

The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader
Edited by Stella Brennan and Su Ballard
Designed by Jonty Valentine
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Contemporary Māori Women's New Media Art Practice

Maree Mills (Ngati Tuwharetoa, Ngai Tahu)

Digital art in Aotearoa New Zealand has a strong indigenous voice. Māori have taken up digital technologies in the same manner that they historically embraced new materials like iron and steel to effectively replace stone tools. This intersection between *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world) and art practices that use digital media suggests that the two worlds are complementary. Digital media has empowered an oral culture by actualising it into a visual one, now accessible to a global audience.

A number of Māori digital artists are at the forefront of contemporary arts practice in Aotearoa. These artists are regularly showcased on the now established Māori television channel.¹ The success of Māori broadcasting is evident. In 2008, Māori Television will host the first world conference on indigenous television and launch a second channel on New Zealand's digital free-to-view platform. While it must be acknowledged that Māori Television operates within a commercial media context, it could be asserted that its success originates from a commitment to *tikanga Māori* (Māori customs and values) guiding its organisational principles and underpinning its creation and selection of content.²

Concurrently, indigenous women academics have seen the value of indigenous epistemology and philosophy in re-thinking cultural and economic conditions and the impacts that globalisation has on the culture of indigenous peoples. In recognition that 'new old' ways of thinking are a way forward, Makere Stewart-Harawira suggests that the central task of her book *The New Imperial Order: Indigenous Responses to Globalisation* is to argue that "traditional indigenous knowledge forms have a profound contribution to make towards an ontology for a just global order."³ As Māori television has applied the principles of *tikanga Māori* to guide its operations, Stewart-Harawira suggests that global organisations could benefit greatly from doing the same. While this is seen by many to be a utopian proposition that does not acknowledge the inherent problems associated with the instrumentalisation of indigenous knowledge outside its context, it is often the desire of those communicating indigenous constructs with new media. In the Māori world knowledge manifests differently between tribes, between families, and between individuals. In a sense 'traditional knowledge' is a collection of individual knowledge and the differences are celebrated rather than contended. Sharing and the rearticulation of knowledge are required for the culture to remain alive. The old stories as well as new need to be told, and dialogue regarding their meaning and application in a contemporary world should be fostered. Much fear seems attached to this phenomenological, mobile and embodied aspect of Māori culture, but it is time for a Māori voice and a Māori knowing to be seen and heard. The way we experience being Māori, or our own experiences of what it means to be Māori, is valid and exciting territory for digital artists.

Māori women digital artists use moving image to communicate their ontologies and make comment on these connections between traditional knowledge and the contemporary world. Digital technology is employed by the

Previous pages: Lisa Reihana, *Dandy and Diva*, 2007, digital prints on aluminium, 1200 x 2000mm each.
 1: Lisa Reihana, *Native Portraits n.19897-1998*, details, *Grant and Rachel*, *Maddy*, collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, photos Norman Heke (*Grant and Rachel*), and Lisa Reihana (*Maddy*).
 2: Lisa Reihana, *Native Portraits n.19897*, *Whānau*, 1998, eleven monitors, 30 minutes DVD, 21 minutes stereo sound, AMX computer programme, collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, photo: Norman Heke.



fig. 1



fig. 2

1. *Te Kete Aronui* is a Māori arts programme currently in its fourth season. It is produced by Kiwa Productions and screens weekly on Māori Television.
2. <http://corporate.maoritvtelevision.com/about.htm>
3. Makere Stewart-Harawira, *The New Imperial Order: Indigenous Responses to Globalisation* (London: Zed Books, 2005), 32.

artists discussed in this essay in order to communicate indigenous constructs, reclaim lost mythology and reinvigorate the telling of things Māori to a wider audience. In discussing contributions of Māori women to current digital art practices in Aotearoa, I use three Māori concepts: the *wharenuī*, our meeting house and its role; *taonga tuku iho*, treasures handed down; and *manawa whenua*, the connection to land. These concepts allow me to group the artists and to locate their work.

The Wharenuī: House keepers of a different kind.

