TE WAKA ME TE HAERENGA: AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY TO TE WĀIPOUNAMU

Rose McLeod

In 2005 I relocated from Waiheke Island in the Hauraki Gulf, Auckland to Dunedin, a major transitional shift in my life. My studio work is an investigative exploration of my journey to Te Wāipounamu, reconnecting with my Kāi Tahu whānui and whakapapa.

I work with material responses to particular places as part of a broader exploration of the notion of navigation. My current art project is centred on a connection to place, Pari kiore, Clay Cliffs, Omarama, in the upper Waitaki basin in North Otago. I felt a connection to this place to be a mediating link between the past and present and also between myself as an individual and as part of my larger tribal identity. I use this particular place – which physically embodies many of the implied fears and attractions of my experience of navigating and belonging – as an anchoring device.

Early Southern Māori travelled the inland streams and rivers on a craft called a 'mokihi' or 'mogi', which they constructed with raupō (bulrush). They encountered raging torrential rivers and strong current flows as they navigated the inland routes. The mogi was constructed where the need arose to cross the inland waterways, and it was made on site and then left behind as they navigated further inland. I constructed a bicultural mogi with materials

Figure 1: Pari kiore, Clay Cliffs, Omarama (photograph by the artist).

sourced during a trip to Wanaka, using willow branches and other introduced prunings, harakeke (flax) and tīkouka (cabbage tree) leaves, with some gifted raupō, as a cultural indicator to metaphorically express my inner journeying. The significance of this is that it links my own individual path with that of the collective, my iwi.

Kāi Tahu people were involved in a political struggle, Te Kerēme, the Claim, which bound them together for one hundred and fifty years. This came about "due to the Crown's failure to provide the lands and resources promised to Kāi Tahu in the negotiation of the land purchases between 1844 and 1863, and the way in which the purchases were conducted. Due to these unfulfilled promises Kāi Tahu became the most landless tribe in the country and sank into poverty."[1]

"The loss of land placed enormous strain on tribal unity. Land had been the basis of the tribal economy and society; without it the collective was unable to function communally as it had done for centuries. Efforts to best use what little they had left were also crushed by the Government, who decided for Kāi Tahu and other Māori that the tribal institution itself had to be destroyed if they were to be civilised and be rid of their 'low Māori habits'."[2]

"They [the government] urged that each Māori should be put on a separate plot of land. By this means, they believed, the influence of the tribe would be lessened, individual competition would be encouraged, and Ngāi Tahu in spite of themselves would come to live more like Europeans."[3] "However, the importance of the tribe did not die in the minds and hearts of Kāi Tahu. Although they had been effectively excluded from participating in the southern economy of New Zealand, the tribe remained the focus of their identity and collective struggle to regain their position in the south."[4]

My own spiritual development has been a conscious one, which began with the unexpected premature death of my father. How can someone you love be with you one moment and then gone the next, I asked myself, as I began to reflect on the nature of Life and one's existence at a very young age in my life. I, too, have had to work extremely hard in this endeavour to arrive at my own personal place in my life. Such a process has been described from a

Figure 2: Rose McLeod , *Mokihi*, 2007, 200 x 50cms, willow, harakeke, tīkouka (photograph by the artist).

Western perspective by Rudolf Steiner:

> The fact of reincarnation lies at the heart of the anthroposophical view of human existence. Without it, it is hardly possible to conceive an evolution of the individual human being within the context of the history of mankind on earth. The continuum of history is normally seen as being founded in the life and progress of humanity as a whole and not in the individual. As individuals we take part in only a tiny fraction of history…the individual human being participates only briefly in the overall course of human evolution. Evolution is of the human species and not the individual.

He goes on to say that,

> "if, over against this, we wish to see meaning and purpose in our individual life we have to seek it not in the evolution of the human species but in the evolution of each human being. We have to discern our present state in relation to the point at which we are in the overall picture of human development, accepting that as individuals we have shared in the whole of history and that we are responsible not just for our few years here but also for the whole of the future. Only then can we hope to understand the present, both in relation to where we as individuals are and in relation to where humanity is.[5]

This ties in with the Māori concept of being located simultaneously in the past, present and future. I and my work are centred on location, not just geographically, but also temporally in a wider process of both self and societal development. My art is an expression of the relationship between location and identity, but this location is not only physical, it is also cultural, societal and spiritual. The mogi in this sense is a metaphorical tool for navigation on all these levels.

