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Peer reviewed

**KELLY JOSEPH**

## **A Journey of Healing, Discovery, and Transformation: *Hohou Te Rongo***

### **Abstract**

*This is a review of Hohou Te Rongo: A Strategy towards Health & Wellbeing, an exhibition curated by Margaret Aull and Cerys Davidson that was on view at the Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts Gallery, Waikato University, Hamilton, New Zealand, July 2–September 3, 2021. It will be on view at the Waikato Museum from July 2022 through January 2023 and will be called Toi is Rongoā.*

**Keywords:** Māori, art, toi, Indigenous, rongoā, health, healing, exhibitions



Figure 1. View of a portion of the exhibition *Hohou Te Rongo: A Strategy towards Health & Wellbeing*, Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts Gallery, Waikato University, Hamilton, New Zealand, July 2 –September 3, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

Stepping into the space of *Hohou Te Rongo: A Strategy towards Health & Wellbeing* is like surrendering to a warm, solid, and healing embrace.<sup>1</sup> It is very

much like the kind of hugs that the curator of the exhibition, Margaret Aull (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Rarawa), is known to give. Aull, an advocate for Māori artists and an artist herself, has been delving into the rangahau of toi as rongoā—arts research as healing practice—for some time (see Glossary, below). She sees toi (art, knowledge) as a powerful tool that can bring balance back into Māori lives and this is the essence of the exhibition’s kaupapa:

Toi at the crux of it is the source. It means knowledge, and for me if you find that knowledge...we can utilize that as a tool to be able to keep ourselves in balance and if we’re good, our whānau are good and if our whānau are good, our communities are good...What this calls for is to find the balance—whatukura, māreikura—nothing operates on its own.<sup>2</sup>

Surrender and balance are embodied in *Hiwaiterangi* (Fig. 1), an electric-pink, crocheted goddess who greets visitors at the entrance of the exhibition. Her arms raised in supplication and her eyes skyward, she is Rudi (Ngāti Kohua, Ngāti Makirangi, Ngāti Paoa, Ngaruahine, Ngāti Tū, Te Arawa) and Lissy (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) Robinson-Cole’s signature-neon revisioning of te ao Māori. *Hiwaiterangi* is the youngest of the stars in the Matariki cluster—a star to whom mortals send wishes and dreams; she is connected to our heart’s deepest desires. Beneath the Robinson-Cole version of this atua, a notebook invites visitors to offer up their wishes to her. It is here that people have written touching requests for wellbeing, among them “My wish is for my husband to find peacefulness and a place in the world where he is not stressed” and “My wish is for the world to start finding a more humane solution to the tragedy that is mental illness. To find better solutions and create more resources.” *Hiwaiterangi* encourages transformation, and these wishes reflect our longing for restorative, healing change.

*Urutengangana* (Fig. 2) and *Hine Turama*, two atua of light swathed in resplendent Kahu huruhuru and celestial feathers, stand like sentinels on either side of *Hiwaiterangi*. When viewed closely, the touch of Lissy and Rudi Robinson-Cole is evident. Faint smudges from fingertips and imperfect places where stitches have been drawn together are reminders that these mahi toi are not machine-made. Crochet can be a healing tool for those who do it (the repetitive movements of crocheting release serotonin in the body), and healing can also be found in the way that these warm, playful works elicit joyful wonder in the viewer. This is refreshing in our technologically-heavy lives and with the feeling of unease driven by COVID-19 and climate change. The Robinson-Coles guide



Figure 2. Lissy Robinson-Cole and Rudi Robinson-Cole, *Urutengangana*, 2021. Polystyrene and crocheted yarn. Photograph courtesy of the author



us with their bright light as they themselves are guided. As Rudi says, “Our mahi is totally faith-led, from our tupuna [ancestors], we have a whakaaro that we are but like prisms. And they shine their life into us and we shine that out through our mahi toi, through our bright colors. And you know that’s how we are in our practice.”