The wharenuī is the big house for meeting on the *marae*. Its role as a focus for things Māori is manifest in a number of works by Lisa Reihana (Nga Puhi, Ngati Hine, Ngai Tu). Emerging from art school at the time video editing tools became more easily accessible to artists, she joined other Māori artists in the drive to have an indigenous voice heard without external mediation. The wharenuī often displays portraits of *tipuna* (ancestors). Reihana's *Native Portraits n.19897* (1998) commissioned for the opening of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, located the still photograph in a physical time, confronting the viewer with an alternative reading of the image. In *Digital Marae* (2001) Reihana digitally represents mythological ancestor forms as life-sized photographic portraits that are then animated in the video *Let There Be Light*. The work generates virtual *poupou* (posts representing ancestors) for inside the wharenuī and the sense of a meeting place for Māori is kept mobile and alive within the gallery space. Reihana suggests that displacement from the homeland (experienced by many indigenous cultures) could be somehow softened by recalling it, re-creating and sharing it in a virtual manifestation. Similarly Reihana's video work references the Māori construct of non-linear time, where past, present and future are seen to co-exist in a continuum. Images of our ancestors remind us that they are ever present, and therefore not mere representations but icons embodied with their sacred *wairua* or spirit. *He Tautoko* (2007 – 8) is one of a series of works where Reihana uses new technologies to give a new history back to old *taonga* (treasures).⁴ *He Tautoko* means support—both in the sense of supporting a building, but also in the sense of supporting the people around you. *He Tautoko* (2007 – 2008) uses cultural objects from the University of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology collection, contrasting these with Reihana's own imagery, creating a fusion of old and new representations of *taonga*. She rehabilitates objects that have been stripped of their cultural context and significance and now reside halfway across the world. Reihana has recently curated digital art exhibitions, in essence, inviting others into her *whare*.⁵ This is an act of *manākitanga* (meaning to holistically take care of) where her assured status is used to launch young emerging Māori and Pacific Island artists whose work also conceptually references an evolving culture.

Another keeper of the wharenuī is curator Dr Deidre Brown (Ngaī Tahu), senior lecturer at the Auckland University School of Architecture. In *Whare* (curated for SOFA Gallery, Christchurch, 2002) seven emerging Māori digital artists were given the physical architectural framing of the wharenuī.⁶ The structure supported four projection surfaces of digital *heke* (rafters) and *poupou* (structural side posts). Viewers could physically walk through the tent-like projection structure, casting their shadow on the work, becoming part of it.

4. Exhibited in *Pasifika Styles* (2007 – 8). The show, a fusion of old and new, occurred alongside the historic oceanic collection at Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
5. Reihana curated *Restless* (2007), the opening exhibition of MIC Toi Rerehiko. The exhibition featured video installation by Brett Graham, Lonnie Hutchinson, Junior Ikitule & Dean Kirkwood, John Miller and Parekohai Whakamoe.
6. *Whare* (2002) at the SOFA Gallery Christchurch consisted of video works by seven contemporary Māori artists with Canterbury connections: Lonnie Hutchinson (Ngaī Tahu), Maree Mills (Ngati Tuwharetoa, Ngaī Tahu), Nathan Pohio (Kati Mamoe, Ngaī Tahu, Waitaha), Rachael Rakena (Ngaī Tahu), Darryn George (Ngapuhi), Eugene Hanson (Ngati Maniapoto) and Ngahiraka Mason (Tuhoe). *Whare* toured to Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute as part of the 2004 Adelaide Arts Festival. Dr Deidre Brown (Ngapui/Ngati Kahu) received the SCAPE Biennial's Innovation Award for her curatorial work with *Whare* in 2002 and *Ahako he Iti* in 2004.

Rachael Rakena's (Ngaī Tahu, Nga Puhi) piece for *Whare, Mihi Aroha* (2002) was a tribute to her mother, who had recently died. The work showed a woman floating underwater while the text of consoling email messages rained down the roof and sides of the structure. The blue of the computer screen mixed with the blue of the water created a space that was both natural and artificial.

Other artists have worked with this connection between the living house and the living culture. *Hohoko* (1999) by Keri Whitiri (Ngati Kahungunu, Ngaī Tahu) was an installation referencing Māori oral culture by using sound through headphones to convey the sense of the talking walls of the wharenuī.⁷ While the *pou*, or structural posts represent ancestors who hold the space between the earth and the *heke* (rafters that act as ribs of the house itself), the 'wall space' between offers another opportunity for story telling. Walls were made by lashing raupo reeds in horizontal fashion, and complex bindings of *harakeke* (flax) or *kiekie* fibre were designed to provide abstract forms that related to cosmology and mythology as well as the day to day. The now customary *tukutuku* panels were a step towards visualising oral culture while facilitating storytelling within the house. *Hohoko* occupied this space and retold the stories traditionally told through the walls.