My own processes of navigation have been practiced and learned over a long passage of time in my life, and have become quite finely tuned. The most important of these processes is that of attuning myself to my inner voice, otherwise known as Intuition. This is practised in relationship with people in one's life, experiences and situations and in relationship with the wider community and places in which we live. I have read many texts on the issue of 'place' and some of these are most meaningful for my studio work. One of these texts is Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather's *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage* in which she writes as follows:

> …as we move from one location to another in the course of the day, we experience places as material, bounded realities…Such specific places acquire meaning for us, in many ways which phenomenologists have tried to tease out.The term 'sense of place' refers to this link between place and meaning – an existential quality, difficult to define, sometimes shared by many, sometimes different for each individual. 'Sense of place' sums up the unique character of some of the places that are part of our lives. We grow attached to such places – whether they are in the city or country – are defensive about them when they are threatened, and feel bereft when they are destroyed…In a sense, such places become part of us – of our identity. We regard the most special of such places as 'home' – an ideal melding of place, culture and beloved people.[6]

"Perhaps the most common concept of home is of a material, bounded place where our own activity spaces and those of people closest to us overlap. It is, ideally, where we are most comfortable with our positionality and our relationships with others; a place where we are accepted and affirmed as who we want to be."[7] Kenworthy Teather continues:

> The discipline of geography as we know it in the academy today began as a mapping project – to get to know and record the features of the earth's surface. Explorers and navigators brought back new maps and amazing stories from their journeys into unknown lands – journeys often undertaken with an imperialist, mercantile or scientific project in mind. [There is, however, another] sort of journey, equally rich in intriguing experiences and encounters, and undertaken by each one of us. It is a journey through time and space, from birth to death: a journey of personal discovery, during which periods of calm weather are interrupted by more tumultuous passages.[8]

"In using the term 'rites of passage' to refer to these life crises, we concentrate on the term passage. We interpret passage in the sense of transition."[9] Kenworthy Teather then explains further: "Our passages, intensely personal, thread their way through, impact upon and are influenced by the institutional fabric of social life: home, work, school, family, religion, nation, for example. They make huge demands on our personal skills of navigation…"[10]

My father built our family home, on Auckland's North Shore, which we moved into in 1952, when I was aged five. It was very definitely 'our family's home', crafted with love and care on an acre of beautifully planted garden and it included a large vegetable patch, an orchard of fruit trees, chickens and shrubs, trees and flowers. This is where I grew up and I always had somewhere to call 'home'. My mother lived in it until she died in 1992, and then one of my brothers bought it and razed it to the ground in order to build eight townhouses on the property. I was devastated to visit one day and to find that not one single plant or tree remained of this beautifully mature, landscaped garden.

Kenworthy Teather reminds us that: "As a concept, home is inseparable from the concept of identity. When our home is destroyed, or irrevocably changed, or is inaccessible to us (after emigration, for example), it can seem as if we ourselves are no longer whole, or are suffering bereavement."[11] Having witnessed the razing to the ground of my family home, it made me realise that the concept of 'home' is not necessarily only the physical building or place. Later, my Waiheke home would become the first place in my life that I had purchased as an adult, created, lived in and cared for.

Other kinds of 'home' can, however, also exist. Joan Borsa writes about coming 'home' to one's practice as an artist and about how one's practice can be such a 'home' while one is moving between different localities.[12] Many acts are part of creating this 'home'. Gathering resources from the environment is one of these acts and is an integral part of my work. So, I set about collecting garments from my immediate surroundings for my clay slip work. Making this work also involved me in a process of thinking about the history of the land, and particularly of the area of Clay Cliffs. I thought of the people who had lived and perished in harsh circumstances there and in the greater South Island. I also thought of the earliest Māori, the European settlers and the goldminers who traversed vast areas of land, many of whom never survived. Initially the work took on a somewhat gloomy and despairing appearance, which was certainly aligned to those particular stories. The next step was to focus on a way of working with the clay so it did not become all dark and depressing as this is not how I wanted to speak of the issues I am involved with. I wanted to speak in terms of a more active mind-set and way of working of freeing up and allowing more bodily flow into the work to shift the reading of the work being produced towards a greater fluidity. I discovered that the use of my own clothing could become my personal connecting point as the memories and stories of these items of clothing have their own associations for me. Combining these highly personalised items with the clay slip in which I dipped them located my body physically 'in' the land, as it were. In relation to this act in my studio work, it is important to me that Jim Williams reminds us of the following: "The Māori word for land is whenua, the same word as for the placenta, which in most iwi was buried in the earth, at a place of importance to the whānau (often with a tree planted over it). At death, the body was buried in a place sacred to whānau, completing the circle. This symbolises interconnectedness between people and the land, which is the basis of the word for local people: tāngata whenua."[13] Having been born into a family whose Māori ancestry was unknown for so long, my work only now takes on the symbolism of this custom.

