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Make it small, the house of the big idea



Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Ngā Mokopuna, Seatoun, Wellington, July 2019. Personal archive.

Abstract

This exegesis discusses a range of recent sculpture and installation by Kate Te Ao. *Pīpīwharauoa* (2020), *Make it small, the house of the big idea* (2021) and *Untitled* (2021) are discussed in relation to colonial history, Pākehātanga, decolonisation and what Moana Jackson suggests we might call restoration. These works are located in relation to antiformal and the work of other artists who approach art making as a conversation between space and materials, objects and imagination. Rather than being a direct or didactic expression of ideas the works occupy an active, processual, and generative space in which materials, objects and space combine to open territory for multiplicity, humour, grief and hope.

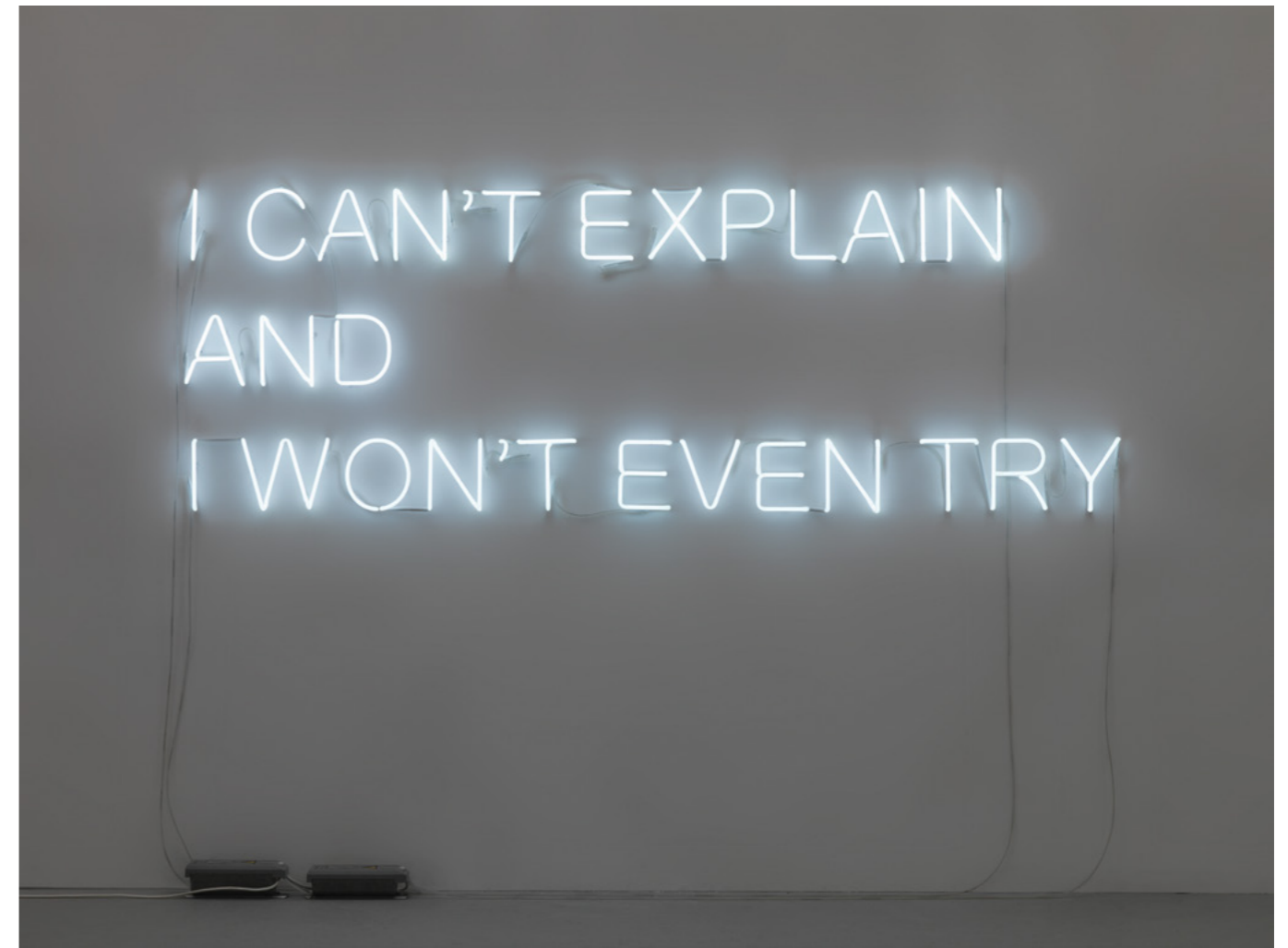
This body of work is rooted in Aotearoa and located within the dialogue of decolonisation. Encompassing installation and sculpture, my recent work attempts to make sense of what Aotearoa was, is and could be. My work allows me to ask questions about what it means to be Pākehā and how Pākehā might be a part of what is often called decolonised but what Moana Jackson suggests we might call restoration.¹

As a Pākehā mother of Māori children, I frequently grapple with questions of identity and place. My attempts to engage with te ao Māori and learn te reo Māori alongside my husband and children have heavily influenced my artistic practice. Colonial history and decolonial theory, alongside my experience as a mother, partner, and member of my community constitute the soil from which my art practice grows. Rather than being a direct or didactic expression of ideas my work occupies an active, processual, and generative space in which materials, objects, space, symbols, and memory combine to open territory for multiplicity, empathy, grief, humour and hope. I discuss these works as conversations between space and materials, objects and imagination.

¹ Moana Jackson, "Where to Next? Decolonisation and the Stories of the Land," in *Imagining Decolonisation*, ed. Anna Hodge (Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books, 2020), 149.

I felt a strong affinity with the glowing, neon statement of artist Stefan Brüggemann when approaching this piece of writing. However, it is impossible to undertake a Masters degree and avoid explaining yourself, so I have softened my position. When introducing his book *Sand Talk* Tyson Yunkaporta explains “This book is just a translation of a fragment of a shadow frozen in time. I make no claims to absolute truth or authority”.² This exegesis is just a translation of a fragment of a process called art making. Like Yunkaporta, I make no claims to absolute truth or authority.

Impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the two and a half years I have spent working at Pukeahu have been extremely challenging and immensely rewarding. The colonial history embedded within Pukeahu and the destabilising effects of the pandemic have undoubtedly influenced the work I have made during this time. This strange combination has been as unnerving as it has generative.



Stefan Brüggemann, *I can't explain and I won't even try*, white neon, transformer, 2003

© Stefan Brüggemann

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zürich

² Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), 20.

