



PĀTAKA
ART + MUSEUM

WI TAEPA

Retrospect



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THE ARTIST

TUTU FINGERS

Aboard a humble corrugated-iron waka, built from neighbourhood scraps and roadside tarseal, a young Wi Taepa set out to test his boat-making skills upon the Waiwhetu stream. That morning, as the sun's rays trickled down the cool jade surface of the stream, Taepa drew a deep breath and launched himself into the unknown. With a sigh of relief, he floated smoothly out into the gentle current. Together with the neighbourhood kids who had seen the sight and clambered aboard, they sailed around Te Whiti Park, emerging triumphantly at the site where the wharehau Arohanui ki te Tangata would soon stand.

It would be fair to say that Wi possessed the 'Maui-complex' from an early age. A true tutu-fingers. Someone with a keen eye and a penchant for doing things, just to see if he can. And often he could. This industrious spirit would prove to be both a blessing and a cross to bear for a young man who would found himself using art as a means of dealing with adversity throughout his life.

Waka huia, from *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki The Call of Taranaki* series, 2012 (detail). Red raku with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection of the artist.

WAIWHETU

Growing up in the decades following World War II, Wi Taepa experienced an era of rapid change. Waiwhetu, in Lower Hutt, was a hub of political and cultural activism for Māori living in Wellington. When the raids on Parihaka took place in the 1880s, there were few Māori living at Waiwhetu, and those who were there had very rudimentary housing compared to the relative luxuries of Parihaka in its prime. As Native Reserve lands, the government was compelled by iwi leader Ihaia Puketapu and several prominent Māori politicians of the 1920s and 1930s to develop this site into an urban settlement for descendants of Te Ati Awa.¹ Many of Tohu and Te Whiti's followers who came to settle there brought with them the teachings and philosophies of non-violent resistance. Those lessons learned in Taranaki under the heavy hand of the Crown had fostered an environment of proactive and politically astute leaders who were determined to master the ways of the Pākehā, for themselves and their descendants.

Through links on his maternal side, Taepa's family were allowed to settle at Waiwhetu, and in 1946 they welcomed Wi Te Tau Pirika Taepa into the world—the first of nine children to Laura (nee Black) and Canon Hohepa Taepa. Laura Taepa was heavily involved in the establishment of the Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club, working closely with Lady Miria Pomare to develop a gathering place for urban Māori.² Taepa's father, Canon Hohepa Taepa, was a Māori Anglican Bishop.

Mourning, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, c. 1997 (detail). Anagama fired glazed red raku clay with harakeke cord and bone amulet. Collection of Garry Nicholas.



He descended from a line of tohunga whakairo, master carvers from Te Roro-O-Te-Rangi and Tunohopu hapu of Ngāti Whakaue. This upbringing provided Taepa with a fertile grounding in Taranaki and Te Arawa art, culture and politics.

RANGIATEA

During Taepa's teenage years, his father's missionary work led the family to live in Otaki where Canon Hohepa Taepa ministered at the Rangiatea Church. Canon Hohepa Taepa's brother, Taunu 'Doc' Tai Taepa, had carried on the family tradition of whakairo and in 1950 he carved the famed Rangiatea pulpit. The pulpit was distinctive in that it introduced figurative Māori carvings into Christian architecture with six Māori atua depicted holding the gospel of Jesus aloft—something that was relatively unheard of at the time.³ This willingness to transgress accepted conventions of tikanga would stay with Wi Taepa as a major influence throughout his career.

Following their time in Otaki, the family moved to Whanganui where Wi Taepa attended Whanganui Technical College. Whanganui would play an important role in Taepa's art practice and he would return to live there on multiple occasions throughout his life. Leaving school, Taepa moved back to Pōneke where he worked in retail merchandising at the DIC Department Store on Lambton Quay in central Wellington. Working as a window display artist he began to hone his aesthetic design sensibilities, putting his resourcefulness

Parautanga plough, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, c. 2012 (detail). Anagama fired red raku with two tone pearl auto paint. Collection of Wi Taepa.



to full use developing innovative design solutions to negotiate size, space, colour and scale—skills that would come to serve him well later in life.

After five years in this position, the prospect of a new adventure dawned on the horizon, and in 1968 he enrolled in the New Zealand army. Taepa would eventually go on to fight the American War in Vietnam from 1970 to 1972 as part of a predominantly Māori infantry unit dubbed the ‘Grey Ghosts’. Taepa and his platoon were placed on the front lines, searching out military encampments ahead of the US troops. The atrocities of war and days spent drenched in ‘agent orange’ would stay with him forever, as would the moments of beauty that would eventually lead to a lifelong affinity with the artistic traditions of South-East Asia—a path he would not fully realise for another decade.

WI TAKO

Returning to Aotearoa New Zealand, Taepa gained a position working for the Justice Department as a Prison Officer at Wi Tako Prison—later renamed Rimutaka Prison. Taepa used his knowledge of Māori art and culture to develop workshops for the inmates. Initially working in wood, bone, stone, leather and copper, Taepa’s industrious nature helped to foster a strong work ethic amongst his students. This program came to the attention of retired parliamentarian Jock McEwen and iwi leader Ralph Love who organised a space at Petone Technical College, away from the prison, for the students to carve

Parautanga plough, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, c. 2005 (detail). Anagama fired red raku with terra sigillata. Collection of Wi Taepa. Work courtesy of Sonya Rimene.



two poupou for the Michael Fowler Centre.

In 1976 Taepa and his students worked on the carvings for Orongomai meeting house in Upper Hutt, Wellington and around this same period Taepa was asked to carve one of the poupou at the newly constructed Pipitea marae in central Wellington—the new home-to-be for the Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club. These achievements were confirmation of Taepa's true calling. This young man who had once watched his mother help start the Ngāti Pōneke Club was now on a path to finding his place within the community, using art as his tool of empowerment.