Ka maumahama ai te whenua. The land remembers.[14]

Working with the garments and the clay slip was an experimental process: finding out how long things took to dry, what happened when different layers of slip were applied, etc. When building up the layers of the work, I became more actively engaged with the materials. The ways in which the garments hung, folded and developed new shapes became a sculpting process, linking my work to the natural formation of the Clay Cliffs. Hand work is another important aspect of my process as it involves physical engagement through all my senses, while my working environment and those from where the garments have come from and the land from where the clay comes all play into an experience of locatedness. I read the following and it relates to my own hand work: "Between myself and the material with which I create, no tool intervenes. I select it with my hands. I shape it with my hands. My hands transmit my energy to it. In translating idea into form, they always pass on to it something that eludes conceptualization. They reveal the unconscious."[15]

The paper clay slip, made from recycled shredded paper and other people's leftovers and remnants, sits very comfortably with me in a Western world of hyper-consumption. My process thus suggests an alternative to this hyper-consumption, while it also posits an alternative for the fast-moving life of people living in a Western context. As with my past hand-stitching practice, where every stitch counts, one at a time, I have found the moulding of

clay onto the garments a slowing down, grounding process which enables quiet contemplation. Julian Zugazagoitia writes of the work of Kim Sooja:

> The act of sewing is one of intimacy, of withdrawing into oneself, close to symbiosis with a state of being that represents both tradition and family memory. This activity – almost passive, enthralling – locks the artist into a sequence of slow movements that repeat to infinity and are conducive to meditation. It is to be one with oneself, the fact of saturating oneself in one's own history…It is the point of the needle which penetrates the fabric, and we can connect two different parts of the fabrics with threads, through the eye of the needle. A needle is an extension of the body, and a thread is the extension of the mind. The traces of the mind always remain in the fabric, but the needle leaves the site when its medialization is complete. The needle is the medium, mystery, reality, hermaphrodite, barometer, a moment, and a Zen.[16]

Whilst not using a needle and thread as I usually do with the felt and textile work, I experience the same intimacy and slowness of making when working with the clothing and clay slip together.

The next stage was firing. I was told not to have expectations as the firing process is always unknown and at times hazardous. On opening the gas kiln, I was, however, faced with a total collapse of the work, a kiln full of shards and fragments of the garments – all beautifully fired, but metamorphosed. I was horrified at the disaster, but quickly realised there was no time or space for lamentation. An instant mental transition was required – to see it not as I had planned or expected, but rather as the reality of what was in front of me: not necessarily the end of what had been, even though in one sense it was, but rather as a new beginning – new life contained within the old, only apparent after the ordeal by fire. More importantly, I could instantly make the connection with aspects of my own personal inner experiences after coming South. I had to allow myself to enter into an experience of relinquishing control of a situation, producing a result unable to be programmed or foreseen: moving into the unknown, taking risks, picking up the pieces afterwards in order to make some sense of and gain understanding from the experience. This experience involves seeing matters in a different light, in ways we have not been able to see them before. I had developed new eyes to view with after letting go of my original ideas. In this process the work came to speak succinctly of my experiences of partial identity disintegration after travelling South.

Figure 3: Shards of work in the opened kiln (photograph by the artist).

What was I to do with the work now? Further steps were required. I began to lay it out on a very large floor, exploring the readings that different placements and compositions suggested. One thing became very apparent and that was that the formality I chose in the layout took on the appearance of a large archaeological dig, with groupings of similar pieces together forming parts of a whole.

The work suggested to me that something had happened to it and it became my job to form a new relationship with it in its radically changed form. As in an archaeological excavation, the pieces were unearthed from the kiln and then examined for meaning and identification and understanding in their wider cultural, social and spiritual context.

In relocating to the South, I had no idea that a deeper level of my own residual fears and doubts would need to be unearthed and brought to the surface to be released through my inner journeying. Had I remained in a lovely warm island climate, these may not have surfaced quite as dramatically as they did. External circumstances and environments often are the trigger points for such surfacings and their concomitant transformations.