Figure 3. Eugene Kara, *Taku Manawa* (detail), 2003–2021. Tōtara wood. Photograph courtesy of the author

Eugene Kara (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, Ngāti Pāhauwera, Ngāti Tipā/Waikato, Ngāti Kōata, Ngā Rauru, Te Ātihaunui-a-Pāpāurangi, Ngāti Tūwharetoa) is an exceptional multi-disciplinary artist and educator who is known for his public art projects focused on mana whenua (Māori who have historic and territorial rights over the land). This includes the striking pou (carved post) on the newly-renovated jetty on the Waikato awa that represents taonga tuku iho (treasures, heirlooms) from local hapū. Kara describes himself as a cultural navigator, and his mahi toi delves into advocacy, project management, and strategic planning within the community as a way “to let healing back into the land.” While his community work relates to the kaupapa of *Hohou Te Rongo*, his three pieces in the exhibition are a return to highly personal mahi with a more intimate scale. The artist believes that being a part of the kaupapa of *Hohou Te Rongo* is, in itself, a healing process, but

it came with its challenges: “To come back into this space in a gallery context where the work is all about you and not about mana whenua, not about the people, it’s quite a challenge because you’re putting, you know literally, my heart out there.”

Kara’s mahi toi *Taku Manawa* (Fig. 3) is a tōtara stump lovingly polished to a high shine and subtly carved into the shape of a heart. A chink that runs through the stump is filled with gold, making the repair visible. Like the Japanese art of kintsugi—a traditional process that highlights cracks and repairs to celebrate the life and history of an object—it evokes a kind of rebirth. Kara similarly celebrates and acknowledges the life of his brother who passed away after receiving a heart transplant. His brother’s baby was born around that time and was named Manawa (heart). Tōtara heartwood is one of the most durable timbers in the world, and a prized wood used by Māori for toi whakairo (the art of carving) and pou tokomanawa—the central ridgepole and heart of a whareniui. Kara’s mahi toi, then, is a powerful and lasting tribute to the loss of a loved one.



Figure 4. Eugene Kara, “*Find your shoes...*” 2008–2021, Tōtara wood. Photograph courtesy of the author

Another piece by Kara is “*Find your shoes...*” (Fig. 4), in which a single shoe is carved from tōtara and painted black and red. Its form is elongated, like

something a character in a children's storybook might wear. A tension exists because of the distorted form. Kara admits that with his mahi he seeks to confront the viewer through aesthetics and also through kaupapa. Subtle forms carved within the shoe are Kara's way of paying homage to those who wear traditional markings such as tā moko and kauae, acknowledging their pathway and their connection to tupuna:

In whakairo we activate our poupou by planting pāua in the eye so they can see. In the shoe here, there is no pāua in there, because sometimes during those moments you're guided by higher sources, so you don't need that pāua, and physical eye. So, if you were wearing those shoes, you're really tapping into your higher being.

Though these are older works, Kara himself knows the value in reworking and breathing new life into mahi toi, especially because the work may not have resonated with the right audience or the right kaupapa at the time they were created:

I think there's real value in honouring the ideas and the thoughts that we had twenty years ago and representing them in a different context to a new audience. And I think in that way of having reverence, we honour those ideas, that time, those people that were in that space when you were creating it.

Four oil paintings by Hiria Anderson (Rereahu, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Apakura) have a quiet, simmering power that honours the people and spaces of her life in Waipa/King Country. Anderson's ability to render chiaroscuro matches the sublime skills of the masters of the Dutch Golden Age. This is all the more striking because she applies it to everyday vignettes within her own community. Her paintings are political and healing in that they are never sentimental, but are an honest celebration and expression of the lived experience of Māori in the twenty-first century. *Ministers and the Dinosaur* (Fig. 5) shows a row of Anglican Church clergy members seated against a grid of windows. The composition is balanced, yet there is tension in the way two vinyl chairs in the foreground are truncated. This gives a dynamism to an otherwise peaceful scene and a sense that viewers are looking in, or even included, in this space. An unexpected element is a child wearing a vest with a dinosaur hood, whose presence is gently acknowledged with a faint smile by one of the ministers. A nuanced work that is playful in subject matter, this piece feels like a page from a visual diary to which we are

privity, and captures the daily connections between community members and whānau.



Figure 5. Hiria Anderson, *Ministers and the Dinosaur*, 2021. Oil on canvas. Photograph courtesy of the author





Figure 6. Hiria Anderson, *They Were a Lovely Couple*, 2021. Oil on canvas. Photograph courtesy of the author

*They Were a Lovely Couple* (Fig. 6) is an even quieter work depicting two orange vinyl chairs placed side by side. The chairs are flanked by outdoor views filled with trees and a curtain of falling rain outside. This is a liminal space, where the couple referred to in the title are absent, but two prosaic chairs become their poignant proxy. Potential narratives surface; we are left to wonder is this a quiet moment at a tangihanga or is it merely an everyday moment captured? Either way, Anderson has an ability to frame and make visible the details that most of us overlook in the modern rush. Through her lens, the ordinary is exalted but also remains truthful, and she continually shows that the present moment is completely worthy of our attention.