In 1985 Taepa accepted a rehabilitation position working with at-risk-youth at the Kohitere Boy's Training Institute in Levin. It was during this period that Taepa first began to really experiment with clay. Unlike the men he had worked with at Wi Tako Prison, many of whom were good at heart but had for one reason or another made some poor decisions in life, the young boys at Kohitere faced other challenges that were beyond their control. Clay provided a safe and therapeutic medium that could be recycled and reused. Perhaps reminding him of himself at their age, the boys at Kohitere impressed Taepa with their skills in tool making, using rudimentary materials to create intricate patterned works—a practice he would impart upon successive generations of eager young artists.

With the closure of Kohitere in 1988, Taepa made the decision to seriously focus on his art

practice, and in 1989 he enrolled in a Certificate of Craft Design at Whitireia Community Polytechnic in Porirua. Over the next four years all of the experiences from Taepa's childhood and early adult life would begin to manifest in his art, giving form to a distinctive range of vessels and sculptures that he would continue to expand upon throughout his career.

THE WORKS

TE PŪTAKE

Taepa's early works involved a lot of burnishing, a time-consuming and labour intensive practice that resulted in a smooth, gloss-like surface texture. His influences at the time included New Zealand ceramicists such as Robin Stewart, Jo Munro, Paul Winspear and James Grieg.

Searching for his own artistic voice, Taepa decided to put the potter's wheel and burnishing aside, focusing instead on the sculptural practice that he knew best, whakairo. Freeforming sculptures by hand, using a combination of coiling, pinching and slab techniques, Taepa's works began to take on a more organic feel—being inherently imperfect and misshapen by gravity, human touch and the various methods of firing. In their irregularity, the works demonstrated a sense of honesty, being true to both the natural texture of the material and the process of working by hand—values inherent to Taepa's practice as a wood carver.

This Māori approach to sculpture held further philosophical implications beyond the physical making process. Considering the place of uku,

Untitled ipu, from the
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995 (detail).
Stoneware clay and glaze.
Collection of George Kojis.





clay, in Māori cosmology, Taepa's relationship with the medium began to change. Coming from the body of Papatūānuku, the primordial ancestor from whom all life is said to have been created, working with uku was no longer a mere technical challenge, but a sacred undertaking. With this understanding, Taepa began to form a conceptual framework for his art practice.

KAUHURI

The first major series of works that Taepa created in this manner responded to the scenes of urban development that he had witnessed as a child. The rapid conversion of Waiwhetu, and other urban Māori kāinga, from communities centred round planted cultivations to fully urbanised consumerist communities, had a profound impact on Taepa. Whether conscious or subliminal in creation, Taepa's works from this period often depict this trajectory, responding to forms that epitomise these changes.

One of the more repetitive forms is that of kauhuri or mound-making, referencing the process of turning soil to plant kumara and other root vegetables. By pushing his fingers from the interior of a still-wet clay vessel, Taepa is able to create tuberous extrusions on the surface of his work, allowing the clay to bulk and crack like freshly tilled soil. Vessels for storing kai, such as hue and kete, were also a prominent feature in this series of works.

Nuku Puta, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, 1994 (detail). Anagama fired red raku. Collection of The Dowse Art Museum.

Later, industrial forms used in food cultivation, such as mechanised ploughs and bulldozer blades, began to appear in his works. Further exploring this process of industrialisation, Taepa was inspired by the paintings of Robert Ellis who seemed to be able to evoke a sense of the speed and scale of urban development that was occurring at the time. Taepa responded with stylised representations of suburban maps and imagined topographical cityscapes carved into the surface of his sculptures.

HONONGA

When the Ngā Kaihanga Uku National Collective of Māori Clay Workers was formed in 1987, Taepa was there as a founding member. He and his companions, Manos Nathan, Baye Riddell, Paerau Corneal and Colleen Waata Ulrich became known as the Tokorima—the five fingers of Māori ceramic art practice. As a collective, the Tokorima would support each other's work through research and camaraderie.

Lapita pottery discoveries at that time had revealed a much longer history of indigenous ceramic practice throughout Oceania than many Māori artists and academics had previously realised, and much of the investigations undertaken by Ngā Kaihanga Uku focused on the ancestral connections between Māori and the people and art practices of South-East Asia.

Taepa's *Hononga Connections* series explored these connections through incised patterns on the surface of his vessels, drawing links between customary

Long-net fishing, from
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995 (detail).
Anagama fired stoneware.
Collection Pātaka Art +
Museum.





Māori imagery and similar markings found throughout Melanesia and West Polynesia. Taepa's imagery hybridised navigational imagery employed by indigenous cultures across the Pacific, merging them with military wayfinding maps that Taepa had used during his time in Vietnam—connecting migration lines across Asia to Aotearoa New Zealand, but also to Taepa's own journey in life.

WHITIREIA

Upon graduation from Whitireia in 1992, the Art and Craft Course Supervisor Anne Philbin offered Taepa a fulltime teaching position, specialising in clay sculpture. Taepa accepted the position and worked at Whitireia part-time while also teaching at Whanganui Polytechnic as an art mentor. During his time in Whanganui, Taepa developed a strong relationship with Whanganui-based US ceramic artist George Kojis. The expertise that Kojis would bring to New Zealand ceramics would prove to be invaluable to Taepa's art practice.