Taonga tuku iho: Treasures handed down

Maureen Lander (Nga Puhi), for a long time a senior lecturer in the Māori Studies department at the University of Auckland, was one of the first Māori artists to complete a Doctorate of Fine Arts. Lander's work reframes traditional Māori material knowledge, our *taonga* or treasures, within a western sculptural aesthetic. Her work *String Games* (1998 – 2000) takes traditional patterns into a parallel digital world of coded language. The work invites viewers to play a contemporary version of the ancient Māori game where string is threaded between the fingers. The shapes made by the string recount ancient knowledge of how we came to be, making ordered pattern out of confusion. It also suggests the player's role in creation, in establishing a complex network that relies on comprehension of structural rules and on the necessity of its own undoing. Many creation theories suggest that an ending is required to bring about a new beginning. Often a shape achieved after several hand or finger movements results in an unravelling of the form itself, emulating this concept. Manifestations of this work have included an enclosed black-light environment dissected by fluorescent shafts of coloured line that change as the viewer moves. The viewer becomes the fingers as they twist the shapes and forms of the light.

Donna Campbell (Nga Puhi, Ngati Ruanui) is a weaver renowned for her material virtuosity with *harakeke*. Campbell has adopted new media in order to communicate more of the essence of what it means to weave. Historically there have always been connections between weaving and new technologies. The computer screen or television monitor produces images through interlacing lines. The horizontal weft and vertical warp lines are redrawn constantly by an electron beam, creating mobile images. One of the processes of de-interlacing these scan lines is called 'weave'. This references the turning of the two fields of odd and even lines into one progressive frame. Campbell's video work *Aho, a Conversation with the Whenua* (2005) is a triptych projection suggesting the sensuality of the weave, movement under and over, in and out, dark and light.

7. Exhibited in *Hiko: New Energies in Māori Art* (1999), co-curated by Jonathon Mane-Wheoki (Nga Puhi), now Director of Arts and Visual Culture at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

The woven surface is projected onto the literally woven body. The meditative experience of the practice is also captured in vertical stills, illuminated by Campbell in *Light Pou* (2007). These fluorescent light boxes demand the viewer stands to attention and considers the glowing woven image as a marker for traditions made new.

For Campbell digital materials open up the dialogue regarding the feminine (often associated with weaving) in Māori art to new audiences. Digital media celebrate material culture in an abstract way where the *mauri* (life force) of the *taonga* (knowledge and/or treasure) exists but is no longer bound by original narratives. Like many of the artists mentioned, Campbell felt liberated by the gift of technology (a laptop computer) from her workplace and directly attributes this access to electronic tools as the impetus to move her work on. She says: "The work is always shifting and evolving; the same as tikanga."⁸ Campbell joins other Māori artists who see Māori values and customs evolving over time and validated by continued practice. An understanding can be gleaned from the meaning of the word itself. *Tikanga* is simply that which is right or correct. An example of this evolution would be the protocols of urban marae represented by pan-tribal authorities, who might apply different tikanga from traditional marae rooted in tribal *whakapapa* (genealogy).

Manawa whenua: The heart land

Rachael Rakena (Ngai Tahu, Nga Puhī) is a new media artist who has always positioned her work in Te Ao Māori, often using overlays of digital and water imagery. In *Ahakoā he iti...* (2004) she anchored her connection to the *whenua* (land) through the use of digital projection on stone. In the installation, a collaboration with Keri Whaitiri, a large boulder was placed in front of the Christchurch cathedral with an image projected on its surface at night. The *mauri* (essence or life force) stone was illuminated by the image of a woman who at times seemed to precariously hang from the rock and at others to hold it up. She hovered like the knowledge, suggested in many Māori creation chants, that we once came from stone.

Rakena's liquid signature returns in *Aniwaniwa* (2006), her collaboration with sculptor Brett Graham (Ngati Koroki Kahukura).⁹ *Aniwaniwa* originally showed at Te Manawa Gallery in Palmerston North and was selected for the collateral events section of the 2007 Venice Biennale. *Aniwaniwa* refers to a homeland drowned by the damming of the Waikato River for hydro-electric power generation. Five large domed vessels hang suspended from the eleven metre-high roof of an ancient salt warehouse. Sculpted with a surface suggestive of both moving water and coral, these forms house video projections. While viewers lie back on rows of mattresses (as they might in a *wharenuī*) watching the footage, a global tide seems to rise around them. These submerged vessels communicate an analogy of cultural loss. By naming them *wakahuia* (traditionally carved treasure boxes), Rakena reminds us of the treasures once kept now washed away, or submerged and unobtainable.

