

Lisa Reihana: A continuum of Māori practice

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In 2007 at the 57th Venice Biennale, Aotearoa New Zealand was represented by Lisa Reihana, (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Tū), and her exhibition *Emissaries*. The main event was the broadly popular *in Pursuit of Venus (infected)* (hereafter referred to as *iPOVi*), an expansive and immersive multi-channelled video project first exhibited in 2015 at the Auckland Art Gallery to critical acclaim and mainstream success. *Emissaries*, curated by Auckland Art Gallery Director Rhana Devenport, included a meticulously edited *iPOVi* alongside a series of new photographic and sculptural works¹. It was presented at Tese dell'Isolotto, one of the oldest maritime buildings in the Arsenale di Venezia.

The title, *in Pursuit of Venus*, refers to Captain James Cook's first voyage to the Pacific from 1768-1771 during which he was to observe the 1769 transit of Venus across the sun. Reihana and her production team used CGI and green screen techniques to animate a version of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, an early nineteenth-century wallpaper produced by Joseph Dufour and composed of illustrations of an imagined, classicised, and exoticised Pacific utopia. In *iPOVi*, the animated wallpaper serves as a backdrop to carefully scripted, dramatic vignettes of encounters and conflicts between Pacific peoples and European explorers during the late eighteenth century. In her introduction to the catalogue accompanying the 2015 exhibition of *iPOVi*, historian Anne Salmond writes, "A descendant of Kupe, Lisa Reihana explores the Pacific, guided by Venus (Kōpū), summoning up ancestors, letting them sing and move again in those moments when Captain Cook and his sailors with Joseph Banks and his artists and scientists first came ashore" (2015, p. 2).



Figure 1: *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (still). 2015-2017. Multi-channel video, HD, colour, sound. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery.



Figure 2: *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (installation view, Auckland Art Gallery). 2015-2017. Multi-channel video, HD, colour, sound. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery.

iPOVi is a triumph in many ways, not least because Reihana has spent over three decades developing and honing her skills as an installation artist, photographer, animator, and filmmaker. A self-professed “tech geek” (Devenport, 2009, p. 8), Reihana readily adopted new and varied media early in her art practice, since graduating in 1987, from the newly established intermedia department at the University of Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts. Film and photography have subsequently taken precedence within Reihana’s practice, and as such, she has been included in several exhibitions that recognised her as a technological innovator, and valued her role in representing and reinterpreting Māori imagery, histories and myths to reflect new generations of urban Māori identities.²

Reihana’s career trajectory, starting in the mid-1980s with daring, often politically charged short films and animations, is interesting in itself. Her practice has undergone a series of shifts and transformations over the last two decades, leading to her current level of international success. A politically literate artist with much to say, Reihana has made and continues to make work that reflects and pushes against the social, cultural, and political contexts of its making. Reihana is particularly well known for two series of work—*Native Portraits*, commissioned for the opening of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington in 1997, and *Digital Marae*, first exhibited at the Govett-Brewster

Art Gallery in 2007. Both series reinterpreted visual representations of Māori gods and ancestors, and recreated features of Māori architecture, using still and moving photographic images to turn gallery spaces into contemporary marae or wharenui. Frequently described as being key moments in her career, they are important examples of the evolving nature of contemporary Māori art at the time.



Figure 3: *Digital Marae: Marakihau*. 2001. Colour digital print on aluminium Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, acquired with assistance from the Govett-Brewster Foundation. Image courtesy of the artist and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

However, two smaller, lesser-known works by Reihana are, I would argue, more illustrative of the ongoing relevance of her work. *Wog Features* (1990) and *A Māori Dragon Story* (1995) have maintained their socio-political relevance, highlighting the “continuing currency of many of the concerns raised in the work” (Cunnane & Huddleston, 2017). So much so, they have been revisited in group exhibitions in New Zealand in 2016 and 2017 at ST PAUL St Gallery and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery respectively. These low-budget, lo-fi works, utilising stop animation and puppets, are a far cry from the high production value evident in iPOVi, reflecting the technological landscape of the late 1980s and early 1990s. This essay will consider Reihana’s career in terms of technological innovation, with particular regard to the enduring nature of these two early films.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new generation of young Māori artists had begun to emerge. These urban-living, university art school graduates, such as Michael Parekowhai, Peter Robinson, and Reihana, rebelled against the notion that Māori art was that which was Māori in appearance or included explicit references to traditional Māori symbolism or concepts. Although their practices differed greatly, these artists all shared in a movement away from the ideas and philosophies of an earlier generation of Māori artists, represented by the Māori artists and writers group, Ngā Puna Waihangā (established at Te Kaha marae, Bay of Plenty in 1973). According to White (2012, p.2), these so-called ‘Young Guns’³ “challenged the collective authority and ideologies of Ngā Puna Waihangā”, representing instead an “urban Māori avant-garde” and questioning definitions of contemporary Māori art.⁴