Diana Wood Curry, in an article entitled "The Archaeological Metaphor: a Personal Excavation", writes: "Sites and fragments also become a metaphor for personal pain and loss."[17]

And so, I return to the Clay Cliffs and why I chose this particular location to base my work on. In doing so, I am reminded of Ronda Cooper's paper presented at a Visual Arts Forum in Dunedin in 1992, in which she asked:

> What are the qualities that give a place meaning? What makes a place special, a landscape important, valuable, unique? What makes a particular place worth caring about – worth caring for, and conserving for future generations?…Some places are obviously so distinctive, so extraordinary in their sheer physical insistence that they immediately capture our spirits and our imaginations…Many places derive meaning and significance from their ecology – their natural characteristics and values…There are also sites of exceptional archaeological importance, sites of pre-history which have value for scientific and palaeontological research – caves and cliffs with moa bones and older fossils…another, perhaps less easily quantifiable set of criteria [exist] for meaning

Figure 4: Practice layout (photograph by the artist).

> in landscape - [for] places that have meaning because of cultural rather than natural qualities, places that are important for the human presence, places where something happened. The meaning of many landscapes requires us to ask questions about the past as well as to understand the physical realities of the location itself.[18]

I reflect back to my family home where I grew up. This place no longer exists. However, the memories are still there in the very structure of my cellular memory, quite vividly. Sculptor Michael Parekowhai says: "our meeting house in my iwi homeland has two sides and a ceiling. It's got no carving. It's just little. It's not used any more, but it is abandoned only in the physical sense. This is because we know we belong to this place. We carry its spirit with us, wherever we go."[19]

Ronda Cooper writes: "Place provides the basic framework for vitally important connections with ancestors and family, a person's essential identity as expressed in his or her whakapapa. Who you are, and who your family is and was, is a part of the place – a personal referencing and specificity not always so highly valued in European culture. And in turn, places are defined and delineated by the resonances of the individual people who lived there or passed through. Sites derive meaning from their inhabitants and their stories and actions – the first discoverers, the famous travellers and explorers, neighbours, allies and invaders, husbands and wives and lovers."[20]

She writes of the concept of kaitiakitanga, guardianship of the land, conveying the sense of time future as well as time past, acknowledging that we are only caretakers of the land for the future generations. We are part of a continuum that stretches back to Rangi and Papa, and also move forward into the future. This is a most serious responsibility towards future generations.

The fired work, albeit fragmented, resembled the Cliffs' formation to my satisfaction and excitement. On taking some pieces down to the foreshore of the Pūrākaunui Estuary where I now live, I laid them out, documenting the effects of the tide's ebb and flow on them over the next few days and weeks. Not only were my own clothes and those of others in the work, transformed by fire, but the laying out on the foreshore gave me a very real sense of connection to this beautiful place.

Figure 5 & 6: Fired pieces laid out at on the foreshore (photographs by the artist)

After these experiments with placing the work in a natural environment, I then had to give serious consideration as to how to exhibit the work in a more public context as my journey did not only involve myself, but also my whānui and my relationships with other people outside that context.

Understanding and reading the work became part of the next task, and this engaged me in a process of exploring different compositional elements and placings which could suggest various interpretations and readings. I chose to use the horizontality of an archaeological grid for layout. Considering where my practice connected or intersected with a theoretical framework also became part of my next research task, as did studying other artists exploring similar territory. These artists provide me with a sense of artistic community and I identify some of them below, with the assistance of critical art writers Hal Foster, Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss:

> For with the object often disturbed, if not dissolved, and the gaze of the viewer often diffused, if not deranged… a new configurative intimation of the body became possible. Early on, [Lucy] Lippard called this corporeal evocation (it was most apparent in [Eva] Hesse) a 'body-ego', more recently, critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Anne Wagner have discussed it instead as non-representational registering of psychic fantasies and bodily drives. It is these three dimensions that are distinctive to Process Art – a logic of materials, a field effect, and a phantasmatic corporeality – and they are probed most effectively by [Richard] Serra, [Robert] Morris and Hesse respectively.[21]

