

ARTISTS TALK

TITLE: *Sentient Place – Mauri – Life Essence*

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Desna Whaanga-Schollum Hon.FRAIC. M.Sci-comm, B.Design

Tribal Affiliations: Rongomaiwahine, Kahungunu, Pāhauwera, Ngāi Tahu Matawhaiti

Corey Ruha. BE Hon.(Class IIA)

Tribal Affiliations: Te Arawa Waka

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Mauri (*Life-Essence*)

The regenerative life principle/life essence of mauri connects people and spirit to all within the natural physical world, and taonga, in the form of highly valued man-made objects, carries the mauri of the maker. Art forms and objects are seen as having an intimate relationship with the environment and people, with mauri being the connective life essence that flows throughout all.

Mauri is the elemental bonding energy, an essential life force conceptualised as drawing together humans, the physical environment, natural phenomena such as mist and wind, and spirit (Durie, 1998) (Marsden, 1992). Like other deep traditional concepts, mauri has undergone a continual “process of re-invention and expansion” (Holman, 2007, p4). When mauri is strong, peoples, places, fauna and flora flourish. When mauri is depleted and weak, life forms become sickly and weak. (Marsden, 1992). Mauri ora denotes a holistic and regenerative form of well-being.

All taonga that we create, that we might create in the future, and that our tīpuna (ancestors) have created before us, are an opportunity to be a conduit connecting with life-essence. We have a whakapapa of regenerating energy in our creative works.

Whakapapa

Whakapapa is how Māori explain connections to the environment, people and to the gods; it is the practical manifestation of the kinship principle. It is fundamental to understanding origin and connection to the multiple elements of a Māori worldview, and is intimately related to whanaungatanga and kinship. It is the organising principle of a Māori world. (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011b, p23).

Often basically translated as genealogy, whakapapa in its broader sense is the conceptual matrix of mātauranga Māori, relating environment, people and events. Tangata whenua (Indigenous people of the land) have a relational and process-based way of approaching the world; identity within whānau, hapū, iwi, and almost all knowledge recording and creation, is approached through establishing and maintaining connections. Whakapapa has been described as:

“a way of thinking, a way of learning, a way of storing knowledge, and a way of debating knowledge. It is inscribed in virtually every aspect of our worldview.” (Smith, 2000, p225)

Whanaungatanga (*kinship*)

The defining principle of mātauranga Māori is whanaungatanga, or kinship. In te ao Māori (the Māori World), all of the myriad elements of creation – the living and the dead, the animate and inanimate – are seen as alive and interrelated. All are infused with mauri (that is, a living essence or spirit), and all are related through whakapapa. Every species, every place, every type of rock and stone, every person (living or dead), every god, and every other element of creation is united through this web of common descent, which has its origins in the primordial parents Ranginui (the sky) and Papa-tū-ā-nuku (the earth). (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011b, p23).

Ora (*in a state of well-being or being alive*)

We create our taonga — artefacts and stories; to be of use; to address needs; to communicate concepts — push concepts further — to expand our mātauranga (knowledge) — exploring the potential, nurturing the holistic value, nurturing ora. At that point in time when we are creating (alone or with others) and when we gift taonga to others, these artefacts, words and moments — taonga — that we create are an opportunity to reconnect with mauri-ora: Mauri ora — that which supports our well-being through connections to the cultural landscape around us. Taonga are an opportunity to reorient ourselves within our taiao (environment), tīpuna (ancestors), and whānau (families). Valuing our relationships, our sense-of-place.

Inherent in this concept is intergenerational guardianship of people and place. The guardianship ethos termed ‘Kaitiakitanga’ is based on an eco-philosophical understanding of humans as an integral part of nature rather than a separate element.

“... that sense of connection that has confronted Europeans throughout the Pacific... In the elemental terms of matter and energy, people ultimately are land, no more, no less than the birds, insects, trees and seeds and the constant process of their birth, growth and decay and the movement of them and their parts through the landscape.” (Park, 2006, p25)

Moving from ‘Values to Assets’

Via our (tense-present) industrialised nation, whakapapa-embedded taonga values have been replaced with economic terminology. The things we make are commodified, taonga are ‘assets’, and the main value measured and considered is producing economic gains. Industrialism and commercialism and the structures which support it are presumed ‘normal’. ‘Culture’ and ‘identity’ are additional to our contemporary way of living.

The (tense-present) notion of ‘taonga’ has been relegated to ‘treasure-of-the-past’ — to ‘tradition — to ‘preservation’.