Figure 7. Regan Balzer, *Te Aki Kaa (I)*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. Photograph courtesy of the author

Regan Balzer's (Te Arawa, Ngāti Ranginui, Raukawa, Maniapoto) mahi toi are a visual feast of colour, movement, and swirling layers of paint. Balzer began the two large canvases in the exhibition during her artist residency at Massey University, where their basic forms and structures emerged. Soon after, she attended the tangihanga (funeral) of taonga puoro legend Richard Nunns, and was inspired to finish the two paintings with that experience in mind. A palpable energy flows through both works. *Te Aki Kaa (I)* (Fig. 7) shows the kōwhiri (front door) of a whareniui, along with its pare (lintel). Contrasting with these structured entry forms is the interior, where a pou tokomanawa and heke (rafters) are enveloped by organic forms—a kaleidoscopic multitude of heart-shaped kawakawa leaves that draw our gaze inward. The kawakawa plant is valued in rongoā for its purifying properties, and is used in the launching of canoes and in tohi ceremonies. The plant plays a significant part in tangihanga, as it is worn as a pare kawakawa (head-dress) to symbolise mourning and the loss of a loved one. Balzer depicts its leaves



like tears or confetti, as both a remembrance and a celebration of a life. She has captured the energy of spaces in which stories and waiata are shared, tears and laughter spring forth, and grief is allowed to flow freely so that healing can follow.



Figure 8. Regan Balzer, *Te Aki Kaa (II)*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. Photograph courtesy of the author

Kawakawa features again in *Te Aki Kaa (II)* (Fig. 8). A swirling wave of curvilinear designs dissolves into a tumultuous cluster of leaves in shades of teal, yellow, and startling crimson. Merging with the foliage are the subtle features of a face, integrated with the natural forms. Like Balzer's other mahi, there is a portal-like quality and a reverence for the flow of things. Kawakawa has long been used as a medicine to remove paru and mamae (pain, injury). Balzer's mahi speaks about our tupuna's connection to nature, and how mātauranga Māori can guide

us to a healthier way forward. These works remind us how toi is a vital tool that allows us to tap into a force greater than ourselves. Balzer states,

Toi for me is as an integration of beliefs, of traditions, of our tu-puna...our stories and our narratives. And they all come in and they flow through. So, when we interact with our work, when others interact with our work, it's actually living, it has mauri.



Figure 9. Tāwhanga Nopera, *Bookworm*, 2017–2021. Interactive installation. Photograph courtesy of the author

Tāwhanga Nopera (Tainui, Te Arawa, Ngati Tuwharetoa, Ngapuhi) similarly explores the ideas that toi can be an invitation to connect to atua, tupuna, and our inner cosmos, but he takes them a step further by making us question what toi even is. Nopera is a Māori academic and artist of takatāpui identity, who currently works at Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato (the University of Waikato) as its health promotions coordinator. His PhD work and ongoing rangahau have been all-consuming. He says that after he got the call to join the kaupapa of *Hohou Te Rongo*, his initial feeling of dread at not having new work to show soon transformed into trust and confidence that what he was already doing could be incorporated. *Bookworm* (Fig. 9) is a stack of five publications from 2017 to 2021. A sign



nearby states, “This display is able to be touched and we encourage you to sit and read these publications.” The books on display are texts relating to his rangahau, Indigenous trauma, Māori sexuality, and Indigenous identity issues.<sup>3</sup> What he presents is a beautiful blurring of the boundaries of toi, while addressing ways we can weave rangahau and mātauranga Māori into our lives organically. Ultimately this work starts a conversation about how life itself is, in fact, our most important mahi toi. Nopera explains,

I just started to really think through the data that I’m sitting with and I was like, hey actually this is gold. This is what’s at the heart of my practice, you know, it’s not just a desire to make beautiful things. It’s a desire to make a beautiful life and that’s what I want for myself and that’s what I want for the young people that I see come to this University. Not just the young people but all the people.

*Bookworm* draws together strands and models for healthier, conscious and intentional living, but like raranga (weaving) it can be complex:

It’s actually not about the strands, it’s about the space between—it’s about the tension. Because if you’re not figuring out what that tension really is, then it doesn’t matter what the media is, it’s not gonna bend and flex and resonate the way it should in a functioning world.