Kojis, himself a Vietnam war veteran, and a student of renowned US porcelain artist Rudolf Staffel, held great admiration for indigenous modes of art practice and introduced Taepa to an impressive collection of international ceramicists, including Sudanese potter Siddig el'Nigoumi, Kenyan ceramicist Magdalene Anyango Namakhiya Odundo and English sculptor Peter Beard. Taepa would go on to workshop with several of these artists in England at the behest of Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Craft Advisor Edith Ryan. Ryan

Untitled ipu, from *Mahere Mapping* series, c. 2011 (detail). Red raku clay with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection Pātaka Art + Museum.



encouraged Taepa to expand his artistic horizons abroad and over the next ten years Taepa worked closely with Ngā Kaihanga Uku and Toi Māori Aotearoa to exhibit extensively nationally and internationally—including a three-month residency at Glenn Green Gallery in Santa Fe in 1994 where he learned bronze casting at the Shidoni Foundry.

Major exhibitions during this period included *NZ Choice* in Santa Ana, United States in 1994; *Harare* at the Zimbabwe National Art Gallery in 1995; *Haka* which toured through the United Kingdom in 1998; *Kiwa* at Spirit Wrestler Gallery in Vancouver, Canada in 2000; and *Ngā Tokorima* at the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2005. In 1999 Taepa completed his Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts from Whanganui School of Design and subsequently a Master's Degree in Philosophy in Māori Visual Arts from Massey University, Palmerston North in 2007.

TE REO KARANGA O TARANAKI

Following a series of serious health issues in 2012, Taepa held a small but important solo exhibition at City Gallery Wellington where, for the first time, he began to revisit some of the darker moments from his time in Vietnam. The series confronted Taepa's own mortality and the impact that he had made on other people's lives. Perhaps in an attempt to hold on to a sense of security, the works also recalled influences from Parihaka and the philosophies of non-violent resistance that Taepa had experienced during his childhood at Waiwhetu.

Pātaka, from *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki The Call of Taranaki* series, 2012 (detail). Red raku clay with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection Pātaka Art + Museum.

The works in this series traced the journey of life, beginning with a small waka-pito—a repository vessel for the umbilical-cord of a newly born child. The works gradually increased in size, with the largest piece featuring a stylised Māori Pātaka—a storage-house representing the fullness of life at its prime. The series culminates with a small waka tūpāpaku, a funerary vessel, and behind that, projected on the wall, a photograph of Taepa and the surviving members of the Grey Ghost infantry unit on their last day in Vietnam.

Visually, influences from Taepa's time in South-East Asia were evident in the use of white slips applied liberally across the entire collection. In keeping with his personal aesthetic, Taepa manufactured a crackle effect across the surface of the slip which he further enhanced through the use of manganese oxide. While this series of works opened a new area of artistic exploration, the conflated histories of war and non-violent protest were hard to reconcile. Like the inmates he had worked with in the past, the process of creating helped Taepa to come to terms with his past, and the present he had helped to create.

In 2013, works from this series were shown in *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki: The Call of Taranaki* exhibition at Puke Ariki Museum in New Plymouth. The exhibition featured twenty-five contemporary Māori artists with ties to the various iwi and hapu from Taranaki. The works Taepa created featured a strong Taranaki carving style—something which he had not explored

Untitled ipu, from *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki*
The Call of Taranaki
series, 2012. Red raku
clay with white sigillata
and manganese oxide.
Collection Pātaka Art +
Museum. Image courtesy
of Puke Ariki. Accession
number PA2014.28.



in great detail previously. The exhibition was somewhat of a homecoming for Taepa whose early Ngāti Whakaue carving influences from his father's side had not led to a strong exploration of his mother's Te Ati Awa whakapapa.

In the same year Taepa's works went on to be featured in the first major Ngā Kaihanga Uku survey exhibition, *Uku Rere*, that began at Pātaka Art + Museum in Porirua and went on to be exhibited at galleries and museums across the country for the next two years. *Retrospect* is the largest survey exhibition of Taepa's works to date. The exhibition is as much a celebration of Taepa's art practice as it is a tribute to all the people who took part in the journey, in particular Manos Nathan and Colleen Ulrich who passed away in 2015. As of 2016, Taepa shows little interest in slowing down. He still manages to rally a community around him, teaching art at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa in Porirua where he continues to push himself, and his students, down new streams of creative practice.

REUBEN FRIEND

NOTES

- 1 Anon., 2010. A "glorious day" dawns at Waiwhetu. [Online] Available at: http://www.atiawa.com/marae_history3.htm
- 2 Taepa, L., 2016. *Laura Taepa interview for Wi Taepa exhibition* [Interview] (7 June 2016).
- 3 Taepa, C. H., 1966. The Carved Pulpit. In: *The Rangiatea Story*. Wellington: Kerslake, Billens and Humphrey, p. 36.

Untitled ipu, from *Raranga*
Cross Hatching series,
c. 1990. Red raku clay.
Collection of the artist.



Mourning, from the
Kauhuri Cultivation series,
c. 1997. Anagama fired
glazed red raku clay with
harakeke cord and bone
amulet. Collection of
Garry Nicholas.



Nuku Puta, from the
Kauhuri Cultivation series,
1994. Anagama fired red
raku. Collection of The
Dowse Art Museum.



Parautanga plough, from
the *Kauhuri Cultivation*
series, c. 2012. Anagama
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Collection of Wi Taepa.



Parautanga plough, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, c. 2005. Anagama fired red raku with terra sigillata. Collection of Wi Taepa. Work courtesy of Sonya Rimene.



Long-net fishing, from
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995. Anagama
fired stoneware. Collection
of Pātaka Art + Museum.



Untitled ipu, from
Hononga Connection
series, c. 1990. Red
raku clay and white
porcelain with sigillata
and manganese oxide.
Collection of the artist.