If you've ever been to Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington you have probably walked through *Te Waimapihi/Te Aro Park*. Just off Cuba Street, this small slice of land sits at the intersection of Courtenay Place and Taranaki Street, between the strip club Dreamgirls and the public toilets. It is frequented by flocks of raucous seagulls, sometimes flocks of raucous drunks. Considered equally unsavoury by the general public, these visitors add an air of neglect to the park.

I often have the sense, living in Aotearoa, of one narrative, language, and landscape being slapped on top of another. Tidy grids of streets with names like Churchill Avenue have been placed on vertiginous hillsides. Streams have disappeared into pipes to flow silently under the streets. The rivers are strangers. But there are significant gaps, breaks and slippages in what Pākehā ecologist Geoff Park termed 'the language of invasion'.³ Park suggests that Shona Rapira Davies has created one of these breaks, piercing the fabric of the city to acknowledge the history of the land.

Shona Rapira Davies was commissioned to create *Te Waimapihi* by Wellington City Council in the late 1980's. A Māori woman of Ngāti Wai ki Aotea descent, Rapira Davies began the project in 1988, just five years out of art school. Dogged by budget blow outs and public backlash, the project caused so much controversy that passersby stopped to abuse Rapira Davies as she laid some of the 30,000 handmade ceramic tiles that make up the work.⁴

³ Geoff Park, *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 45.

⁴ Pamela Meekings-Stewart, "A Cat Among the Pigeons," 1992, Television Documentary, 41:48, <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/a-cat-among-the-pigeons-1992>.

Te Waimapihi/Te Aro Park is an example of an artwork firmly rooted in the history of a place while also creating a new space in which one can be present. The work invites you to sit with the sound of the water and run your hands over the imprint of leaves, their trees long gone. Rapira Davies provides a model for the way in which an artwork can acknowledge the past while complicating and enriching the present. Dreamgirls, the public toilets, the air of neglect, the long-departed pā and the shoreline pushed back into the sea. The memorial embraces the entanglement of our histories with the present. It is not a memorial of the war variety; it does not demand your solemn contemplation. While Rapira Davies' had no way of knowing how the streets around her work would be changed and developed, the fact that her work is firmly rooted in the whakapapa of the land means that *Te Waimapihi* remains untroubled by the toilets and the traffic.

Geoff Park describes *Te Waimapihi* as “an exquisite ecological expression of place, a wild almanac of locality in which we can see what is lost when a place is defined with the words of invasion”.⁵ Park's essay, in which he discusses *Te Waimapihi*, draws together the colonial history of Wellington with the ecosystems, flora, and fauna of this place. He acknowledges our need for a sense of place in these “sudden cities” and suggests that an understanding and clarification of the locally distinctive, the “genius loci”, is the way in which we might find this.⁶

⁵ Park, *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua*, 45.

⁶ Park, *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua*, 46–52.



Waimapihi, Wellington, March 2020. Personal archive.

This genius loci can be found in *Te Waimapihi* through the tiles that bear the imprint of leaves and seaweed and those that list names of significant tupuna and places from around the area. *Te Waimapihi* also shifts our experience of landscape in the way American essayist Rebecca Solnit describes as “landscape not just a place to picnic but a place we live and die”.⁷ People do indeed sit in the park to picnic, but Rapira Davies’ acknowledgement of the history of the land and tangata whenua breaches any notion that this small slice of land is neutral. It was indeed a place people lived and died long before it became a place people sat to drink coffee in takeaway cups.

Why is it important that an experience of the present be mediated by an understanding of the past and what role does art play in this discussion?

Because the past has an influence on the present and a failure to understand it results in a failure to act consciously. I agree with Oliva Laing that the role of art in this discussion is the provision of new material, new registers with which to think.⁸ This new material can be used to think through the possibilities of a future shaped by an understanding of the past.

Ani Mikaere states: “To forget history is to allow myths to spring up in its place, myths that serve to ease the conscience of those upon whom history does not reflect well”.⁹ I can see the truth of Mikaere’s assertion when I look back at my own childhood, I remember celebrating Cook’s arrival on the shores of Aotearoa but knew nothing of Parihaka. I finished secondary school in 1998 and 2023 will be the first year New Zealand history will become a compulsory part of the National Curriculum of New Zealand. In a statement that accompanied the announcement of this policy, Minister of Education Chris Hipkins stated that it is important to understand the history of New Zealand as a continuous thread, with contemporary issues linked directly to major events of the past.¹⁰

It seems to me that Rapira Davies’ work, and its current lived upon state, has achieved this. She has created a space in which the thread that tangles the past with the present is apparent. It is a space in which one can be physically present, perhaps without realizing, and I would suggest this is a way in which art can make a unique contribution to our understanding of the world. Her approach falls into the category of art making that Solnit describes as conversational, interacting with subject and site in a conversational give-and-take, “assuming meaning is to be found rather than imposed”.¹¹

⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 12.

⁸ Oliva Laing, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (London: Picador, 2020), 2.

⁹ Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths – Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Wellington: Huia and Te Wananga o Raukawa, 2011), 72.

¹⁰ “NZ History to be taught in all Schools,” New Zealand Government, press release, September 12, 2019, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/nz-history-to-be-taught-all-schools>.

¹¹ Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art*, 5.

Using the form of the waka as a metaphor for both vessel and journey, distance and time, Rapira Davies opens up a space in which multiplicity and entanglement are both encompassed and embodied. Rather than having a didactic, educational aim, the work has a more subtle and subversive purpose. It places our current experience in conversation with the past. The waka carries the stories of the pā and its people into the noise of the city. The air of neglect that surrounds the memorial resonates with some of the broader societal responses to both the importance of art and artists and the importance of acknowledging our colonial history. Ignorance, willful or otherwise, negligence and the marginalisation of Māori remain highly visible in that space.

I am beginning my exegesis with a detailed discussion of *Te Waimapihi* because it has been so important to my recent practice. Titled *Aro, Aro, Aro*, the first work I made at Massey was created in response to the Rapira Davies' memorial. The work was a small booklet that documented my failure to create a fitting tribute, to both *Te Waimapihi* and the whakapapa of the land. The booklet explored the sentiment of Brüggemann's neon statement, the sense that any attempt to communicate, any attempt to explain, is destined to fail. The acceptance of this failure opened a space to acknowledge the importance of experience over resolution, of process over conclusion. It allowed readers to sit in the gap between then and now and all the things in between.

The fact that *Te Waimapihi* acknowledges te ao Māori and the colonial history of Aotearoa is significant but also of significance is the way in which it uses space and metaphor to encompass multiplicity and entanglement. It's a waka and a park, it's a series of water features and it's Te Aro stream reincarnated. I've attempted to walk this line in my work, to make work generative and complex enough to embrace this kind of multiplicity. It has also forced me to examine the ways in which my position as Pākehā plays into this conversation.