The making of this work was itself an act of letting go and yet, like much of Nopera’s work, there is also a wero (challenge) that is being laid down in front of us, that calls us to question ourselves and our presumptions about the world. It is in this juicy, confrontational, highly creative space that transformation has the potential to arise.

The installation *Toi is Rongoā* was created by three artists: Margaret Aull (Te Rarawa, Tūwharetoa, Fiji), Leilani Kake (Tainui, Ngāpuhi, Kuki Airani) and Elizabeth Gray (Ngāti Rehia, Ngāti Uepohatu Tama Ūpoko ki te awa o Wanganui, Ngāti Tūwharetoa). This collaboration is an extension of work the three created previously for *Whenua Ūkaipō Connectedness*, an art exhibition held in Wellington for the United Nations seventy-fifth anniversary (Te Whanganui-a-Tara, October–November 2020). One component of the installation is a digital video made by Kake and accompanied by toanga puoro played by Gray. The video (Fig. 10) is a mesmerising phantasmagoria of morphing imagery; rigid, geometric lines melt into

organic shapes as Māori motifs dissolve into unfamiliar abstractions and back again. Dualism and binaries are at play here: dark and light, negative and positive, whatukura and māreikura, te kauae runga (celestial) and te kauae raro (terrestrial), Rangi-nui and Papatūānuku, exterior and interior worlds—all echoing and folding into each other in the pulsing symbolism. Expanding and contracting, reaching back and forth, these seemingly contrary forces begin to feel complementary and interconnected. Harmony and balance abound in this toi mahi and reinforce Aull’s statement that “nothing operates on its own.”



Figure 10. Margaret Aull, Leilani Kake, and Elizabeth Gray, *Toi is Rongoā* (detail), 2020. Mixed media, video, and audio installation. Photograph courtesy of the author

An extension of this idea, and complementing the work’s intense and mutable imagery, is a soundscape that is calm and grounding. The taonga puoro offers a reo (language) of sound and vibration that draws together the installation’s imagery—and evokes nature, birds, the rustle of wind, and heartbeats. Gray is a skilled practitioner of taonga puoro and this mahi extends to her teaching techniques of pain relief using taonga tuku iho at Hapū Wānanga ki Tainui (Waikato District Health Board). She was inspired to create the six-minute track by the story of Hine Raukatauri, he atua o taonga puoro (the goddess of flute music), who descended from Rangi-nui down to this terrestrial realm. Taonga puoro is a rongoā

and by taking the time to listen, audiences are immersed in an energy where the divine meets the earthly.



Figure 11. Margaret Aull, Leilani Kake, and Elizabeth Gray, *Toi is Rongoā*, 2020. Mixed media, video, and audio installation. Photograph courtesy of the author

Another facet of *Toi is Rongoā* are the sculptural components made by Aull (Fig. 11). Yellow and black signs are warnings, perhaps harbingers, from Papatūānuku, indicating the imminent danger ahead for all of us, especially with regard to climate change. Three piles of earth lay on the floor and perched on top of one of them is a taumata atua, an effigy of Rongo carved from pumice (Fig. 12). Rongo is the atua of cultivated crops and peace, and is related to good health, wellbeing, and our senses. He is a fitting atua, then, for this multi-sensory mahi. Shells are embedded carefully on his body, shining like stars and evoking *Hiwaiterangi* at the entrance of the exhibition. So, we come full circle.



Figure 12. Margaret Aull, Leilani Kake, and Elizabeth Gray, *Toi is Rongoā* (detail of an effigy of Rongo), 2020. Mixed media, video, and audio installation. Photograph courtesy of the author



The artists in *Hohou Te Rongo* bring different expressions and interpretations to the kaupapa of toi as rongoā, but the mahi also interconnects as each practitioner answers Aull’s call to action: “*Hohou Te Rongo* is about gathering in our mahi from wherever points of the compass we are sitting, and bringing it in together so that our community can see that there’s an opportunity to find an answer for wellbeing.” The underlying thread in *Hohou Te Rongo* is that we, the audience, are encouraged to connect to ourselves, to our communities, to the earth and beyond—to our tupuna, the atua, and the cosmos. Like the kete aronui—the basket of knowledge that contained aroha, peace, and the arts—*Hohou Te Rongo* is an important and rich offering. It achieves what all good toi does—it provokes, gives food for thought, opens our eyes, opens our hearts, nourishes, and provides pathways to transformation.