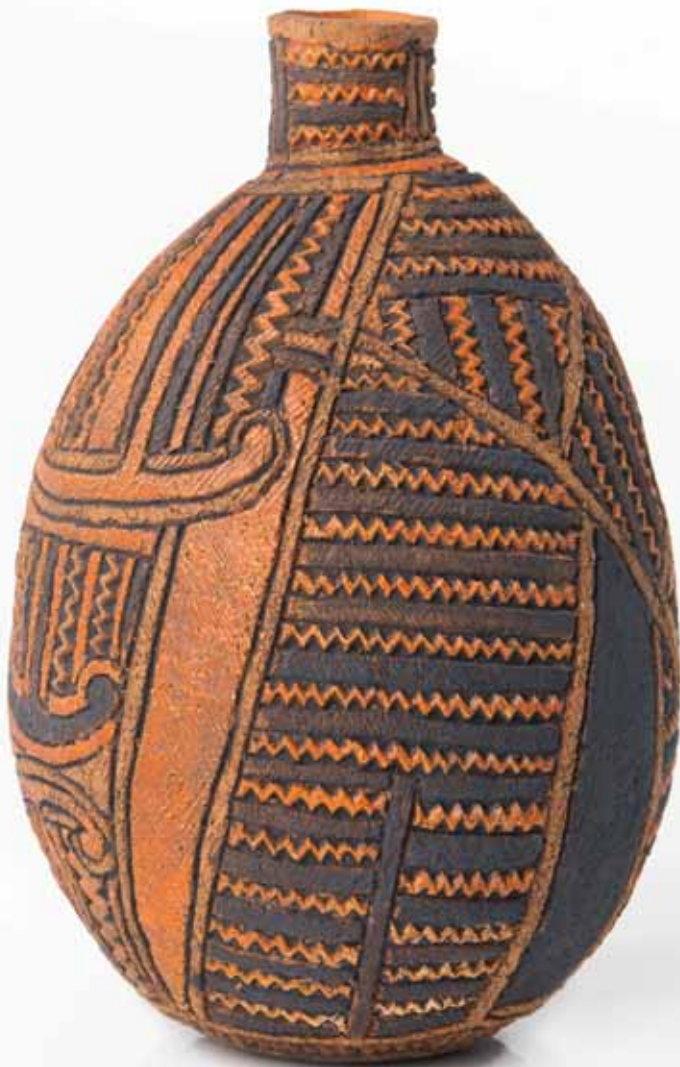
Untitled ipu, from
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995. Stoneware
with terra sigillata.
Collection of Darcy
Nicholas.



Untitled ipu, from the
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995. Stoneware
clay and glaze. Collection
of George Kojis.



Untitled ipu, from *Mahere Mapping* series, c. 2011.
Red raku clay with terra
sigillata and manganese
oxide. Collection of Darcy
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Untitled ipu, from *Mahere Mapping* series, c. 2011.
Red raku clay with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection of Pātaka Art + Museum.



Pātaka, from *Te Reo
Karanga o Taranaki The
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Waka huia, from *Te Reo
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2012. Red raku with white
sigillata and manganese
oxide. Collection of the
artist.



Whale migration, from
the *Hononga Connections*
series, c. 1998. Collection
of Pātaka Art + Museum.
Gift of the Deane
Endowment Trust.



GLOSSARY

Anagama – A Japanese term for a type of wood fired kiln.

Hononga – Connections.

Ipu – A small vessel.

Iwi – Indigenous New Zealand Māori nation.

Kauhuri – To turn soil in a garden.

Parihaka – Parihaka was the site of an industrious Māori community in Southern Taranaki led by Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi which was illegally invaded and destroyed by government forces in the 1880s.

Mana whenua – Power associated with possession and occupation of iwi land and waterways.

Marae – The common contemporary use of this term often refers to a Māori meeting house and the surrounding lands and facilities.

Maui-complex – Māori colloquialism for someone who demonstrates the character traits of Maui, a legendary figure renowned throughout the Pacific for his mischievous yet industrious feats.

Ngāti Whakaue – A Māori iwi from the central north island who trace their lineage to the Te Arawa waka.

Parautanga – To plough a garden.

Pātaka – a storage-house.

Pōneke – A Māori transliteration of Port Nicholson. Used today in reference to central Wellington.

Pūtake – Foundation.

Rere – Flow.

Uku – Clay.

Te Arawa – One of the principal migratory waka that is credited with bringing the iwi of the central north island to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Te Aroha ki te Tangata marae – The name of a Māori marae in Lower Hutt, Wellington that translates as The Love to the People.

Te Ati Awa – Sometimes referred to as Ngāti Awa in various historic records, Te Ati Awa is a Māori iwi who hold mana whenua status in the northern area of Taranaki and central Wellington.

Te Roro-o-te-rangi – One of the principal hapu (nation groups) of Ngāti Whakaue.

Te Whiti Park – A park in Lower Hutt, Wellington named after Te Whiti o Rongomai, a late nineteenth century leader of the Taranaki village of Parihaka who alongside Tohu Kakahi is credited with the establishment of the non-violent resistance movement.

Rangiatea – The original Rangiatea church was established by Te Rauparaha, a leader of the Ngāti Toa Rangatira iwi in Otaki in 1847.

Tohunga whakairo – Master carver.

Tutu fingers – Māori colloquialism for someone who is prone to tinkering or playing with objects to understand how they work.

Waiwhetu – A river in Lower Hutt, Wellington that derives its name from its ability to reflect the stars at night.

Waka – Canoe, boat or ship.

Waka-pito – a repository vessel for the umbilical-cord of a newly born child.

Waka-tūpāpaku – a funerary chest.

Whakairo – Carving or mark-making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Wi Taepa also wishes to acknowledge friends, family and patrons who have supported him, including the whānau of Ngā Kaihanga Uku, Helen Smith, Anne Philbin, Edith Ryan, Val Collins, Liz McLeod-Taepa, Sir Roderick and Gillian, Lady Deane and mentor George Kojis. Taepa also wishes to acknowledge all of the institutions and art dealers who have supported his practice, including Creative New Zealand, Toi Māori Aotearoa, Te Waka Toi, Kura Gallery, John Gow, Spirit Wrestler Gallery, Glen Green, Pātaka Art + Museum and all of the galleries that supported the *Uku Rere* exhibition.