In April 2020, I created an installation entitled *He Tahepuia te Papa*. It was the initial work I made after we emerged from the first lockdown. "He tahepuia te papa" means "the floor is lava". It is a game I play with my children. To play, anyone at any time can yell "He tahepuia te papa!", and everyone must get their feet off the floor as fast as possible. This might mean jumping on a chair or climbing onto a table. The last person to get off the floor loses. Then you climb down and go about your business until someone yells it again. The game, like many children's rhymes and games, is simple and joyful but uses play to navigate danger and uncertainty. At any point during this game the previously benign floor might become lava, requiring you to leap to safety. You never know when it's going to happen and it's impossible to prepare. It forces players to stay alert and responsive. This sense of danger and uncertainty can extend further out and be read metaphorically in relation to the current political climate, climate change and the devastation wrought by the pandemic.

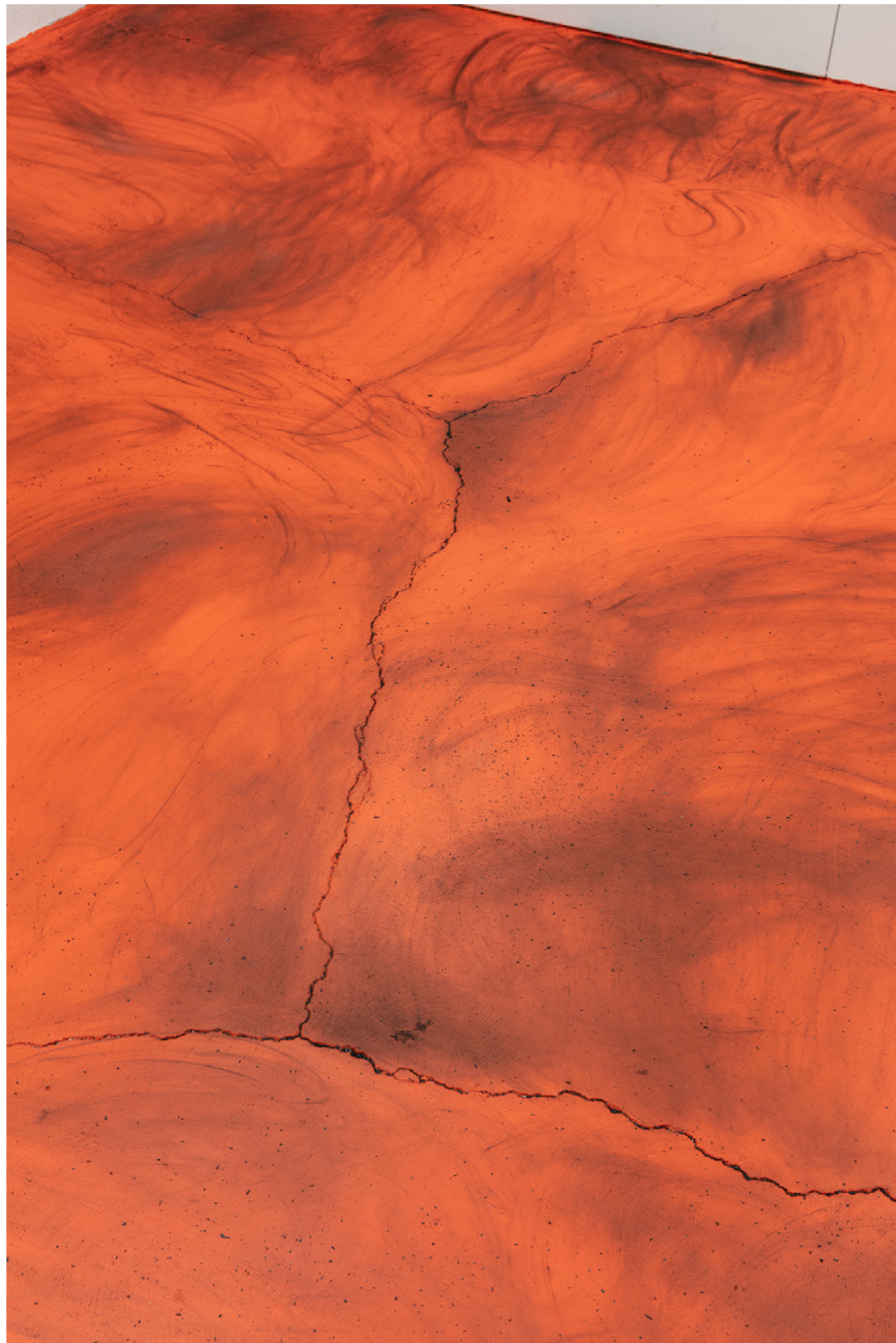
The title, *He Tahepuia te Papa*, suggests that the bright orange section of floor covered with gestural charcoal marks should be read as lava. In te ao Māori lava is Rūaumoko's domain. Rūaumoko, son of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, was still at his mother's breast at the time his parents were separated. As his mother turned away from his father, he was rolled into the earth. The fire he was given to keep him warm sometimes reaches the surface of the earth in the form of lava.¹² Symbolic references to atua Māori and the natural world draw on histories located deeper in time than science and colonisation. Rūaumoko connects a game I play with my children to the ancient history of Aotearoa and provides an understanding of lava that can sit alongside and enrich the scientific explanation.

At right angles to the orange section of the floor lies a piece of blue/black velvet. This piece of velvet is the same aspect ratio as the flag of Aotearoa/New Zealand. The Union Jack has been removed but the Southern Cross is still there. It is in the same position as it appears on the flag although it is hard to distinguish because it is surrounded by its neighbouring stars. The velvet is scattered with ceramic bones and shards of objects. Alongside the orange lava, these could speak to archaeology in relation to colonisation. The excavation of the past parallels the way in which, as Pākehā, I revisit my experience in the light of new knowledge. As the colonial skeleton in the closet comes clattering out, scattering bones, it becomes possible to understand Aotearoa differently.

¹² Eileen McSaveney, "Historic Earthquakes – Earthquakes in Māori Tradition", *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, revised 11 March, 2011, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/historic-earthquakes/page-1>.