In Natalie Robertson's video installation *Uncle Tasman: The Trembling Current That Scars The Earth* (2007) water is found steaming from the ground and crying over the earth. Robertson says video has given her the opportunity to visually express her oral culture.¹⁰ Over three large-screen projections, a

8. Donna Campbell, conversation with the author, 22 June 2007.
 9. Sean Cubitt, "The Memory Of Water," in *Aniwaniwa*, ed. Alice Hutchinson, 2007. <http://www.aniwaniwa.org/index.aspx?site=571&page=5439>
 10. Natalie Robertson, conversation with the author, 22 June 2007. See <http://www.natalierobertson.com/uncletasman/>



fig. 3



fig. 4

3: Maureen Lander, *String Games*, 1998, installation at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, photo: Haru Samehima.
 4: Donna Campbell, *Ahō, a conversation with the whenua*, 2005, triptych projection, Randolph St Gallery, Auckland.



fig. 5



fig. 6

tauparapara (chant) is heard from a local *kaumatua* (respected elder) who relates the story of the pollution and disappearance of Lake Rotoitipaku due to the water requirements of a pulp and paper mill. A Ngati Porou women's *haka* (fighting chant) is heard, calling for justice and invoking Ruaumoko, god of earthquakes. The three large projections reference the romance of Ngati Tuwharetoa ki Kawarau and Ngati Awa, telling the story of the love triangle of three mountains. Robertson makes the tragic cosmology poignant and fluid across time and space. The lake vanishes along with its stories. Finally, Robertson provides the viewer with a long tracking shot taken from her car; the shot defines the landscape and is accompanied by a moving verbal roll call of those who have passed on young, diseased by the effects of the mill. The projection confronts the viewer with the tears of Mount Tarawera—an image of its waterfall. A taste of sulphur and dioxin swells in the mouth when we realize that the thermal activity we see from the ground is inextricably mixed with emissions from the mill. It is not the New Zealand landscape we are used to celebrating and it leaves the viewer in little doubt that we have indeed begun to pay for the scarring of the land.

Robertson originally worked with still photography and continues to look down the lens at the *whenua* (land). Her earlier images of road signage explored this integration between personal connection with the land and Māori oral history. It has pointed her way home to Kawarau, where even maps conceal truth. In one image she captures the name of Lake Rotoitipaku, now placed next to another lake entirely. In *Uncle Tasman: The Trembling Current That Scars The Earth* Robertson presents an installation that communicates on many levels but ultimately leaves the viewer knowing that the desecration of *Papatuanuku* (our Earth Mother) as well as our ancestors who lie beneath her, will be recognised.

Mana Wahine: The essence of Māori women

The author, Maree Mills (Ngati Tuwharetoa, Ngai Tahu) became entranced with video the moment a genlock was invented allowing video signal to be smoothly mixed. I was most interested in the possibilities of using moving image for exploring visual metaphor instead of narrative or document. *Ara Hupana* (2007) communicates an alternative reading of the mythological bird woman from Te Arawa legend, *Kurungaituku*. This bird-woman occurred to me as a symbol for the *noa* status of woman. Rose Pere says *noa* is associated with freedom; freedom embodied in the image of the eagle.¹¹ This is an alternative to the commonly used yet inadequate explanation of *noa* as 'profane', the opposite to *tapu* (sacred or restricted). *Kurungaituku* is a supernatural being who can traverse the realm of earth-mother and sky-father. Her flight, her knowledge of the arts and her ability to commune with all other living creatures sets her apart. Rather than accept her death at the hands of *Hatupatu*, the male hero of the original story, I think of her as a phoenix figure. Raptors are solar symbols in every indigenous culture. My birdwoman is transformed rather than vanquished by fire and alluding to her power to transform the hero from boy to man. Rather than follow a linear narrative, *Ara Hupana* uses visual layering, expansive images of the bird woman's habitat and emotive surround sound from traditional Māori musical instruments to communicate the essence of *Kurungaituku*.