#### Glossary<sup>4</sup>

aroha: love, affection, compassion

atua: ancestor with continuing influence, god, deity

awa: river

hapū: subtribe

heke: rafters

hohou te rongo: to make peace

kahu huruhuru: feather cloak\*

kauae: woman’s chin tattoo

kaupapa: theme, initiative, subject

kawakawa: pepper tree with heart-shaped leaves

kete aronui: basket of knowledge of aroha, peace, and the arts and crafts which benefit the Earth and all living things

kūwaha: front door

mahi: work, practice, activity

mahi toi: art, craft

mamae: pain, injury, wound

mana whenua: the right of a Māori tribe to manage a particular area of land

māreikura: an order of female supernatural beings

Matariki: Pleiades, Messier 45 - an open cluster of many stars in Te Kāhui o Matariki

mātauranga: knowledge, wisdom, understanding, skill

mauri: life principle, life force

Papatūānuku: Earth, Earth mother, and wife of Rangi-nui  
pare: lintel  
pare kawakawa: headdress made from kawakawa  
paru: dirt  
pāua: abalone  
pou: post or pillar, often carved  
poupou: wall-pillars, post, pole  
pou tokomanawa: centre pole supporting the ridge pole of a meeting house  
rangahau: research  
Rangi-nui: atua of the sky and husband of Papatūānuku, from whose union originate all living things  
raranga: weaving, to weave  
reo: language  
rongoā: medicine  
takatāpui: a traditional Māori term meaning “intimate companion of the same sex.” It has been reclaimed to embrace all Māori who identify with diverse sexes, genders, and sexualities\*  
tā moko: tattoo  
tangihanga: funeral  
taonga puoro: musical instrument  
taonga tuku iho: heirloom, something handed down, cultural property  
taumata atua: resting place of gods  
te ao Māori: Māori world view\*  
te kauae raro: terrestrial  
te kauae runga: celestial  
tohi: dedication rite, baptism rite, child dedication ritual - a ritual ceremony over a child in flowing water while petitioning the *atua* to endow the child with the desired mental and physical qualities  
toi: art, knowledge  
toi whakairo: art of carving  
tōtara: species of podocarp tree endemic to Aotearoa  
tupuna: ancestor  
waiata: song  
wero: challenge  
whakaaro: idea, thought, understanding  
whakairo: to carve, carving  
whānau: family  
whareniui: meeting house

whatukura: an order of male supernatural beings

*Kelly Joseph (Ngāti Maniapoto) is a writer and artist living in Hamilton, New Zealand. Her writing has been published in anthologies such as Huia Short Stories, Black Marks on the White Page, and Pūrākau: Māori Myths Retold by Māori Writers. In 2009, Kelly was the Tau Mai e Kapiti Māori Writer in Residence, and in 2018 she received an Emerging Māori Writers Residency at the Michael King Writers Centre. Kelly has an MA in creative writing from Victoria University and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, USA.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An iteration of this exhibition will be shown at Waikato Museum in July 2022–January 2023 and will be called *Toi is Rongoā*.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes in this review are taken from the *Hohou Te Rongo* artists panel discussion held at The Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts Gallery, Waikato University, July 3, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> These publications are Brendan Hokowhitu, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Chris Andersen, and Steve Larkin (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2020); *The Aotearoa New Zealand People Living with HIV Stigma Index*, (Auckland, 2020), <https://www.stigmaindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/New-Zealand-Aotearoa-SI-Report-2020.pdf>; *Aotearoa New Zealand People Living with HIV Stigma Index*, Te Whāriki Takapou, February 6, 2021, <https://www.stigmaindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/New-Zealand-Aotearoa-SI-Maori-Report-2021.pdf>; Jaimie Veale, Jack Byrne, Kyle K.H. Tan, Sam Guy, Ashe Yee, Tāwhanga Mary-Legs Nopera, and Ryan Bentham, *Counting Ourselves: The Health and Wellbeing of Trans and Non-Binary People in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Hamilton, New Zealand: Transgender Health Research Lab, 2019), <https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/12942>; and Leonie Pihama, Alison Green, Carl Mika, Matthew Roskrudge, Shirley Simmonds, Tāwhanga Nopera, Herearoha Skipper, and Rebekah Laurence, *Honour Project Aotearoa* (Hamilton: Te Kotahi Research Institute, University of Waikato, 2020), [https://www.waikato.ac.nz/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/636420/Honour-Project-Aotearoa-Final-Report.pdf](https://www.waikato.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/636420/Honour-Project-Aotearoa-Final-Report.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Unless noted with “\*”, all definitions are taken from *Te Aka/The Māori Dictionary*, <https://maoridictionary.co.nz>.