He Tahepuia te Papa, 2020, paint, charcoal, fabric, ceramic (installation view)



He Tahepuhia te Papa, 2020, paint, charcoal, fabric, ceramic (detail)

Ani Mikaere speaks with searing insight in her book *Colonising Myths – Maori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro*. She urges Pākehā to “own up to the truth about how they have come to occupy their position of dominance in our country- and to deal with it”.¹³ Our colonial history and the ongoing and devastating impact on tangata whenua is often ignored or denied. Like people who’ve touched a hot pot, Pākehā recoil from any suggestion they could have done or could do better. *He Tahepuia te Papa* was created, in part, as a response to this sense of danger and uncertainty when trying to acknowledge our history.

James Baldwin, writing specifically about North America, describes settler colonists as bringing with them a “European vision of the universe...a vision as remarkable for what it pretends to include as for what it remorselessly diminishes, demolishes or leaves totally out of account.”¹⁴ My attempts to understand and accept my Pākehātanga must acknowledge this. This thread of history, the pull of the past on the present is everywhere once you start looking. Like gravity, it will exert its influence regardless of whether or not it is understood or acknowledged.

¹³ Mikaere, *Colonising Myths – Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro*, 63.

¹⁴ James Baldwin, “On Being White and Other Lies,” *Essence Magazine*, 1984. <https://ourcommonground.com/2016/11/14/on-being-white-and-other-lies-james-baldwin-essence-magazine-1984/>.

Over the first lockdown I discovered that my paternal great grandfather, Dr Joseph Patrick Frengley, was the acting Chief Health Officer of New Zealand (the equivalent to Dr Ashley Bloomfield) during the influenza pandemic of 1918.¹⁵ The virus ended up infecting forty percent of New Zealanders and killing around 9000 people. The overall death rate amongst Māori was more than 8 times that of Pākehā.¹⁶

The story of my great grandfather Joseph and the influenza pandemic of 1918 draws together many of the issues I have been grappling with. Joseph was a settler colonist who arrived in Aotearoa at the age of 29. He left the country of his birth, his family and his job to make the long and unpleasant journey to Aotearoa. I cannot be certain, but I suspect his motivation in making this journey was the prospect of owning land, advancing his career and escaping some of the persecution he faced as a Catholic living in Eire/Ireland, a country ruled by protestant English. The way in which Solnit describes Ireland as complicating “terms like *First World, European, white* and *civilised*” meant that my great grandfather had to travel to one of England’s colonies in order to be considered white.¹⁷

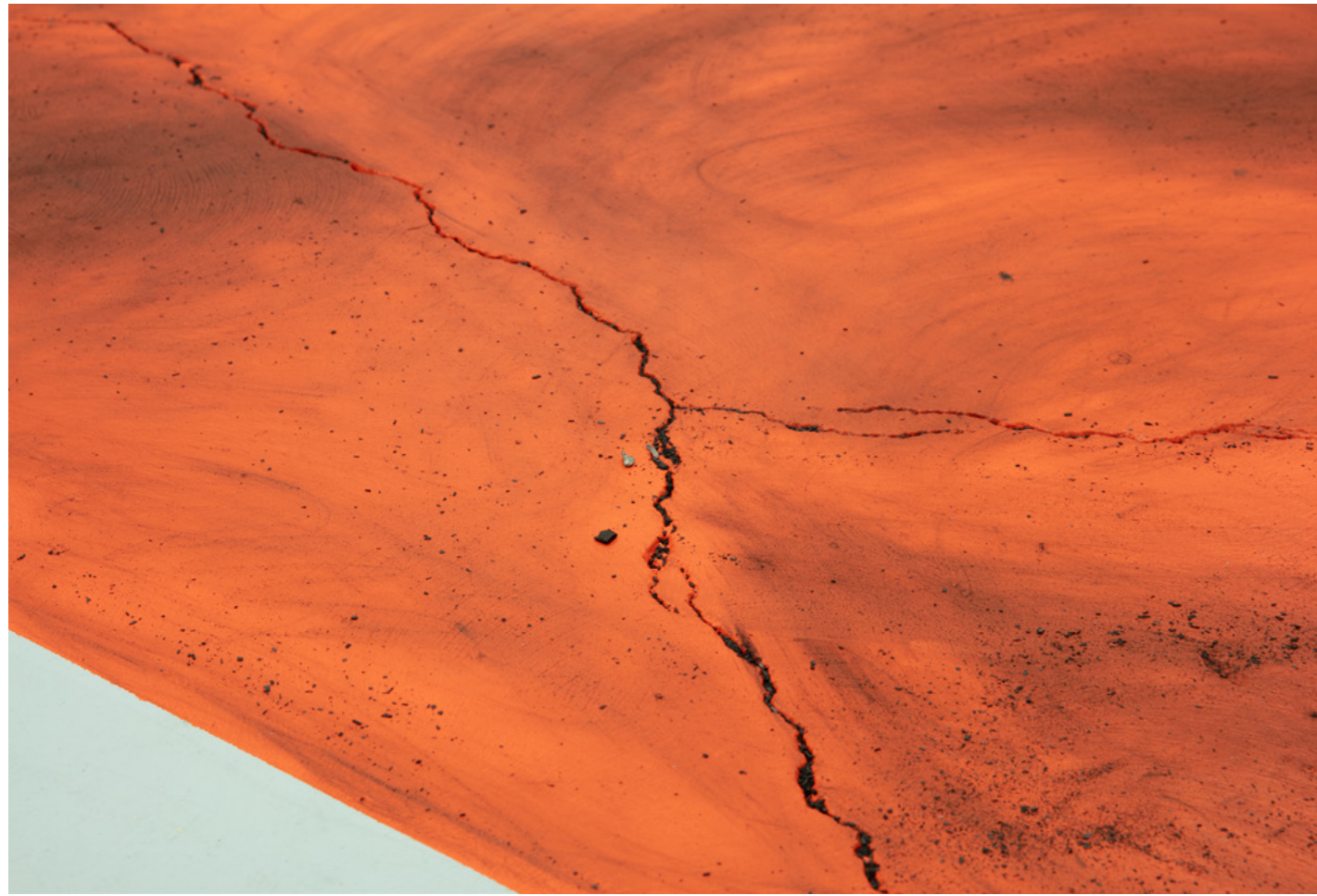


He Tahepuhia te Papa, 2020, paint, charcoal, fabric, ceramic (detail)

¹⁵ Warick Brunton, “A Letter to Dr Bloomfield, from 1918,” *Newsroom*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2020/04/17/1131022/frengley-letter-to-bloomfield>.

¹⁶ “Māori and the flu, 1918–19,” Ministry for Culture and Heritage, updated 1 July, 2020, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/influenza-pandemic-1918/maori-and-the-flu>.

¹⁷ Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art*, 12.



