The Infinite Library

*"I suspect that the human species ... teeters at the verge of extinction, yet that the Library—enlightened, solitary, infinite, perfectly unmoving, armed with precious volumes, pointless, incorruptible, and secret—will endure."*¹¹

The above quote by writer Jorge Luis Borges comes from his famous short story *The Library of Babel* which describes a seemingly infinite library of hexagonal chambers that is said to contain the totality of all books that could ever be written no matter how illegible, false or absurd. *The Library of Babel* could be understood as an analogy for intelligence being something beyond the human—a network of knowledge and information so complex that humans struggle to fathom its entirety. Many of the artworks in *EAST 2018* allude to this quality by revealing that singular issues are manifold concerns which could fill untold volumes written from many perspectives, motivations and imaginations. And, similar to the fraught social structure described in Borges narrative, we all play different roles and games within this infinite library which often expose our shortcomings but also glimmers of our collective potential.

Peter Madden was about nine years old when he first tapped into this infinite library. He had been gifted a subscription to National Geographic Magazine which, through its authoritative photojournalistic lens, provided a never-ending window on to the world. His kaleidoscopic collages images reflect upon this formative experience and take it a step further by turning portraits of people into portals to other dimensions—not unlike how digital technology enables us to travel down an endless wormhole of links and hashtags. Alternate realities of knowledge also converge in **Michael Hawksworth's** series of works which picture an emergent swarm of renaissance drapery intersecting with ridged institutional infrastructures. But while such complex systems of knowledge might grant lofty drifts in imagination they can also be used to have control over others. **Kauri Hawkins'** performative chess game comprising of unhealthy consumables, such as energy drinks and cigarettes, speaks to such strategies used by food industry titans to profit off those that have more to lose. Similarly, **Rangituhia Hollis'** mutilated self-portrait alludes to the state of physical and emotional precariousness that such economic imperatives can create.

The notion of a flawed or broken societal system could be further discussed in relation to a labyrinthine grid painting by **Martin Poppelwell**. Within this work, patches in the painting's network appear to be fused in regular units while other portions seem disconnected, subdivided or distressed. A video work by **Sonya Lacey** continues this conversation by considering how our vested interest in a particular system of thought or infrastructural support can distract us and muddle our perspective of more pressing issues. In her work the residents of a fictional seaside apartment complex become disorientated by the building's typographic shaped architecture while the corrosive ocean environment threatens its legibility and structural integrity. **Clare Plug's** works meditate on a comparable situation through a series of textile works depicting denuded abstract landscapes. Via perforated lines and heat distressed fabrics, Plug references the tomes of scientific data that have charted the impact of climate change upon the rapid decline of Arctic sea ice.

David Trubridge also confronts our ecological predicament by gaining insight from ancient indigenous sailing technologies. His windsurfer, made entirely out of sustainable and surplus materials, is an example of how cross-cultural collaboration and harnessing collective

intelligence can help us find new ways to address our pressing social and environmental issues. An earlier example is found in the work of **Kamaka Pottery**. In 1981, Kamaka Pottery founders Bruce and Estelle Martin built the first traditional Japanese Anagama style kiln in Aotearoa under the guidance of potter Fujii Yokio. Such approaches to sharing knowledge can establish pathways to help us navigate the great puzzle of our infinite library that we have the burden and the privilege of exploring.

The Dithering

"The edge of extinction is not just a metaphor; system collapse is not a thriller ... we are living in times of The Dithering ... a state of indecisive agitation. ... The Dithering will be written into earth's rocky strata, indeed already is written into earth's mineralized layers."¹²

According to theorist Donna J. Haraway, our present time of The Dithering is a period rife with indecision, disabling our ability to address the grave environmental issues that threaten our existence. It is an age of baffling inaction in which we are accelerating climate change rather than reducing it; a time in which we are cheaply consuming limited natural resources that ought to be highly valued; and an epoch in which we are hastening species extinction instead of taking urgent action to protect them. Numerous artworks within *EAST 2018* reflect Haraway's argument, while at the same time consider the complications that hinder our ability to make decisive changes or to propose ways that we might proactively rebuild our relationship to the earth.

