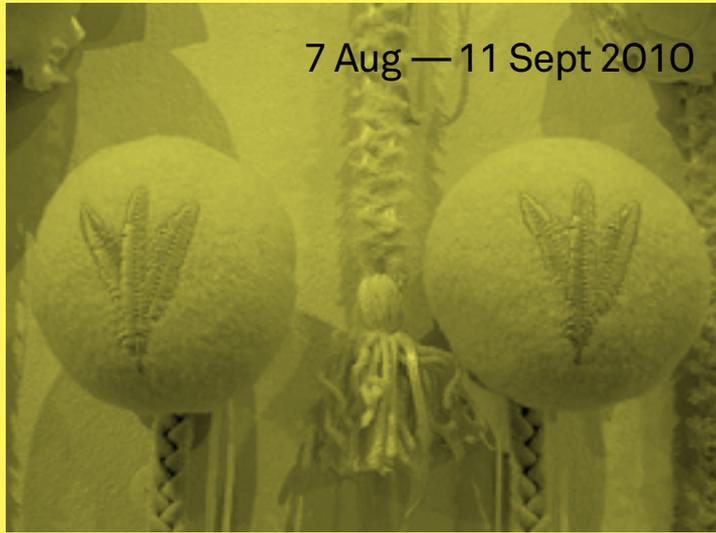


7 Aug — 11 Sept 2010



# Manawa wera Defiant chants

Ngaahina Hohaia  
Karl Rangikawhiti Leonard

ABOVE:  
Ngaahina Hohaia  
*Kao-kao* 2006  
(installation detail)  
satin, recycled woolen  
blankets, embroidery  
cottons.

## *Weaving meaning within contemporary practice*

To sing, recite, repeat, inform, reiterate, impart, provoke, respond, react

All of the above kupu illuminate the concept of chants or waiata and express the ways in which oral traditions can communicate deeper insight and meaning to events, people and relationships. Whether motivated by political struggle or individual desire and ambition the narrative message found within chants have the power to elevate and emancipate agendas and positions. This practice is applied here to describe the pairing of contemporary Maori weavers Ngaahina Hohaia and Karl Rangikawhiti Leonard whom in their own unique way are offering Manawa wera—*defiant chants* to speak of their epistemological position.

Their chants reverberate to a different beat with a diction that is uniquely their own. Framed firmly by the place weaving and the fibre arts in their upbringings, it is no surprise that Hohaia and Leonard were destined to take their love for the art form to new heights with purpose and conviction.

For Ngaahina Hohaia, of Ngāti Moeahu and Ngāti Haupoto descent, Parihaka is the

kāinga from which her world view and heritage are intrinsically shaped. The teachings of the spiritual leaders Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi are implicitly intertwined in how she negotiates the telling of stories, events and tribal narratives.

*19th century Parihaka oratory was rich in symbolism, both ancient and contemporary. Symbolism, that expressed the Taranaki peoples struggle of passive resistance that intertwined both ancient Maori and biblical identities into liberation theology.<sup>1</sup>*

Such prophetic teachings are a source of reverence for Hohaia who imbues elements of this thinking within her art making. One example of the Parihaka tradition is poi manu or poi chants. This customary practice was a way of imparting tribal narratives and recalling significant events. Hohaia draws on the concepts and ideas found within these waiata to present her own contemporary poi manu that give new insight to this tradition of ritual narration.<sup>2</sup> The symbols, motifs and illustrations found

stitched at the centre of each poi reiterate the stories and their connection to Parihaka. Hohaia believes fibre stores memory whether it be a woollen blanket or muka.<sup>3</sup> In this exhibition we find an impressive installation of poi manu strategically placed along the gallery wall, echoing designs and forms found in customary weaving patterns. Stretching from one end of the gallery space, virtually to the other, poi manu serves to reaffirm philosophies that support land retention, communal pride and self respect and echo the very teachings of Te Whiti o Rongomai.

The suspended piece *Te kahu o te Karauna*, hangs heavy in the gallery space. The title of this work comes from an expression found in one of the Parihaka chants. Literally translated to mean 'the cloak of the Crown', Hohaia discusses the confiscation of Maori land by the settler government and the impact this had on the natural environment. Forming the collar to this cloak is a reconstituted two-man saw, similar to those used in the clearing of native forests. With the teeth of the saw detailing the neck of the garment it also describes the eating away of the native landscape. Furthermore the 'body' of the garment is comprised of 160 metres of un-galvanised chain, anchored in three mounds on the gallery floor. The artist's intention is to revisit the seat of power, the throne of authority by reconceptualising this space as one of empowerment and control as opposed to an oppressive colonial event.