In 1988 Reihana made public these views by exhibiting one of her early films *Touched by your presence* (1983) in *Nga Toi o te Iwi - Nga Hua o te Iwi*—an exhibition of contemporary Māori art at the National Library, Wellington. *Touched by your presence*, a sensual and texturally rich short film, juxtaposes images of classical sculpture and architecture with footage of an attractive, semi-naked young man. A poem about love echoes within an ominous accompanying soundtrack. By including *Touched by your presence* in *Nga Toi o te Iwi*, Reihana rejected traditional definitions of Māori art, reclassifying it as that produced by an artist of Māori descent. Equally, with this work Reihana asserted herself as a feminist artist for the first time, identifying the camera as a tool to critique the nature of looking and being looked at. Looking back more than twenty years later, Reihana commented that her early adoption of photographic and video technologies was a means to “transgress culture in a respectful way” (Devenport, 2009, p.12),

I seized upon twenty-first century technologies because they sit outside traditional rules, the photographic process came from there, it replaces the wood and I use the computer as my carving tool. Traditionalists might see this as a provocative act, but there are precedents. (p.12)

Wog Features, produced by Reihana during her residency at the Australian Centre of

Photography in Sydney, was one of her first films to gain recognition in New Zealand. *Wog Features* employs the stop-motion technique of pixilation, creating a jarring and intentionally clunky effect, reinforced by the hip-hop sound track composed by George Hubbard. Like many of Reihana's early films, *Wog Features* uses humour and pop culture references and imagery to bring issues of identity politics to light. Directly drawing on the style and tone of the children's TV series *Playschool*, Reihana critiques the reinforcement of racial and gender stereotypes within pop culture. Dancing minstrels in blackface, golliwog dolls, and a repetitive rap constructed of the racial slur 'wog' are combined with images of Reihana herself, reimagined each time in different cultural guises—reference to her 'ethnically ambiguous' appearance that is often incorrectly identified. Produced between the years of Australia's bicentenary and New Zealand's sesquicentenary, *Wog Features* challenges, unpacks, and dismantles the racial and gender stereotypes that were active in New Zealand and Australia at the time. A collector of racist toys and souvenirs, Reihana couples these with puns and plays on words, using the language of racism and sexism against itself.



Figure 4: *Wog Features* (still). 1990. Single channel video, standard definition (SD), 4:3, colour, stereo sound, 7min 50sec duration. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery



Figure 5: *Wog Features* (still). 1990. Single channel video, standard definition (SD), 4:3, colour, stereo sound, 7min 50sec duration. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery.

In 1990, *Wog features* was included in an exhibition of contemporary Māori art at Artspace in Auckland titled *Choice!*. Curated by George Hubbard. *Choice!* included work by just seven artists most of whom were recent art school graduates (including Michael Parekowhai, as well as Diane Prince, Darryl Thomson, Jacqueline Fraser, Rongotai Lomas, and Barnard McIntyre). According to Brunt (2005, p. 215), *Choice!* “ushered into the nation’s art galleries the so-called ‘new Maori art’...giving it its first self-conscious and articulate platform”. Not so coincidentally, *Choice!* opened in the same year as a much larger exhibition of Māori art, *Kohia ko Taikaka Anake*, at the National Art Gallery (now Te Papa Tongarewa). Curated by Ngā Puna Waihanga founding member Paratene Matchitt, alongside artist Sandy Adsett, and curator Tim Walker, *Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake* was somewhat of a climax to a modern Māori art movement that dated back to the 1950s. Māori modernism saw a young generation of Māori artists strive for a contemporary vision that integrated Western artistic traditions with traditional Māori forms and motifs, all the while maintaining links to Māori cultural traditions. According to Brunt, *Choice!* was a direct critique of this exhibition, and the more conservative attitudes towards Māori art it represented.

Early in 2017, 27 years after it was first exhibited, *Wog Features* was included in another group exhibition, *Still, like air, I’ll rise* at Auckland University of Technology’s ST PAUL St Gallery. Regarding the inclusion of *Wog Features*, curators Abby Cunnane and Charlotte Huddleston wrote,

Reihana's *Wog Features* (1990) was made at a time when identity politics were in the foreground of contemporary art. This was also a time when biculturalism was prominent in political discussions around nationhood in Aotearoa New Zealand... Revisiting Lisa Reihana's *Wog Features* 27 years after it was made, and taking the work as a starting point, this exhibition acknowledges the tone of defiance surfacing again in a series of contemporary works, and sets out to amplify this by bringing these intergenerational voices together. (2017)

Named after a poem by civil rights activist and poet Maya Angelou, *Still, like air, I'll rise*, brought together six female artists whose works take on racial and gender oppression and the ongoing 'essentialising stereotypes' (Cunnane & Huddleston, 2017) that exist as a result. Key to these works is sense of rebellion and provocation, no better exemplified than in Reihana's *Wog Features*.