He Tahepuhia te Papa, 2020, paint, charcoal, fabric, ceramic (detail)

In his desire to escape this vision, which diminished him in Eire/Ireland, my great grandfather came to Aotearoa and became part of a system that diminished the Māori people. He was the acting head of a system that utterly failed Māori during the influenza pandemic. And 110 years later, I watch as another government, during another pandemic, utterly fail Māori.

Family legend tells that Joseph died young, his official diagnosis tuberculosis, but those close to him believed it was guilt that killed him. No one knows with any certainty if Joseph's guilt was due to preventable deaths caused by the pandemic or whether he felt guilt about the higher death rate within Māori communities, I suspect the former. Regardless, the participation of individuals, both knowingly and unknowingly, in systems that diminish and demolish other people cannot be denied. It certainly makes coming to terms with your Pākehātanga uncomfortable.

Jen Margaret is a Pākehā educator for Te Tiriti o Waitangi based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara. Our daughters have known each other since they were three. She argues that “we (Pākehā) don’t know ourselves, our white ways and we don’t know the ways of the land. We are poorly equipped to act well in the relationships that allow us to be here”.¹⁸ I want to know what it means “to act well” and believe that an awareness of “Pākehā-ness” is necessary to engage with this question. Not what Damian Skinner describes as “a facile search for origins which is really about forgetting colonial history” but an understanding of Pākehātanga that acknowledges colonial history.¹⁹

In her book *This Pākehā Life: An Unsettled Memoir* Alison Jones presents a perspective on what it means to be Pākehā that I find very useful. She argues that:

If Pākehā people exist in terms of our relationship with Māori, then we have to be able to think with a Māori-informed point of view. How else can the relationship work? However imperfect or limited our Pākehā perceptions might be, to be Pākehā, to fully inhabit that identity, is to be permanently oriented to Māori, as well as to know about our historical entanglements.²⁰

¹⁸ Jen Margaret, “State of the Pākehā Nation.” *Scoop*, February 3, 2018, <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL1802/S00010/state-of-the-pakeha-nation-jen-margaret.html>.

¹⁹ Damien Skinnner, “*Seeing Pākehā*,” *Pākehā Now!* (Nelson: The Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu, 2007), 48.

²⁰ Alison Jones, *This Pākehā Life: An Unsettled Memoir* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2020), 191.

Which begs the question, if being Pākehā entails an orientation to te ao Māori, where is the line between orientation and appropriation? How will I know if I've overstepped the mark? Will an understanding of my Pākehātanga and colonial history provide me with a compass to navigate this terrain?

I have long been a lover of science fiction as a way of imagining futures. A way to extrapolate out current socio-political conditions to a possible (usually terrible) end. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* imagines the consequences of declining fertility rates. *District 9*, a film directed by Neill Blomkamp examines the treatment of refugees from an interspecies perspective and Cherie Dimaline's novel *The Marrow Thieves* speculates about the climate crisis and a rebirth of residential schools from an indigenous perspective. A more utopian perspective has the crew of a Star Fleet vessel navigating the universe via a mycelial network. The possibilities are endless!

I have recently begun to wonder if my love of science fiction has less to do with acts of imagination and more to do with what Mark Fisher terms "capitalist realism". I discuss capitalism here because as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains, "colonialism (is) an aspect of the capitalist economic globalization".²¹

²¹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 6.

Fisher describes capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it."²² In an essay entitled "Atwood's Anti-Capitalism" Fisher claims that author Margaret Atwood "imagines the end of Capitalism but only after the end of the world".²³ As the author Frank Herbert has noted, "ecology is the understanding of consequences" and the consequences of capitalism are apparent in the climate crisis.²⁴ If you cannot imagine a coherent alternative to capitalism and by extension an end to the climate crisis, perhaps the void of deep space is your only refuge. The two works I discuss in this chapter both look to space and the cosmic as a space of possibility and a refuge.

An installation I made in 2021 titled *Pīpīwharauoa* consists of a large circle painted in the very centre of the room. Paint, charcoal and glitter are used to create the impression of stars in deep space. Pieces of coal, polystyrene eggs, and chicken eggs sit within the circumference of the circle. The installation places the viewer into a godlike position, from a celestial point of view, simultaneously outside of and able to control the universe. While creating this illusion, the work also references the futility of attempts to capture or control things beyond our comprehension. This collection of objects becomes a generative and reflexive game, a dilemma designed to provoke conversation.

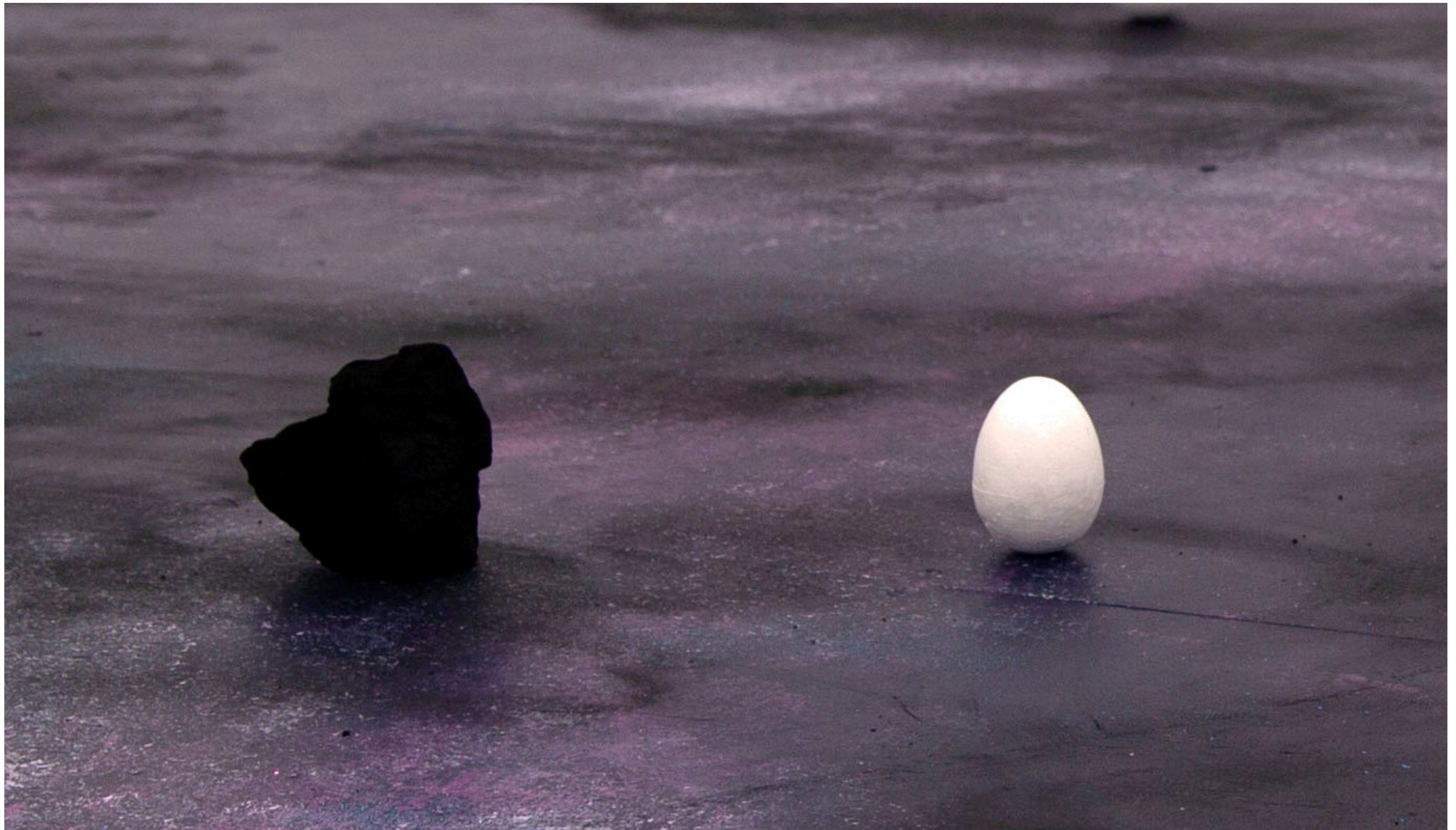
²² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: O Books, 2009), 12.