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PĀTAKA

ART + MUSEUM

www.pataka.org.nz
Cnr Norrie & Parumoana Sts,
PO Box 50 218,
Porirua City 5240,
New Zealand
Ph: +64 4 237 1511

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manganese oxide. Collection of the artist.

FRONTISPIECE: Wi Taepa pictured with
one of his *raranga cross hatching* series
ipu shown in the foreground at Whitireia
Polytechnic in Porirua, Wellington c. 1990.
Image courtesy of Whitireia Polytechnic
archives. Photographer unknown.



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TUTU FINGERS

Aboard a humble corrugated-iron waka, built from neighbourhood scraps and roadside tarseal, a young Wi Taepa set out to test his boat-making skills upon the Waiwhetu stream. That morning, as the sun's rays trickled down the cool jade surface of the stream, Taepa drew a deep breath and launched himself into the unknown. With a sigh of relief, he floated smoothly out into the gentle current. Together with the neighbourhood kids who had seen the sight and clambered aboard, they sailed around Te Whiti Park, emerging triumphantly at the site where the wharehau Arohanui ki te Tangata would soon stand.

It would be fair to say that Wi possessed the 'Maui-complex' from an early age. A true tutu-fingers. Someone with a keen eye and a penchant for doing things, just to see if he can. And often he could. This industrious spirit would prove to be both a blessing and a cross to bear for a young man who would found himself using art as a means of dealing with adversity throughout his life.

Waka huia, from *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki The Call of Taranaki* series, 2012 (detail). Red raku with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection of the artist.

WAIWHETU

Growing up in the decades following World War II, Wi Taepa experienced an era of rapid change. Waiwhetu, in Lower Hutt, was a hub of political and cultural activism for Māori living in Wellington. When the raids on Parihaka took place in the 1880s, there were few Māori living at Waiwhetu, and those who were there had very rudimentary housing compared to the relative luxuries of Parihaka in its prime. As Native Reserve lands, the government was compelled by iwi leader Ihaia Puketapu and several prominent Māori politicians of the 1920s and 1930s to develop this site into an urban settlement for descendants of Te Ati Awa.¹ Many of Tohu and Te Whiti's followers who came to settle there brought with them the teachings and philosophies of non-violent resistance. Those lessons learned in Taranaki under the heavy hand of the Crown had fostered an environment of proactive and politically astute leaders who were determined to master the ways of the Pākehā, for themselves and their descendants.

Through links on his maternal side, Taepa's family were allowed to settle at Waiwhetu, and in 1946 they welcomed Wi Te Tau Pirika Taepa into the world—the first of nine children to Laura (nee Black) and Canon Hohepa Taepa. Laura Taepa was heavily involved in the establishment of the Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club, working closely with Lady Miria Pomare to develop a gathering place for urban Māori.² Taepa's father, Canon Hohepa Taepa, was a Māori Anglican Bishop.

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RANGIATEA

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Following their time in Otaki, the family moved to Whanganui where Wi Taepa attended Whanganui Technical College. Whanganui would play an important role in Taepa's art practice and he would return to live there on multiple occasions throughout his life. Leaving school, Taepa moved back to Pōneke where he worked in retail merchandising at the DIC Department Store on Lambton Quay in central Wellington. Working as a window display artist he began to hone his aesthetic design sensibilities, putting his resourcefulness

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After five years in this position, the prospect of a new adventure dawned on the horizon, and in 1968 he enrolled in the New Zealand army. Taepa would eventually go on to fight the American War in Vietnam from 1970 to 1972 as part of a predominantly Māori infantry unit dubbed the ‘Grey Ghosts’. Taepa and his platoon were placed on the front lines, searching out military encampments ahead of the US troops. The atrocities of war and days spent drenched in ‘agent orange’ would stay with him forever, as would the moments of beauty that would eventually lead to a lifelong affinity with the artistic traditions of South-East Asia—a path he would not fully realise for another decade.

WI TAKO

Returning to Aotearoa New Zealand, Taepa gained a position working for the Justice Department as a Prison Officer at Wi Tako Prison—later renamed Rimutaka Prison. Taepa used his knowledge of Māori art and culture to develop workshops for the inmates. Initially working in wood, bone, stone, leather and copper, Taepa’s industrious nature helped to foster a strong work ethic amongst his students. This program came to the attention of retired parliamentarian Jock McEwen and iwi leader Ralph Love who organised a space at Petone Technical College, away from the prison, for the students to carve

Parautanga plough, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, c. 2005 (detail). Anagama fired red raku with terra sigillata. Collection of Wi Taepa. Work courtesy of Sonya Rimene.



two poupou for the Michael Fowler Centre.

In 1976 Taepa and his students worked on the carvings for Orongomai meeting house in Upper Hutt, Wellington and around this same period Taepa was asked to carve one of the poupou at the newly constructed Pipitea marae in central Wellington—the new home-to-be for the Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club. These achievements were confirmation of Taepa's true calling. This young man who had once watched his mother help start the Ngāti Pōneke Club was now on a path to finding his place within the community, using art as his tool of empowerment.

In 1985 Taepa accepted a rehabilitation position working with at-risk-youth at the Kohitere Boy's Training Institute in Levin. It was during this period that Taepa first began to really experiment with clay. Unlike the men he had worked with at Wi Tako Prison, many of whom were good at heart but had for one reason or another made some poor decisions in life, the young boys at Kohitere faced other challenges that were beyond their control. Clay provided a safe and therapeutic medium that could be recycled and reused. Perhaps reminding him of himself at their age, the boys at Kohitere impressed Taepa with their skills in tool making, using rudimentary materials to create intricate patterned works—a practice he would impart upon successive generations of eager young artists.