The practical implication of co-joining our culture with a preservation framework is that identity is located as a discreet object from evolving society, philosophy, and business practices. This perception of Māori culture seems not to have progressed in any significant manner from Walter Buller’s conviction in the 1800s that, similar to New Zealand’s native birds, Māori are a dying race and all haste should be made to preserve our cultural outputs. In the words of Te Rangihiroa — Sir Peter Buck:

“Thus he relegates us to the Shades, and we cease to be as important as the carvings our brains designed and our hands executed.” (Buck, 1922)

Tangata Whenua are still here (past-tense-colonised — current-tense-de-colonial — future-returning-tense-Indigenous). Our culture is living, breathing, evolving, and increasingly relevant to the well-being of the environment and the people.

Aro (*turn towards, take heed, be comprehended, be understood*)

The risk in diversifying-the-industry-within-the-same-structures is that the overall framework of trade and societal values is not acknowledged as being embedded within a cultural paradigm. In ignoring (other) cultural knowledges, potential opportunities that might assist in addressing the colonised-patriarchal-imbalanced-disconnected-disparate-unequal status quo, are not pursued. We miss the chance to connect, to create, to explore, to expand into new ways-of-life.

Hā (*breathe, essence, tone*)

I’m interested in conversations that open up a diversity of thought regarding the way we live, ways-of-doing, ways-of-being, systems of value. I’m less interested in having more tangata whenua, tangata moana (Indigenous people of the oceans), more wāhine (women), more POC, more LGBTQI, involved in upholding the same Colonial systems we all labour within in this present tense. How might we (re)locate, and (re)connect in this (being-present) tense?

Hongi (*a traditional ritual of pressing noses*), confirms we are meeting in peace. It is symbolic of the first breath of life and is seen as a way of sharing the mauri of the event through physical contact.

*Whakataka te hau ki te uru,
Whakataka te hau ki te tonga.*

*Kia mākinakina ki uta,
Kia mātaratara ki tai.*

*E hī ake ana te atākura,
he tio, he huka, he hauhunga.*

Haumi e! Hui e! Tāiki e!

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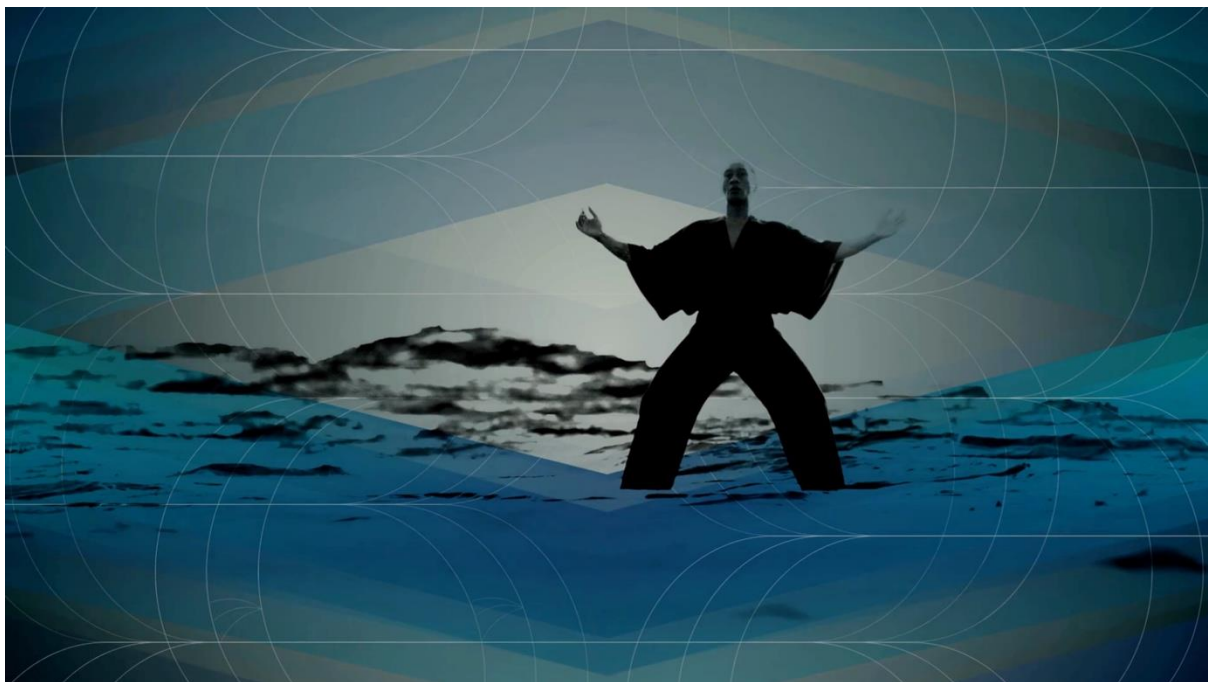
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Dancer: Tane Mete, Te Mauri o Waikawa, Taipōrutu, 2023