In 1995, following her time in Christchurch as the Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence, Reihana produced the short film, *A Māori Dragon Story*.⁵ Reihana used handmade puppets and props to tell the Waitaha legend of a female taniwha (sea dragon) at Ohikaparuparu (Sumner, South Island), as told to Pākehā historians by Teone Taare Tikao (Ngāi Tahu) in the early twentieth century. Like *Wog Features*, Reihana's use of animation techniques and puppetry references the conventions of children's entertainment, appearing light-hearted and whimsical on initial viewing. And yet, the film's unsettling lack of dialogue, eerie soundtrack and filmic techniques elevate this film to something much more powerful and cinematic than any children's animation of the time. This dramatic tale of utu (revenge) and death was interpreted by Reihana, according Tamati-Quennell (1999, p. 159), "with all the drama and blackness of a Shakespearian tragedy".







Figures 6-10: A Maori Dragon Story (still). 1995. 16mm animation transferred to DVD, 15 minute duration. Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Images courtesy of the artist and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

In 2016, *A Māori Dragon Story* was included in the exhibition *All Lines Converge* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth. It was exhibited alongside existing collection works and new commissions, brought together to encourage questions and conversations about the nature of the Gallery's history of collecting. The exhibition also drew attention to the enduring significance of many of the Gallery's older collection works, not least Reihana's *A Māori Dragon Story*. Reihana's respect for Māori history, and commitment to good story telling, made for compelling viewing within this contemporary context.

Just a year and a half prior to *A Māori Dragon Story*'s inclusion in *All Lines Converge*, that first exhibition of *iPOVi* opened at the Auckland Art Gallery to captivated audiences, following more than six years of development, and 28 years since Reihana graduated from Elam. According to Devenport (2015, p. 9), "*in Pursuit of Venus* has forged new visual languages both technically in the complexity of its digital capture and construction, and poetically in the interplay of narrative that unfolds within its fictive, scripted habitat". Every frame of the 32 minute long, 25 metre wide panorama, held over eight million pixels of information, all the while drawing viewers into the dramas being depicted—moving them beyond the role of spectator.

The differences between *iPOVi* and Reihana's early films in terms of animation techniques and film technologies are significant. *Wog Features* particularly, is a product of the socio-political and cultural climate of the late 1980s, and the technologies available for emerging artists like Reihana. However, film technologies aside, the issues interrogated by Reihana in *Wog Features* still provide rich and relevant content for artistic exploration, as is made evident by its inclusion in *Still, like air, I'll rise*. Reihana's continuing commitment to this content has seen her consistently reclaim and decolonise the images and language of colonisation and prejudice. As is evident in the success of *iPOVi*, the reactivation of Māori and Pacific histories and legends continues to be an essential action, and Reihana's evolving use of film and new media has enabled her to discover new ways of performing this action. Mason wrote of Reihana's work, "The artist's genius is her ability systematically to represent a continuum of Māori practice, thus bringing ancestors to life by imagining new ways to extend history and heritage" (2004, p. 56). Looking forward and back from Mason's description of Reihana's work, it applies as much to her significant contribution to the 57th Venice Biennale, as it does to her experimental beginnings.

Endnotes

¹ A catalogue accompanies Reihana's exhibition at the Biennale: Reihana, L. (2017). *Emissaries*. Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

² Such as: *Choice!* (1990), Artspace, Auckland; *Pu Manawa: A celebration of whatu, raranga and tāniko* (1993), Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington; and *Techno Māori: Māori art in the digital age* (2001), City Gallery Wellington.

³ Art historian and curator Jonathan Mané-Wheoki coined this term to describe this generation

of young Māori artists as those who experienced national and international success following their active and willing engagement with "more advanced forms such as kinetic art, computer art, video art and conceptual art to which these new technologies have given rise" (Mané-Wheoki, 1999, unpaginated). Implicit in Mané-Wheoki's label for this group was a sense of provocation, and the recognition that Māori art was undergoing some radical, but necessary, changes in the lead up to the new millennium.

⁴ In 2001, Reihana exhibited alongside several artists of this generation in *Techno Maori* at City Gallery Wellington. Her place in this exhibition, curated by Deidre Brown and Jonathan Mané-Wheoki, cemented her status as a technological innovator. The exhibition aimed to create a "snapshot of Māori life in a digital age" (Brown, 2001), but equally revealed the enthusiasm with which many Māori artists had adopted digital technologies as a medium.

⁵ The film was exhibited in 1997 as part of the New Zealand Film Archive (now Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision) exhibition, *Animates: hands on Kiwi Animation*.

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