With the closure of Kohitere in 1988, Taepa made the decision to seriously focus on his art

practice, and in 1989 he enrolled in a Certificate of Craft Design at Whitireia Community Polytechnic in Porirua. Over the next four years all of the experiences from Taepa's childhood and early adult life would begin to manifest in his art, giving form to a distinctive range of vessels and sculptures that he would continue to expand upon throughout his career.

THE WORKS

TE PŪTAKE

Taepa's early works involved a lot of burnishing, a time-consuming and labour intensive practice that resulted in a smooth, gloss-like surface texture. His influences at the time included New Zealand ceramicists such as Robin Stewart, Jo Munro, Paul Winspear and James Grieg.

Searching for his own artistic voice, Taepa decided to put the potter's wheel and burnishing aside, focusing instead on the sculptural practice that he knew best, whakairo. Freeforming sculptures by hand, using a combination of coiling, pinching and slab techniques, Taepa's works began to take on a more organic feel—being inherently imperfect and misshapen by gravity, human touch and the various methods of firing. In their irregularity, the works demonstrated a sense of honesty, being true to both the natural texture of the material and the process of working by hand—values inherent to Taepa's practice as a wood carver.

This Māori approach to sculpture held further philosophical implications beyond the physical making process. Considering the place of uku,

Untitled ipu, from the
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995 (detail).
Stoneware clay and glaze.
Collection of George Kojis.





clay, in Māori cosmology, Taepa's relationship with the medium began to change. Coming from the body of Papatūānuku, the primordial ancestor from whom all life is said to have been created, working with uku was no longer a mere technical challenge, but a sacred undertaking. With this understanding, Taepa began to form a conceptual framework for his art practice.

KAUHURI

The first major series of works that Taepa created in this manner responded to the scenes of urban development that he had witnessed as a child. The rapid conversion of Waiwhetu, and other urban Māori kāinga, from communities centred round planted cultivations to fully urbanised consumerist communities, had a profound impact on Taepa. Whether conscious or subliminal in creation, Taepa's works from this period often depict this trajectory, responding to forms that epitomise these changes.

One of the more repetitive forms is that of kauhuri or mound-making, referencing the process of turning soil to plant kumara and other root vegetables. By pushing his fingers from the interior of a still-wet clay vessel, Taepa is able to create tuberous extrusions on the surface of his work, allowing the clay to bulk and crack like freshly tilled soil. Vessels for storing kai, such as hue and kete, were also a prominent feature in this series of works.

Nuku Puta, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, 1994 (detail). Anagama fired red raku. Collection of The Dowse Art Museum.

Later, industrial forms used in food cultivation, such as mechanised ploughs and bulldozer blades, began to appear in his works. Further exploring this process of industrialisation, Taepa was inspired by the paintings of Robert Ellis who seemed to be able to evoke a sense of the speed and scale of urban development that was occurring at the time. Taepa responded with stylised representations of suburban maps and imagined topographical cityscapes carved into the surface of his sculptures.

HONONGA

When the Ngā Kaihanga Uku National Collective of Māori Clay Workers was formed in 1987, Taepa was there as a founding member. He and his companions, Manos Nathan, Baye Riddell, Paerau Corneal and Colleen Waata Ulrich became known as the Tokorima—the five fingers of Māori ceramic art practice. As a collective, the Tokorima would support each other's work through research and camaraderie.

Lapita pottery discoveries at that time had revealed a much longer history of indigenous ceramic practice throughout Oceania than many Māori artists and academics had previously realised, and much of the investigations undertaken by Ngā Kaihanga Uku focused on the ancestral connections between Māori and the people and art practices of South-East Asia.

Taepa's *Hononga Connections* series explored these connections through incised patterns on the surface of his vessels, drawing links between customary

Long-net fishing, from
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995 (detail).
Anagama fired stoneware.
Collection Pātaka Art +
Museum.





Māori imagery and similar markings found throughout Melanesia and West Polynesia. Taepa's imagery hybridised navigational imagery employed by indigenous cultures across the Pacific, merging them with military wayfinding maps that Taepa had used during his time in Vietnam—connecting migration lines across Asia to Aotearoa New Zealand, but also to Taepa's own journey in life.

WHITIREIA

Upon graduation from Whitireia in 1992, the Art and Craft Course Supervisor Anne Philbin offered Taepa a fulltime teaching position, specialising in clay sculpture. Taepa accepted the position and worked at Whitireia part-time while also teaching at Whanganui Polytechnic as an art mentor. During his time in Whanganui, Taepa developed a strong relationship with Whanganui-based US ceramic artist George Kojis. The expertise that Kojis would bring to New Zealand ceramics would prove to be invaluable to Taepa's art practice.

Kojis, himself a Vietnam war veteran, and a student of renowned US porcelain artist Rudolf Staffel, held great admiration for indigenous modes of art practice and introduced Taepa to an impressive collection of international ceramicists, including Sudanese potter Siddig el'Nigoumi, Kenyan ceramicist Magdalene Anyango Namakhiya Odundo and English sculptor Peter Beard. Taepa would go on to workshop with several of these artists in England at the behest of Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Craft Advisor Edith Ryan. Ryan

Untitled ipu, from *Mahere Mapping* series, c. 2011 (detail). Red raku clay with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection Pātaka Art + Museum.



encouraged Taepa to expand his artistic horizons abroad and over the next ten years Taepa worked closely with Ngā Kaihanga Uku and Toi Māori Aotearoa to exhibit extensively nationally and internationally—including a three-month residency at Glenn Green Gallery in Santa Fe in 1994 where he learned bronze casting at the Shidoni Foundry.