²³ Mark Fisher, "Atwood's Anti-Capitalism," in *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (London: Repeater Books, 2018), 97.

²⁴ Frank Herbert, "Frank Herbert on the origins of Dune," interviewed by Willis E. McNelly, 1969, YouTube video, 1:20:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-mLVVJKH7I&t=2331s>.



Pipiharauroa, 2021, paint, charcoal, coal, polystyrene, and chicken eggs (installation view)



Pipiharauroa, 2021, paint, charcoal, coal, polystyrene, and chicken eggs (detail)

The Pīpīwharauoa (Shining Cuckoo) is a migratory bird that arrives on the shores of Aotearoa in spring. It doesn't build a nest or rear its young, but instead places its eggs in the nest of the Riroriro (Grey Warbler). The Riroriro raises one clutch of eggs before the arrival of Pīpīwharauoa and then raises the Pīpīwharauoa chick as its own, despite the fact it pushes the smaller Riroriro eggs and chicks out of the nest. The actions of the bird have parallels with the process of colonisation but also offer up more subtle and complex stories about origins, migrations, and symbiotic relationships.

My use of eggs links to the bird, Pīpīwharauoa, and plays with the question: "which came first, the chicken or the egg?". Although this question seems ridiculous and is often encountered for the first time at primary school, if seriously considered, it interrogates the origins of life. I remember my son's baffled amazement when I first asked him that question. He and his sister still try, unsuccessfully, to reason through it. The eggs within the work carry no clue as to their origin. Like the proliferation of ideas we encounter without history or context, without an understanding of origin it is difficult to distinguish what is "real" from what is "fake".

The combination of both real and fake eggs is also a playful nod to intersectionality, a term Angela Davis describes as one of the hallmarks of contemporary feminism, a recognition of the interrelating character of identities.²⁵ When read through the lens of intersectionality it becomes apparent that the polystyrene eggs and the chicken's eggs exist simultaneously. They don't fit together neatly, and they don't negate one another. The task is relating the two as much as it is differentiating them.

Untitled offers a continuation of some of the themes explored in *Pīpīwharauoa*. It reflects my interests in outer space as symbolic of humankind's inability to comprehend and control. A space beyond the control of standardised time, identified by Rangi Mātāmua as essential to capitalism's control of the workforce, it also envisions a space of possibility.²⁶

²⁵ Angela Davis, "Mainstream Feminism," 8 January, 2018, YouTube Video, 8:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzQkVfO9ToQ>.

²⁶ Rangi Matamua, "Matariki and the Decolonisation of Time," in *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, ed. Brendan Hokowhitu, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Chris Andersen and Steve Larkin (London: Routledge, 2020), 66.

Untitled comprises a wall of fabric, hanging flush with the ceiling, stretching from wall to wall, and stopping just short of the floor. The fabric is transparent, like a scrim, with four, floor to ceiling lengths of turquoise fabric hanging behind it. The foremost black sheet of fabric is heavily patterned by bleach, again intended to reference a galaxy, or deep space. A key part of this pattern involves a grid of black circles that resist the bleached effect. They begin in a very regular formation and, eventually, on the right hand panel, the pattern dissolves into a random sequence. The grid of circles becoming irregular to the right side suggests some underlying order or structure, but one that is unreliable, shifting or perhaps incompletely understood. Similarly this work continues the thread in my work of tension between abstracted materiality and specific reference; the enormity of what the work represents and the reality of what it actually is, at once the universe and a piece of fabric hanging in a room. The work embraces imperfections and irregularities as inevitable outcomes of the experimental process. The combination of layers and textures between the viewer and the back of the room shifts as she moves within the space, potentially adding to a sense that the work is constantly shifting and somewhat unreliable.



Untitled, 2021, fabric and bleach (installation view)



Untitled, 2021, fabric and bleach (detail)

One intention of the work was to create a space in the room that the viewer could not access and only had a partial and shifting view of. This was an attempt to work through, as an embodied proposition, an idea I encountered in the writing of Māori Marsden.

In *KAITIAKITANGA: A Definitive Introduction to the Holistic World View of the Māori*, Marsden explains that within Māoridom sacred knowledge was only shared with a few selected candidates in order to avoid it being abused or misused.²⁷ To further expand on this concept Marsden uses the example of the atomic bomb. He describes a conversation he had with one of his elders about the atomic bomb. His elder viewed this as an abuse of sacred knowledge, something that could have been avoided if that knowledge had been protected and only shared with those deemed fit.²⁸

²⁷ Māori Marsden, *Kaitiakitanga: A Definitive Introduction to the Holistic Worldview of the Māori* (Wellington: Ministry for Environment, 1992), 4.

²⁸ Marsden, *Kaitiakitanga: A Definitive Introduction to the Holistic Worldview of the Māori*, 4–5.

The idea that not all knowledge should be available to all people is challenging to me. This perspective is not unique to Pākehā but indicative of a Western perspective in which science and the relentless desire to understand and control the physical world is privileged. However Marsden's example makes it hard to deny the validity of the Māori approach to carefully guard and take care of knowledge. This work could be viewed as an expression of the desire to reweave the fabric of the universe, to mend and to render some things inaccessible again.

