

An Exhibition in Conversation

Bruce E. Phillips

Whatu-ngarongaro he tangata, toitū he kāinga
(People pass away, but places still remain).¹

Commonly referred to as Whatungarongaro, the beauty 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.² Toitū can be translated as to be undisturbed, untouched, permanent, entire or to be sustainable.³ In other versions of Whatungarongaro the word kāinga (home, settlement or dwelling) is substituted for whenua (land, territory or placenta).⁴ Considering these slight variations in meaning, Whatungarongaro 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 Whatungarongaro travelled 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 marvelled 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 Whatungarongaro — humble yet

¹ J. H. Mitchell. *Takitimu: A History of Ngati Kahungunu*. Libro International, 2014. P.246

² Translations sourced from maoridictionary.co.nz

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

manifold in meaning. In fact, the numerous messages bound within Whatungarongaro could easily be used as a lens to understand and link many of the artworks currently under production for EAST 2018.

To aid further clarity I have crafted two similar proverbs to accompany Whatungarongaro:

People pass away, but places still remain

Order controls limits, but chaos unleashes infinity

Cities eventually collapse, but forests forever rise

Together the sentiments create layers on top of each other — networking the issues of social and environmental degradation, the importance of whakapapa and questioning conventional knowledge structures. And as the artists' projects develop and change, so too could these proverbs 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.