Major exhibitions during this period included *NZ Choice* in Santa Ana, United States in 1994; *Harare* at the Zimbabwe National Art Gallery in 1995; *Haka* which toured through the United Kingdom in 1998; *Kiwa* at Spirit Wrestler Gallery in Vancouver, Canada in 2000; and *Ngā Tokorima* at the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2005. In 1999 Taepa completed his Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts from Whanganui School of Design and subsequently a Master's Degree in Philosophy in Māori Visual Arts from Massey University, Palmerston North in 2007.

TE REO KARANGA O TARANAKI

Following a series of serious health issues in 2012, Taepa held a small but important solo exhibition at City Gallery Wellington where, for the first time, he began to revisit some of the darker moments from his time in Vietnam. The series confronted Taepa's own mortality and the impact that he had made on other people's lives. Perhaps in an attempt to hold on to a sense of security, the works also recalled influences from Parihaka and the philosophies of non-violent resistance that Taepa had experienced during his childhood at Waiwhetu.

Pātaka, from *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki The Call of Taranaki* series, 2012 (detail). Red raku clay with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection Pātaka Art + Museum.

The works in this series traced the journey of life, beginning with a small waka-pito—a repository vessel for the umbilical-cord of a newly born child. The works gradually increased in size, with the largest piece featuring a stylised Māori Pātaka—a storage-house representing the fullness of life at its prime. The series culminates with a small waka tūpāpaku, a funerary vessel, and behind that, projected on the wall, a photograph of Taepa and the surviving members of the Grey Ghost infantry unit on their last day in Vietnam.

Visually, influences from Taepa's time in South-East Asia were evident in the use of white slips applied liberally across the entire collection. In keeping with his personal aesthetic, Taepa manufactured a crackle effect across the surface of the slip which he further enhanced through the use of manganese oxide. While this series of works opened a new area of artistic exploration, the conflated histories of war and non-violent protest were hard to reconcile. Like the inmates he had worked with in the past, the process of creating helped Taepa to come to terms with his past, and the present he had helped to create.

In 2013, works from this series were shown in *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki: The Call of Taranaki* exhibition at Puke Ariki Museum in New Plymouth. The exhibition featured twenty-five contemporary Māori artists with ties to the various iwi and hapu from Taranaki. The works Taepa created featured a strong Taranaki carving style—something which he had not explored

Untitled ipu, from *Te Reo Karanga o Taranaki*
The Call of Taranaki
series, 2012. Red raku
clay with white sigillata
and manganese oxide.
Collection Pātaka Art +
Museum. Image courtesy
of Puke Ariki. Accession
number PA2014.28.



in great detail previously. The exhibition was somewhat of a homecoming for Taepa whose early Ngāti Whakaue carving influences from his father's side had not led to a strong exploration of his mother's Te Ati Awa whakapapa.

In the same year Taepa's works went on to be featured in the first major Ngā Kaihanga Uku survey exhibition, *Uku Rere*, that began at Pātaka Art + Museum in Porirua and went on to be exhibited at galleries and museums across the country for the next two years. *Retrospect* is the largest survey exhibition of Taepa's works to date. The exhibition is as much a celebration of Taepa's art practice as it is a tribute to all the people who took part in the journey, in particular Manos Nathan and Colleen Ulrich who passed away in 2015. As of 2016, Taepa shows little interest in slowing down. He still manages to rally a community around him, teaching art at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa in Porirua where he continues to push himself, and his students, down new streams of creative practice.

REUBEN FRIEND

NOTES

- 1 Anon., 2010. A "glorious day" dawns at Waiwhetu. [Online] Available at: http://www.atiawa.com/marae_history3.htm
- 2 Taepa, L., 2016. *Laura Taepa interview for Wi Taepa exhibition* [Interview] (7 June 2016).
- 3 Taepa, C. H., 1966. The Carved Pulpit. In: *The Rangiatea Story*. Wellington: Kerslake, Billens and Humphrey, p. 36.

Untitled ipu, from *Raranga*
Cross Hatching series,
c. 1990. Red raku clay.
Collection of the artist.



Mourning, from the
Kauhuri Cultivation series,
c. 1997. Anagama fired
glazed red raku clay with
harakeke cord and bone
amulet. Collection of
Garry Nicholas.



Nuku Puta, from the
Kauhuri Cultivation series,
1994. Anagama fired red
raku. Collection of The
Dowse Art Museum.



Parautanga plough, from
the *Kauhuri Cultivation*
series, c. 2012. Anagama
fired red raku with two
tone pearl auto paint.
Collection of Wi Taepa.



Parautanga plough, from the *Kauhuri Cultivation* series, c. 2005. Anagama fired red raku with terra sigillata. Collection of Wi Taepa. Work courtesy of Sonya Rimene.



Long-net fishing, from
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995. Anagama
fired stoneware. Collection
of Pātaka Art + Museum.



Untitled ipu, from
Hononga Connection
series, c. 1990. Red
raku clay and white
porcelain with sigillata
and manganese oxide.
Collection of the artist.