Solnit suggests the scientists responsible for developing the atomic bomb “believed in the pursuit of particular kinds of knowledge” and that “the questions most of them asked were more often about “how” than “why” or “with what consequences”.²⁹ In some ways, history, as well as ecology, can be understood as the study of consequences. The consideration of history and ecology alongside science fiction, and science alongside indigenous knowledge establishes the kind of nuanced and shifting perspective that allows a space of possibility beyond capitalism and colonisation.

²⁷ Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art*, 14.

Are we there yet?

In early 2021 I began a new work, *Make it small, the house of the big idea*. The starting point was a patchwork cushion that my Mum made for me over a decade ago. It's travelled with my whānau as we've moved from Auckland to Nelson to Wellington. It's witnessed the arrival of each of our three children. And it reminds me of the place where I spent most of my childhood, at the foot of the Richmond Hills in Whakatū/Nelson. The patchwork pattern on the cushion resembles those low, rolling hills silhouetted against the night sky.

For me, making work is a process rather than an event. It's hard to clearly delimit a beginning and end. Sometimes it feels like ideas drop from the sky, however if I hadn't been reading, thinking and paying attention, perhaps the ideas wouldn't arrive or I wouldn't be ready to recognise them whenever they do. And the initial idea or image, in this case a patchwork cushion, is just a small piece of the process. Once I begin making, the work takes on a life of its own. It feels like following a rope into the dark. Maybe walking backwards and looking at what I've just made is a more accurate way to describe it. Ka mua, ka muri.

Discussing the work of ceramic artists David Cushway and Clare Twomey, writer Jo Dahn describes their practices as a form of research:

They are engaged in a process of enquiry, an exploration of ideas, predicated on and exploiting the characteristics of clay. The transformation of the material is a central concern and (semiotic) significance unfolds with making.³⁰

Cushway describes his practice as “a combination of of the two things, of the making and of the conceptual, and the space between the brain and the hands can lead you in different ways”. Twomey explains that her work feels “like an ongoing conversation”.

This conversation between ideas and materials, between imaginings and objects, led to *Make it small, the house of the big idea*. Made of pieced fabric, dark blue denim and dyed and bleached black jersey, the work uses the quilting pattern from the cushion to orient the fabrics in relation to one another and the space. This orientation created a skyline-like silhouette, and necessitated a negotiation between the mass of the fabric and the surrounding context of the room. I viewed the form of this work as symbolic of the sky, the land and the space between them, the cord representative of links into the past or the unknown.

³⁰ Jo Dahn, “Elastic/Expanding: Contemporary Conceptual Ceramics,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 164.



Make it small, the house of the big idea, 2021, fabric, rope and steel pipe (installation view)



Make it small, the house of the big idea, 2021, fabric, rope and steel pipe (installation view)

Others saw waves, sails and theatre sets. The work appeared to preserve fluidity in its form, and remain open to the viewer's interpretative encounter.

The title of this work represents another attempt to negotiate an orientation to te ao Māori. The title's phrasing is a direct but crude translation of a line from a waiata sung at the kura my children attend, "Whakaiti te whare o te whakaro nui". Directly translated it becomes "make it small, the house of the big idea". A more elegant translation might be "Big ideas need small houses" or "Make small houses for big ideas" but I opted for the very direct and crude translation because I wanted to communicate the way nuance can be lost when taking things from one world and one language into another. This approach to titling a work is my attempt to stay oriented to te ao Māori without directly using te reo Māori, because I would like to avoid what Dr Rawiri Taonui describes as a recolonisation of te reo Māori by Pākehā.³¹ But it could still be viewed as recolonisation, taking things from te ao Māori for my own use and my own gain. Maybe the translation further distances the sentence from its origins in te ao Māori. Without additional information can anyone unfamiliar with that waiata recognise this phrase as having its origin in te ao Māori? I don't think there is a clear answer to this question, but I must consider it carefully and be prepared to contextualise my decision.



Make it small, the house of the big idea, 2021, fabric, rope and steel pipe (detail)

³¹ Dr Rawiri Taonui, "Pākehā Re-colonisation of Te Reo Māori," *Waatea News*, 12 April 2020, https://www.waateanews.com/waateanews/x_news/MjQxMzY/opinion/Dr-Rawiri-Taonui-%7c-Pakeha-Re-colonisation-of-Te-Reo-Maori

In this move to making sculptural work looked to the work of artists Peter Robinson and Mikala Dwyer. Robinson is an Auckland based artist who was teaching at the Elam School of Fine Arts when I attended in 2010. In 2019, Robinson took part in an exhibition entitled *Unravelled* at City Gallery, Wellington. Curator Robert Leonard located the work of Robinson, and the other artists in the show, in the context of the notion of “anti-form”.

Closely related to Arte Povera, Anti-Form sculptors used a diverse range of everyday materials in a way that emphasised process, disorder and irregularity. As the gallery website notes:

In 1968, American sculptor Robert Morris coined the term anti-form’ to distinguish a new kind of sculpture that had emerged in reaction to minimalism. Where it stressed composition and organisation, the new art preferred decomposition and disorganisation. In place of strict geometries, Morris, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, and Barry Le Va draped, poured, and scattered material. Their work emphasised material, mutability, process.³²

The movement has also been described as addressing “its immediate surroundings in new ways, drawing attention to the architecture of the gallery or gesturing to the space outside its walls.”³³

I use soft material in my work because I appreciate its lack of strict geometry and its ability to fall, fold and drape. I happily embrace a certain amount of disorder and irregularity in both the making and the installation of the work. In this respect, my work also relates to the notion of “anti-form”.

The work of Mikala Dwyer could also be viewed as having roots in this movement. Over the course of a career spanning four decades, Dwyer has made installations that are an eclectic mixture of found and made forms, materials and objects. Speaking about Dwyer’s practice, Toni Ross states:

it (the work of Dwyer) exhibits a particular affinity with what art historian Alex Potts calls ‘the sculptural imagination’. For Potts, this term encompasses the shifting concepts and manifestations of sculptural modernity that are underwritten by an ongoing concern with the experience of viewing three-dimensional objects or presences. Various speculative possibilities radiate from this deceptively simple proposition. Making sculpture raises questions about the psychic and social dimensions of subject-object relations and proposes different models of space, embodiment, and vision.³⁴

³² Robert Leonard, “Unravelled, 2019,” *City Gallery Wellington*. accessed June 23, 2021, <https://citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/unravelled/>

³³ Mark Godfrey, “Arte Povera and Anti-form,” *Tate Modern*. accessed on June 22, 2021, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/display/arte-povera-and-anti-form>

³⁴ Toni Ross, “Embodied Reason, Functionalist Magic, Animate Objects: Mikala Dwyer’s Contribution to the Modern Sculptural Imagination,” *Mikala Dwyer, Drawing Down the Moon* (Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2014), 77.