Karl Rangikawhiti Leonard, of Te Arawa, Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Raukawa descent, opens up a range of innovative weaving approaches and techniques, subtly sitting amongst what one might describe as strictly

customary mahi raranga. On closer inspection, however, there are many other ideas at work in Leonard's pieces that offer development to customary techniques and ways of executing and understanding the art form.

For Leonard the skill and knowledge of weaving was part of the relationship he shared with his grandmother and the kuia of his kāinga in Rotorua. "Learning such skills wasn't an option— it was universal to our upbringing".<sup>4</sup> The artist also acknowledges being highly influenced by Bubbles Mihinui, Mini Hohepa, Kura Raponi, Homai Balzer, Denny Anaru, Katiroa Tuhakaraina and Emily Schuster from whom he learnt the arts of piupiu making, tāniko, kete making and tukutuku.

*It was a privilege to have access to knowledge and skills through these kuia. They would all have their own tricks and techniques that were their signature style<sup>5</sup>*

A trained carver as well as an experienced weaver, Leonard is constantly striving for quality and excellence with his work. Leonard is one of the more talented weavers of his generation, with a reputation for tackling challenging and ambitious weaving techniques and methods. Whether mastering carving or weaving, for Leonard, learning and understanding the foundations of each art form is the platform from which he pushes the parameters of each discipline to create new statements.

In this exhibition Leonard also considers poi. The diamond shape of Leonard's meticulously crafted and labour intensive poi tāniko explore the spherical geometry of the poi and pushes the boundaries of the form. The technical design and patterning is impressive but it is the subtlety with which the artist has considered form whilst contributing new ideas to customary practice, which really stand out. Like his teachers before him, whom developed new techniques and tricks; a signature style that was individual to them, Leonard also echoes this philosophy and innovation with the subtle developments present in these poi tāniko.

Other works demonstrate Leonard's facility with intricately woven pihepihe and graceful kahu muka, illustrating the breadth of his weaving knowledge and learning. Again it is testament to the legacy of his weaving mentors and the role they have played in his practice. These works are complemented with natural dyes and dying techniques, giving the garments a dignity that is not complicated or contrived.

TOP:  
Karl Rangikawhiti Leonard  
*Makaweroa* 2009  
flax leaf/flax fibre extracted  
and spun, raurekau bark,  
tutu bark, peat.

BOTTOM:  
Karl Rangikawhiti Leonard  
*Poporo tu ki te hamuti* 2010  
flax fibre extracted and  
spun, raurekau bark.

1  
Ngaahina Hohaia,  
artist statement, 2009

2  
Ngaahina Hohaia,  
(personal communication,  
June 5, 2010)

3  
ibid

4  
Karl Rangikawhiti Leonard,  
(personal communication,  
July 4, 2010)

5  
ibid



A committed teacher and practitioner of mahi raranga and mahi whatu he is candid when surveying the current climate within the wider weaving fraternity. Vocal about the lack of peer critique and the need for this to take place more often within the contemporary Maori weaving movement, Leonard believes this absence is not helping the art form to advance.

Manawa wera—*defiant chants*, holds a beat that implies a steadfast and determined resolve and, for differing reasons, it also describes the positions of both Hohaia and Leonard. The metaphorical use of chants to poetically describe the commonalities and

individual aspirations found within their art practices also tell us something of their qualities and beliefs. Whether considered separately or offered in unison – as they are in this exhibition – both makers produce work that implicitly speak of the tensions found within the wider Maori weaving movement. Whether motivated by the stories of Parihaka or a desire to innovate and strive for excellence within the art form, it is the personal convictions of both artists which allow the works in Manawa wera—*defiant chants* to resonate loudly with the viewer.

NIGEL BORELL — 2010  
Pirirākau, Ngāi Te Rangi, Te Whakato whea

## Glossary

*kahu muka*  
fitted shoulder  
garment with  
spun muka  
*kāinga*  
home

*kuia*  
elderly women,  
grandmother  
*kupu*  
words  
*mahi raranga*  
weaving work  
*mahi whatu*  
finger-woven  
fibre work

*muka*  
prepared fibre of  
the harakeke plant  
*pihepihe*  
shoulder cape  
with ornamental  
cylindrical tags  
*poi*  
a light ball on a  
string of varying  
length which is  
swung or twirled

rhythmically to  
sung accompani-  
ment  
*poi manu*  
a Taranaki form  
narration using  
waiata and  
performed with  
repetitive poi  
movements and  
actions

*tāniko*  
coloured  
geometric finger  
woven pattern:  
a finger weaving  
technique  
*waiata*  
songs, chants  
*whenua*  
land