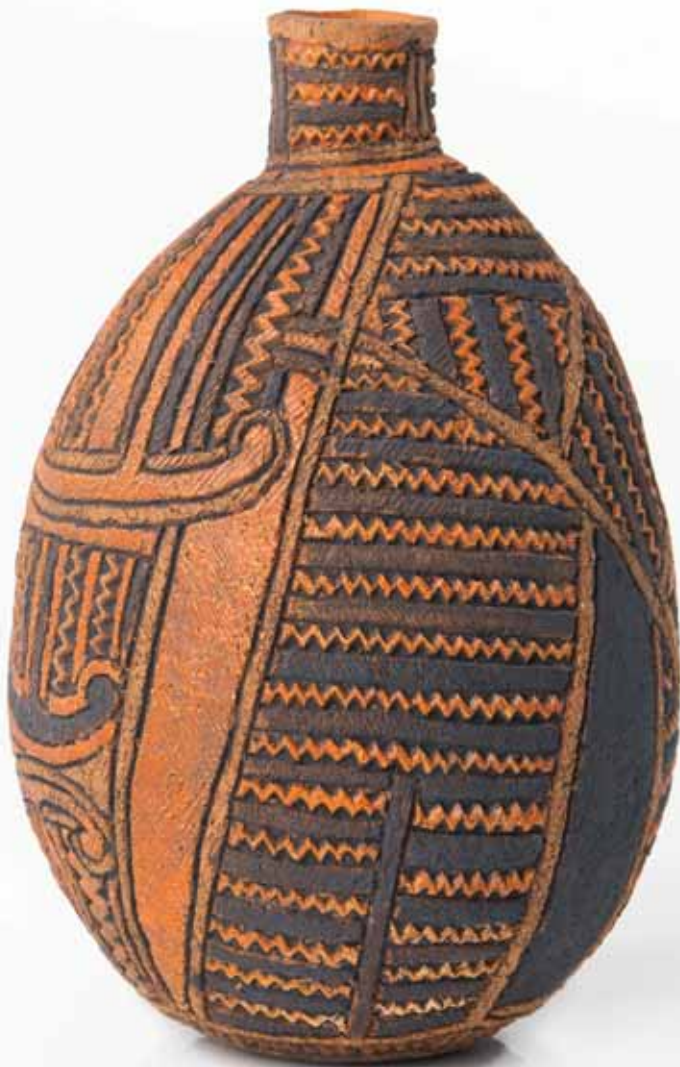
Untitled ipu, from
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995. Stoneware
with terra sigillata.
Collection of Darcy
Nicholas.



Untitled ipu, from the
Hononga Connections
series, c. 1995. Stoneware
clay and glaze. Collection
of George Kojis.



Untitled ipu, from *Mahere Mapping* series, c. 2011.
Red raku clay with terra
sigillata and manganese
oxide. Collection of Darcy
Nicholas.



Untitled ipu, from *Mahere Mapping* series, c. 2011.
Red raku clay with white sigillata and manganese oxide. Collection of Pātaka Art + Museum.



Pātaka, from *Te Reo
Karanga o Taranaki The
Call of Taranaki* series,
2012. Red raku clay
with white sigillata
and manganese oxide.
Collection of Pātaka Art +
Museum.



Waka huia, from *Te Reo
Karanga o Taranaki The
Call of Taranaki* series,
2012. Red raku with white
sigillata and manganese
oxide. Collection of the
artist.



Whale migration, from
the *Hononga Connections*
series, c. 1998. Collection
of Pātaka Art + Museum.
Gift of the Deane
Endowment Trust.



GLOSSARY

Anagama – A Japanese term for a type of wood fired kiln.

Hononga – Connections.

Ipu – A small vessel.

Iwi – Indigenous New Zealand Māori nation.

Kauhuri – To turn soil in a garden.

Parihaka – Parihaka was the site of an industrious Māori community in Southern Taranaki led by Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi which was illegally invaded and destroyed by government forces in the 1880s.

Mana whenua – Power associated with possession and occupation of iwi land and waterways.

Marae – The common contemporary use of this term often refers to a Māori meeting house and the surrounding lands and facilities.

Maui-complex – Māori colloquialism for someone who demonstrates the character traits of Maui, a legendary figure renowned throughout the Pacific for his mischievous yet industrious feats.

Ngāti Whakaue – A Māori iwi from the central north island who trace their lineage to the Te Arawa waka.

Parautanga – To plough a garden.

Pātaka – a storage-house.

Pōneke – A Māori transliteration of Port Nicholson. Used today in reference to central Wellington.

Pūtake – Foundation.

Rere – Flow.

Uku – Clay.

Te Arawa – One of the principal migratory waka that is credited with bringing the iwi of the central north island to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Te Aroha ki te Tangata marae – The name of a Māori marae in Lower Hutt, Wellington that translates as The Love to the People.

Te Ati Awa – Sometimes referred to as Ngāti Awa in various historic records, Te Ati Awa is a Māori iwi who hold mana whenua status in the northern area of Taranaki and central Wellington.

Te Roro-o-te-rangi – One of the principal hapu (nation groups) of Ngāti Whakaue.

Te Whiti Park – A park in Lower Hutt, Wellington named after Te Whiti o Rongomai, a late nineteenth century leader of the Taranaki village of Parihaka who alongside Tohu Kakahi is credited with the establishment of the non-violent resistance movement.

Rangiatea – The original Rangiatea church was established by Te Rauparaha, a leader of the Ngāti Toa Rangatira iwi in Otaki in 1847.

Tohunga whakairo – Master carver.

Tutu fingers – Māori colloquialism for someone who is prone to tinkering or playing with objects to understand how they work.

Waiwhetu – A river in Lower Hutt, Wellington that derives its name from its ability to reflect the stars at night.

Waka – Canoe, boat or ship.

Waka-pito – a repository vessel for the umbilical-cord of a newly born child.

Waka-tūpāpaku – a funerary chest.

Whakairo – Carving or mark-making.

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PĀTAKA

ART + MUSEUM

www.pataka.org.nz
Cnr Norrie & Parumoana Sts,
PO Box 50 218,
Porirua City 5240,
New Zealand
Ph: +64 4 237 1511

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Karanga o Taranaki The Call of Taranaki
series, 2012. Red raku with white sigillata and
manganese oxide. Collection of the artist.
FRONTISPIECE: Wi Taepa pictured with
one of his *raranga cross hatching* series
ipu shown in the foreground at Whitireia
Polytechnic in Porirua, Wellington c. 1990.
Image courtesy of Whitireia Polytechnic
archives. Photographer unknown.



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