What interests me most about Dwyer's practice is the play between the material and the metaphysical, "their ability to act like props, as three-dimensional mark-making in space, which hold ideas or become repositories of the memories we project onto them".³⁵

I appreciate the eclectic, exuberant and somewhat chaotic quality of her installations. Both a maker and curator of objects, she welcomes objects, found and made, embracing all their complex connections with the world.

Writer Anthony Byrt, in speaking specifically of Dwyer's exhibition *A Shape of Thought*, argues that it "perfectly encapsulates Dwyer's personal-conceptual-spiritual world: an installation in which an idea is not just made visible but made physical" and that these objects ask questions about how Australia might deal with its colonial past. He suggests that "the profound and subtle force of Dwyer's haunted spaces do more than enough to make me believe that—whether they acknowledge it or not—objects, people, and cultures are inescapably possessed by their history."³⁶

The idea of objects and people being possessed by history and an installation as an idea made physical resonate strongly with me.

In an email conversation between Dwyer and Robinson, she asks him "do you think we project these states onto matter or are they part of their own agency?" He in turn responds:

Things get so desperate (in the lead up to an exhibition) that I often have to trust purely in my and the material's intuitions. We form a partnership and collaborate, in this sense the life force of the materials emerges more strongly, and I play observer, rather than maker. Luckily, in the final hours before the show the personal difficulty subsides and time in the studio becomes rather joyous, somehow this kind of energy is transferred to the viewer in the exhibition space. I think it is this intangible aspect of art that makes art, art.³⁷

I recognise Robinson's description of the shift from maker to observer when installing work. I also work closely with the material's intuitions when deciding on the final form of the work. I often arrive with ideas and attachments about the work that I am forced to let go. Things never turn out as I imagined, and I'm always left feeling as if I was a collaborator rather than the creator.

³⁵ Wayne Tunnicliffe, "Ten questions with Mikala Dwyer," *Mikala Dwyer: A Shape of Thought* (Art Gallery New South Wales, Sydney, 2018), 99.

³⁶ Anthony Byrt, "Prism Break," *Mikala Dwyer, Drawing Down the Moon* (Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2014), 13.

³⁷ Peter Robinson, email to Mikala Dwyer, 15 May, 2020, <https://suttongallery.com.au/viewing-room/notations/>.

At the end of 2021 I completed an installation titled *and.. and... and* in Massey's Engine Room Gallery. Comprised of a series of long, narrow forms, the work intends to explore tensions between standing and hanging, growing and falling. As you move around the gallery, you walk through a series of hybrid trees and sequined poles. The hybrid trees are made up of alternating sections, some sections are irregular branches cut from my garden and some are bought machined rounds. Both have been carbonised, a recognition of their wooden nature rather than their current form. This recognition of common material relates to Solnit's view that "hybrids simply draw from the wider possibilities that were separated and inbred for a while".³⁸ Hanging from the beams in the room and one of the trees are several sequined poles. These are proposed as celestial matter, stars that stretch down to the ground, providing points to navigate by. Rangi Mātāmua's essay "Matariki and the Decolonisation of Time" describes the complexity of the Māori system of time, a system "integrating celestial, environmental and ecological occurrences to track time and seasonality."³⁹ The vertical movement in the space asks us to look up and towards this old/renewed knowledge to navigate the world.

³⁸ Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art*, 10.

³⁹ Matamua, "Matariki and the Decolonisation of Time," 67.



and... and... and, 2021, carbonised pine and karaka, concrete, sequins and glazed ceramics (installation view)



and... and... and, 2021, carbonised pine and karaka, concrete, sequins and glazed ceramics (installation view)

The trees are held upright in the pincer grips of pyramid-shaped, grey concrete forms. This industrial material within a hard-edged form holds the long, thin forms of the trees upright. The final components of the work are slip cast, glazed ceramic potato and kumara forms that are scattered around the base of the trees, as if fallen fruit rather than tubers. I made these while thinking about navigation and sustenance on long journeys. The intentional combination of the kumara and the potato is a playful nod to the whakapapa of these humble tubers. Kumara arrived in New Zealand in the hulls of voyaging waka and potatoes in the hulls of colonists' ships. Their transformation into ceramic form endows them with the qualities of rock, shifting them from sustenance to ballast for the hull of a ship.

Kumara and potatoes are both tubers, formed by certain plants when the tip of a rhizome (an underground stem) swells to store unused nutrients. The rhizome has been discussed in detail by Deleuze and Guatarri to represent a processual, connected and multifarious approach.



and... and... and, 2021, fabric, rope and steel pipe (detail)



and... and... and, 2021, carbonised pine and karaka, concrete, sequins and glazed ceramics (detail)

They suggest that “the tree imposes the verb ‘to be’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction ‘and... and... and’ this conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be’”.⁴⁰

When the work is read in relation to this assertion it is possible to view the rhizomes as key elements. Small and inconspicuous, perhaps they contain the energy to sustain and transform us while the blackened trees only remain standing because they are held in place by the grip of the concrete. The concept of the rhizome has also been linked to indigenous theory by providing a metaphor for reciprocity, evenness and regeneration.⁴¹ Remembering that the outcome of regeneration is restoration, the term Moana Jackson suggests in place of decolonisation, the metaphor of the rhizome becomes even more significant.

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 25.

⁴¹ Susan Huhana Mlcek, Monte Himone Aranga and Ngareta Timutimu, “Traversing the Plateaus of Knowledge[s] within the Rituals of Research Processes: How “Mana” Helps to Determine Activity,” *The International Journal of the Humanities* 9, no. 10 (2012): 85.

Jackson uses the term restoration to undermine the idea of colonisation as a historical event rather than a process that continues today, and to foreground the right of Māori to self-determination. He views the ethic of restoration as one that “offers the chance, or challenge, to clutch truth and justice for “future flowerings”.⁴²

Both bleak and hopeful, the experience of moving through the space might appear to resemble walking through a charred forest, damaged and irreversibly altered but still sparkling with life and capable of regeneration. It acknowledges the realities of climate change and colonisation, but is also a gesture of hope for the journey of our mokopuna. May the ocean, increased in volume by melted ice, rise up to meet them as it did their ancestors.

⁴² Jackson, “Where to Next? Decolonisation and the Stories of the Land,” 149.

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An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University,
Wellington, New Zealand

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