Joyce Campbell's 16mm film work for instance, documents a forest recently burnt down and cleared for farmland. Haunted by a soundtrack of native birdsong this immersive installation alludes to the trauma caused by sacrificing an ecosystem for human need. A similar emotive weight is present in a series of dreamlike paintings by **Tim Thatcher**. Resembling shorelines with eroding cliffs and fractured building parts, Thatcher's paintings evoke a sense of uncertainty in reference to sea-level rise and extreme weather events that compound humanitarian and ecological issues the world over. The narrative in **Sonya Lacey's** video work shares a related sentiment. In her work the residents of a fictional seaside apartment complex become disorientated, and distracted, while the ocean corrodes the building's structure.

Haraway's observation, that the impact of our age is now inscribed within the earth's geology, finds some correlation with works in *EAST 2018* that could be considered artefacts of The Dithering. This is particularly the case with **Vanessa Arthur's** work. Her charm bracelet crafted from unusual metal shapes speaks to how our past actions are memorialised in physical form through residues in the urban environment. **Ben Pearce's** scarred and crater ridden coffee pot could also be understood as a deteriorating vestige of our consumer age, or perhaps even a prescient vision of earth's future landscape. Similarly, the ceramic work of **Annette Bull** resembles unearthed relics undergoing a state of geological transformation in which fragments of rocks are amalgamated within bottles, cups and jars. The material ramifications of human civilisation are further revealed in **Clare Plug's** textile works that chart the rapid decline of Arctic sea ice; as well as **Lara Lindsay-Parker's** footage of a video player subsumed by an encroaching tide, and also in **George Nuku's** elaborate installation of plastic bottles representing extinct fish and threatened alluvial life.

Other artists in *EAST 2018* seek out perspectives that might enable us to counteract The Dithering's destructive state of indecision with understandings of how we can rebuild our relational flow and balance with the environment. This is emphasised through **Terri Ripeka Crawford's** work which depicts the transformation of a Māori goddess, and talks to how humankind and the earth are intimately bound in a reciprocal relationship. In collaboration with weaver Ani McGuire, **David Trubridge** built a prototype windsurfer out of natural biodegradable materials as an example of how indigenous knowledge and collective intelligence

might lead to innovative solutions towards a more sustainable future. **Ann Shelton's** photographic work also extends this conversation by producing a composite image of a local biodynamic farm printed on silk. The membranal quality of Shelton's image references the holistic principles of the biodynamic philosophy that highlight how our world finds equilibrium through a cyclical rhythm of tangible and intangible forces. In this sense, while *The Dithering* characterises a pervasive mode of indecision, it is also a time presenting many possible paths.

Note: *Curating EAST 2018* consolidates five different texts produced during the development and exhibition of *EAST 2018*, 11 August - 11 November 2018 at Hastings City Art Gallery and the MTG Hawke's Bay in Napier. This writing is copyright, except in the context of research, review or as otherwise permitted by the Copyright Act of New Zealand, no part may be reproduced by any means without written permission of the author.

¹ Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou : Struggle Without End* (Auckland ; New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 57.

² Robert S. Ellwood, *Islands of the Dawn: The Story of Alternative Spirituality in New Zealand*, First Edition edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993); Greg Roughan, "Strange Magic: A History of NZ's Own School for Witches and Wizards - North & South," *North & South Magazine*, March 2016, <http://www.noted.co.nz/life/life-in-nz/strange-magic-the-story-behind-aucklands-temple-of-higher-thought/>.

³ The first university educated architect of Māori descent.

⁴ Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space," in *Critical Landscapes*, ed. Emily Eliza Scott and Kirsten J. Swenson (University of California Press, 2015).

⁵ J. H. Mitchell and Tiaki Hikawera Mitira, *Takitimu: A History of Ngati Kahungunu* (Libro International, 2014), 246.

⁶ Translations sourced from maoridictionary.co.nz

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Mitchell and Mitira, *Takitimu*.

¹⁰ Designed by Jacob Scott, Darrell Ross, Ricks Terstappen and Thompson Hokianga in collaboration with PMArchitects. For *EAST* the development has been documented by photographer Richard Brimmer and is on display at the MTG in Napier.

¹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1999), 112–18.

¹² Donna J. Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–65.