

Work by~
Julie Kipa/Rangi Kipa/
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Celebrating Matariki and contemporary
responses to customary traditions

23/06—21/07.07

Tepeke Koura

Curated by Karl Chitham Essay by Katie Tua

Maintaining the Continuum

By Katie Tua

Currently in the pre-dawn north-eastern skies above Aotearoa, Matariki traverses the face of Ranginui (Sky Father) acting as a temporal reference for many Maori. Its arrival ushers in the beginning of the Māori New Year and encourages individuals and communities alike to take time to reflect on, and to reap the benefits, of a passing year and begin to plan for the year ahead.

For thousands of years Matariki has opened the way for Maori to navigate the past, the present and the future. Narratives associated with this constellation, are one of the many ways in which Māori are able to strengthen whakapapa relationships, not only between generations, but also with mana atua (Maori deities), mainly Rongomatane, god of cultivated foods and peaceful pursuits. Implicit in these associations are allusions related to **harvest** – reaping the benefits of work completed; **preservation** – of matauranga (knowledge), through wananga (discussions and deliberations) and the sharing of histories and skills; and **nurturing** – the planning and growth of future ventures and developments.

In 2005, *Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Maori*, the Maori Language Commission re-claimed and revitalised the celebration of Matariki as a vehicle for re-igniting the relevance of Te Reo Maori as a cultural imperative for iwi Māori. Similarly, the role that Toi Maori (Māori art forms - song, dance, poetry and visual arts) play in supporting Matariki celebrations has become synonymous with the reclamation of a ‘cultural space’ that has, over time, like Matariki celebrations, been relegated to the back benches of a rapidly changing and dynamic world.

A brief historical revision of Maori visual culture transition brings to light, a visual cultural space that has always been, and still is, in a state of constant flux. In 1997, as a response to European classifications of Māori art, Hirini Moko Mead created an archaeological chronology based on stylistic changes and used the concept of ‘growth’ as an allegory to describe the linear development of Māori Art.

His application of metaphorical names to each phase, **Nga Kakano** – the seeds (900–1200 AD), **Te Tipunga** – the growth (1200–1500 AD); **Te Puawaitanga** – the flowering (1500–1800 AD) and **Te Huringa** – the turning (1800–present); consolidates the physical and cosmogonic whakapapa connections of Maori to their art. This model reinforces the significance of customary Maori knowledge in the creation of objects, historical and contemporary. It also serves to bring to light the imbued qualities of tapu (sacred), noa (secular) and mauri (life-force) generated by the artist in an effort to engage the object as a form of mediator between ira tangata (human realm) and ira atua (spiritual realm).

In 2005, Mason Durie developed a chronological table, which lends support to Mead’s model by summarising the evolution of the culture of Māori and their art forms over time. It cites the endurance of Māori from the time of Pacific voyaging, navigation and migratory planning (500-1000 AD), through indigenous transitions that involved adaptation to climate and environment and the formation of social groups (1000-1300 AD).

During the latter phase, the construction of new societal rules, values and beliefs, saw the materialisation of new forms and patterns as carving artists departed from a Polynesian geometric design system and began to develop a curvilinear design system. The decline of the edge notch and punch mark as dominant design motifs paved the way for the emergence of the chevron, the

tiki, the manaia and the double spiral. This form of artistic language was indicative of a highly developed social group who had established a mode of communication that firmly bound together ancestor and ritual narrative within a visual cultural space.

The impact of colonisation (1820–1900 AD) saw the adaptive task of negotiation coming to the fore as two peoples, Maori and European, made arrangements for power sharing. During this phase the cultural space surrounding the creation of Maori art was heavily influenced by numerous factors including: infectious diseases, the landwars, cultural oppression, alienation of resources and religion.

Missionaries, through the conversion process, encouraged Maori artists to move away from the depiction of ‘pagan’ deities and iconography and to introduce a more Christian set of visual values. An example of this was the removal of genitalia from ancestor figures, which generated a response by some northern iwi artists who reconfigured patterns to disguise genitalia so as to maintain concepts related to procreation, continuation and whakapapa, and as a result produced some of the finest waka huia and papahou in existence today.

In later years (1858–1900), as the Maori world was progressively dismantled through political machinations and the loss of land, the wharenuī (meeting house) became the physical manifestation of a peoples’ connection to their land, tipuna (ancestors) and mana atua.

Inside the painted houses of the North Island, narratives ceased to be exclusively about tangata whenua. Influenced by the introduction of paint and European art conventions, a departure from a customary asymmetric kowhaiwhai system to a symmetrical one became the norm. Native plants in European pots became metaphors for the restriction of indigenous access to resources and marked a significant shift in the way Maori interpreted the changing world around them. The translation of the carved tiki to painted tiki, reflected an art form that had transitioned to encompass not only a new

culture but a recontextualised cultural space which flexed and expanded under the introduction of a new mode of practice.

Over the last two decades the contemporary view of Maori Art origins has been conditioned by the emergence of *Te Maori* onto the international art scene. This group of objects were exhibited for the first time in New York on 10 September 1984. Before the end of its fourth week an estimated 70,000 people had been to see it at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At its close on 6 January 1985, it was estimated that this exhibition had been viewed by 202,000 people.

The act of placing these objects into an ‘other cultural space’ transformed these works from ‘object’ to ‘artefact’ to ‘taonga’. *Te Maori* was instrumental in moving Maori visual cultural space from the back benches of obscurity to the fore-front of international art consciousness.

As Maori people move forward through the new millennium, celebrations like Matariki re-affirm the importance of maintaining a cultural continuum. The transmission of Matauranga Māori ensures that future generations reap the benefits of Māori narratives that have been transformed into contemporary Māori art forms, imbued with the artists’ sense of cultural identity. In this way *Tepeke Koura* relates not only to the complexities of navigating contemporary indigenous practices but also demonstrates the way in which contemporary Maori makers are unable to shake the inherent links their practice has to customary craft and design traditions.

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Raku body clay
2006 - 2007

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Printed shirts
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Te Karanga O Rongo
Matai, Kauri
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Matau a Maui
Wood, paua, bone, muka
2007

Julie Kipa
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Ruaitepupuke - He Manu Tangata
Acrylic on aluminium blinds, waxed nylon, bamboo
2007

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The Seventh Muse
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2006 – 2007

Tepeke
Koura

Tepeke Koura (Coal Sack) is a mariner's term for the Matariki constellation.