Kurungaituku is acknowledged on screen by a *karanga* (a welcome call from women) and sent off by the transformative element of fire, the setting and rising

11. Rangimarie Rose Pere, *Tē Wheke: A Celebration of Infinite Wisdom* (Gisborne: Ao Ako Global Learning, 1997), 56.

5: Rachel Rakena and Keri Whatiri, *Ahakea he hi...*, 2004, Cathedral Square, Christchurch, courtesy of SCAP, Art and Industry Biennale Trust.
6: Rachel Rakena and Brett Graham, *Ahiwaniwa*, 2006/7, 15 minutes, five-channel video loop with sound in suspended sculptural forms, with mattresses and pillows on the floor for viewers.



fig. 7



fig. 8



fig. 9

7. Natalie Robertson, *Uncle Tasman: The trembling current that scars the Earth*, 2007, three screen video projection, 11:11 minutes, installation view, MTC Ton Reprehko, Auckland.
 8. Maree Mills, *Ara Hupana*, 2007, still from 3-minute video.
 9. Louise Potiki Bryant, *Whakaruruhau—he mihi ki Araiteuru*, 2003, performance with installation, stills from film by Louise Potiki Bryant in collaboration with Nigel Bunn, 15:50 minutes.

sun, suggesting the ancestress flies among us still. These potent images of female power have been lost in colonisation. The *atua wahine* (Māori goddesses) were obscured behind their male counterparts, marginalised to make way for the embrace of Christian religion and the dominion of one male God. I see my video work as a way to draw focus to the female within Māori belief systems, particularly the female *noa*. I argue that a restoration of balance is required in order to empower Māori women marginalised in the ethnocentric and patriarchal re-telling of their origins. In this way digital media can reinvigorate ethereal or esoteric knowledge with its sensual and non-linear qualities.

Another artist working with similar themes is Louise Potiki Bryant (Ngai Tahu) who integrates video projection, sound and light with dance and performance art. Traditional Māori *taonga* and esoteric wisdoms are revered and re-imagined through her choreography and performance. Potiki Bryant's formal metaphors for Māori beliefs and values translate imagery and symbolism, engaging audiences with the communication of Māori stories and Māori constructs. Potiki Bryant's *Whakaruruhau—he mihi ki Araiteuru* (2003) was an interdisciplinary performance and installation created during a residency at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art. This work referenced the burning and resurrection of Araiteuru Marae. *Whakaruruhau* suggests that fire is more than simple destruction, that tied into that tragic event, are other stories, histories, tensions. Potiki Bryant says:

I felt like the fire took me back to an older time. In the part of the performance directly after the fire which I called 'Te Ao ki te Po' I felt a clearing was occurring in that creation was beginning again. I created one movement for each level of the night transforming into day. Starting again. Then I rebuilt the whare.¹²

The installation involved dual projection and the manipulation of an elasticated whare to visually demonstrate the re-building of the urban marae. Significant objects were also attached to the whare with elastic (such as a walking stick, a pair of black shoes, and 1960s style glasses). Potiki Bryant used narrative forms drawn from oral histories and as she performed, manipulated the structure, changing its shape throughout the performance. The work generated a sense of the rebirth of both the community and its house. Potiki Bryant made a short film based on her performance within the installation, a film included in the *Pasifika Styles* exhibition.

The concepts of the *wharenui*, the collective home; *taonga tuku iho*, treasures that are handed down; and *manawa whenua*, the relationship with land, are three aspects of tikanga Māori evoked by these artists' work. These categorisations by no means exhaust possible readings and this invitational space of dialogue and layered meaning is one of the reasons digital media has become attractive to Māori artists. Digital media open up new opportunities for evolving and communicating Māori culture. Although often ephemeral in their expression, many of these works are physically experienced and located. Sharing a phenomenological approach to their subject, these women have broken new ground and continue to cultivate the land with digital media art that speaks of a Māori world-view. While centered in the Māori world, their works celebrate its continual transformation as its ancient epistemology is re-constructed and made relevant to a new generation.

Following pages: Lisa Reihana, *Kawhia & Kete #1, 22, 20 and 83*, 2007, inkjet on watercolour paper, 500mm x 750mm. "To ensure my work has resonance and meaning, I need to find a cultural approach to technology. I have recorded video around sacred places, in this instance, Kawhia Harbour, the important *taonga* of the Tainui people. These images are momentary fractions of video time, digital weavings from the video. Resampling the footage, I divide the 16:9 picture plane into a kaleidoscopic grid. At points this reconfigured video forms the *patiki* or flounder pattern. Kawhia Harbour is an important fishing ground for Tainui, particularly for flounder. I liken this abstract language to the grid weavings of *tukutuku* panels found inside *wharenui*." (Lisa Reihana)

12. Su Ballard and Rachel Rakena, "Whakaruruhau," in *Whakaruruhau: Louise Potiki Bryant* (Dunedin: School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, 2003), np.