> For Morris…process was a way less to continue sculpture than to move 'beyond objects' altogether. This 'beyond' was not, however, a conceptual reduction of art to an essential idea but an enquiry into its fundamental visuality: 'to take the conditions of the visual field' as its 'structural basis'. To this end Morris would present an array of materials such as thread, waste or dirt that could not be grasped, in profile or in plan, as an image at all – less to set the viewer in motion (as with Serra) than to shift from a focal gaze on a specific object to a 'vacant stare' on a visual field….the process here concerns visuality more than materiality. Or, more precisely, it concerns a visuality that is at once materialised in stuff and scattered in space, decentered from any subject - as if to register that vision is somehow in the world too, that the world gazes back at us as well. Serra and Morris often force our bodies into a phenomenological confrontation with an object or a field that undoes any purity or stability of form. With Hesse, this undoing is also psychological: it is as if, charged in a strange empathy with her objects, our bodies are disrupted from within. Rather than painting or sculpture that reflects a proper figure, an ideal body-ego, back to us as in a mirror, Hesse evokes a body 'deterritorialized' by desires and drives that just might be our own.[22]

My own work is a looping through of personal narrative and a more generic account of position and the way in which one belongs in the world and in places. I do not insist that my audience focus on any given object in my work. It is much more important to me that they experience a field of objects arranged in reference to an archaeological excavation with its careful attention to objects as part of a larger schema.

Thus, the work itself will have undertaken a journey of its own. I view it as a body with extended limbs, a body scattered in particular locations so that it can speak of a sense of place in relation to my own struggle for emplacement. The body of the work is not a single, not a centred, whole and complete unit. Rather, it is a fluid body in fragments, partly 'deterritorialised'in a scattered and decentred manner. Despite my struggle for locatedness and emplacement, I cannot ever reach this in a final and stable sense. Having come to my Kāi Tahu identity only at a late stage in my life, it is rather the process of trying to find a place – in the face of the impossibility of this task – than the arrival at a stable location which underpins my studio work.

Rose McLeod is an inter-media artist who works with textiles, found object assemblage, painting and ceramics. She is completing her Master of Fine Arts Degree at Otago Polytechnic in 2008.

1 Hana O'Regan, *Ko Tahu, Ko Au: Kāi Tahu Tribal Identity* (Christchurch: Horomaka Publishing, , 2001) 78.
2 Ibid., .80.
3 HC Evison, *Te Wāipounamu: The Greenstone Island* (Wellington: Aoraki Press, 1993) 396, as cited in O'Regan.

Figure 7: Exhibition, Whareenui Kāti Huirapa Rūnaka Ki Puketeraki Marae, September, 2008 (photograph by Max Oettli)

4 Hana O'Regan, Ko Tahu, Ko Au: Kāi Tahu *Tribal Identity* (Christchurch: Horomaka Publishing, 2001) 78.
5 Michael Tapp, "Is Reincarnation a Christian Idea?", in *Anthroposophy at Work*, Number1,1994, *Journal of the Anthroposophical Society in New Zealand*, p.27.
6 Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather, "Introduction : Geographies of Personal Discovery", in Teather, Elizabeth Kenworthy (ed.), 1999, *Embodied Geographies : Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage* (London and New York: Routledge) 2.
7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid., 1.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 4.
12 Joan Borsa, "Nomadic Locations, Travelling Subjects: Affirmation of Autobiographical Acts", in White, Peter (ed.) *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future* (Banff: Walter Phillips, 1996) 68.
13 Jim Williams, "Papat*ūā*nuku: Attitudes to Land", in Ka'ai, Tānia M. et al, eds. *Ki te Whaiao: An Introduction to Maori Culture* (Auckland: Pearson Longman, 2004) 50.
14 Translation given to me by Dr Jim Williams.
15 Magdalena Abakanowicz, in *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago and New York: Abbeville Press, 1983) 102.
16 Julian Zugazagoitia,"An Incantation to Presence", in Thierry Raspail and Jean-Hubert Martin (Preface), *Kim Sooja: Conditions of Humanity*, (Catalogue Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, 2003) 57.
17 Diana Wood Curry, "The Archaeological Metaphor : a Personal Excavation", *Artlink*, 12 (20), winter 1992, 23.
18 Ronda Cooper, "The Why of Where, Meaning and Meaningless in New Zealand Landscape", in *The Body of the Land*, South Island Arts Project, Visual Arts Forum (Dunedin: QEII Arts Council, 1992) 32.
19 Michael Parekowhai cited in Jim and Mary Barr, "The Indefinite Article, Michael Parekowhai's Riff on Representation", *Art Asia Pacific*, 23, 73-76.
20 Ronda Cooper, "The Why of Where, Meaning and Meaningless in New Zealand Landscape", in *The Body of the Land*, South Island Arts Project, Visual Arts Forum (Dunedin: QEII Arts Council, 1992) 32.
21 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, Benjamin, *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004) 535.
22 Ibid., 536-537.