

Te Tuna-Whiri: The Knot of Eels

Cassandra Barnett

The tale has been told before. This time begin with the eels. Eels, who came from the stars. Some are getting ready as I write this in February and March. They lurk fat and heavy, gathering strength amongst the whitebait and raupō (bulrush) along the muddy banks of Ōtākaro. There's one right under the edge where Pani went in—her legs just millimetres from its tail. It breathed faster, then slower, when Rosalyn's māku (magic) retrieved Emily from the whirlpool of time. There's another feeding on worms in the grass near where Te Aitu and George jumped into lake Hāpuakorari—retrieving a pile of pāua-shell eyes. There are a hundred and more in my own ancestral river, Waikato. Still or slow but on their way, pulled to their swarming cousins and the ocean. Soon they will navigate by floods, stars and moons, magnetics and temperatures, pheromones and salinities to their deeper, wider home to spawn.

They will be seen off, some of them, by people who count them as family. Slithering in their waterways past sacred, erect wharetupuna (ancestral meeting houses), past abandoned, submerged wharetupuna, past buried carvings with shining eyes, past motorways and railways and dunes and pīngao grasses, down to the smells of the sea. And in the rain and dark of Hinepouri the new moon they pause, then rush and converge

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and tumble suddenly in one tightly knotted ball over the bar. Push across the sand and now surge forward in their separate bodies again, on different waves, through competing swells, into a newer, vaster sea. Called on, past pāua in the shallows, keeping silent company with snapper, stingray and sharks, towards a watery sonar of whalesong, petrel squawks, oars, propellers or engines ... Swim, tuna, swim.¹

SEA CHANGE

This chapter has two main aims. First, to outline a Māori concept and practice of taonga. Loosely translatable as valuables or treasured things, taonga can be considered animate and alive because they instantiate ancestral hau (life breath), mauri (life force) and mana (spiritual power) in the present.² Hau, mauri and mana, and hence taonga, have enduring force and efficacy—they may amend the course of things here and now in unpredictable ways. Second, to ask how taonga might be found traversing contemporary art discourse and practice, holding a space there. I will examine in depth a set of works by Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne, Ngāti Kahungunu), and briefly touch upon additional works by Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) and others.³ I will attend to the taonga in the artwork, asking the following questions. What (or who) is it? Who is it encountering—and where do I fit in? What stories are told of it? What whakapapa (genealogies), trajectories, contexts and currents are concentrated within it?

The term taonga is commonly applied to taonga tuku iho (material objects passed down from our ancestors), such as carved or woven tools, weapons and adornments; also to tribal resources and territories including customary food gathering areas, fisheries, flora and fauna; and to more abstract cultural entities such as waiata (songs), pūrakau (legends) and whakapapa. You might also hear many modern and post-modern Māori artworks referred to as taonga—and some of them no doubt are, through their animations and activations of taonga processes. Nonetheless, according to my argument, though taonga-things may traverse art-things, they will not bear the exact same forms, contours, configurations and ‘objectifications’ as those art-things. For they arise from (and sustain) different conceptual-cosmological universes.

Taonga can include both contemporary things and customary things. They continue to function beyond the bounded horizon of pre-colonial Māori life, and beneath the surface of other more visible or dominant

currents, systems and dynamics—including global, capitalistic, corporate and aesthetic ones. (‘More visible’ to some, that is. For Māori of course the taonga system with its ebbs and flows is part of the weave of everyday discourse and practice, though this too encompasses invisibilities.) Like the tuna (eels) insinuating themselves upon my writing mind, taonga can survive *as taonga* at a great distance from their whānau (family/familiars), viewers or thinkers. This is in part a matter of hau, as will be seen. And even at that distance they can—like *all* things, on a Māori understanding—call us to attention. As Carl Mika writes in ‘The Thing’s Revelation’, ‘things are not just passive ... they are instead animate and creative, having a much greater impact on the self than would be credited in dominant rational discourse’ (2015, 63); and things are ‘capable of provocation; they can “call forth” ... something in us through their own language or expression’ (2015, 64). Taonga can indeed *insist upon* our attention, our custody, our care of them—as seen in this example from Rangihiroa Panoho:

In a very matter-of-fact manner, a *tino matua keke* ‘great aunt’ from a community along the Whanganui river, informed me that a carved ancestor told her to buy him *pāua* ‘abalone’ eyes so that he, Pāmoana, could see his *uri whakatipu* ‘descendants’ inside their ancestral meetinghouse. (2015, 250)

It is often argued that kaupapa (foundationally) Māori ‘art’ practices should not be confused with contemporary art. I agree, but am arguing that the two can hold their differences yet coexist, overlap or intersect in certain places and times. When they do coincide, taonga-objects and contemporary-art-objects bring into proximity their different worlds of meaning, creating potential for new questions, new understandings and new dynamics to form—depending on the taonga, and the people they encounter.

Such proximities and interleavings afford closer enquiry into where recent Western animisms (as enabled by new materialisms and philosophies of the posthuman and anthropocene) and indigenous world views meet—and where they part ways. Like Māori taonga, contemporary art can invoke a cosmic vibrant materialism, an interconnectedness of all things, and a concern for the role/responsibility of the human within this. But somewhere around the assigning of ‘anthropomorphic’ personalities and behaviours (and even names) to things, the Western

philosophies still tend to become troubled. Taonga Māori land us in a place where ‘animism’ has profound efficacies, yet does not exist as a critique-able term or concept.

BY SMELL AND STARLIGHT

Unwarranted and Unregistered (2013) and *Unwarranted and Unregistered: Te Āhua o te Hau ki Te Papaioea* (2015) are two versions of a multimedia installation by Terri Te Tau. It consists of a 1986 Suzuki Carry 410 van—restored and reinvented by the artist as a high-gloss, black-cherry, window-tinted surveillance van, parked inside the gallery—and a video work projected onto the interior of the van’s windscreen. To experience the work, viewers must clamber inside (usually through the back hatch), and sit in one of the van’s seats gazing ‘out’ through the front windscreen, or rather ‘at’ the video projected onto that screen. The work is an artistic response to ‘Operation 8’, the 2007 dawn raids by over 300 New Zealand Police on 60 homes across the country, mostly the homes of indigenous activists. The raids occurred after a year of covert surveillance, and police subsequently attempted to lay charges against 12 people under the Terrorism Suppression Act 2002. As activist Valerie Morse notes, ‘The people targeted were overwhelmingly Māori’ (2010, 11).

I saw the first version of the work *Unwarranted and Unregistered* in the group exhibition ‘Surveillance Awareness Bureau’ in Wellington in 2015. There, the windscreen-film took us on a journey through Greytown, a small town in the Wairarapa region near the artist’s marae (tribal home). As we drive by streets and buildings, the naturalistic view on screen is gradually overlaid with accruing head-up display (HUD) digital surveillance data pertaining to the people and cars we pass. Thus the transparent windscreen showing the scene ‘outside’ gives way to a more opaque computer screen, as perceptual information is mediated, obscured, then obliterated by information flows from other sources—from rationalized data-mining systems and graphics-generating software. This thickened vision generates a range of grim paranoia affects: the helpless paranoia of the surveilled upon discovering their surveillants’ determined (and well-resourced) penetration of their worlds; and the controlling paranoia of the surveillants, fearful enough of the surveilled to invest untold resources in ceaselessly scrutinizing them. If the allusion is primarily to our state-level surveillance regimes (capitulating to an international War on Terror), gaming interfaces are also evoked by this

graphically data-mapped screen. Gaming often plies a paranoid subjectivity by peddling, in various guises, panoptical search-and-destroy operations. What are our avatars here? Are we police, gathering data, getting ready to pounce? Objects of surveillance taking refuge? Disaffected gang members counter-patrolling their turf? Are these our streets, our ‘hood’—or someone else’s?

I saw the second version of Te Tau’s work, *Unwarranted and Unregistered: Te Āhua o te Hau ki Te Papaioea*, at Te Tohu o Uenuku Māngere Arts Centre, Tāmaki (Auckland), in June 2016, during Matariki—the season when Matariki (Pleiades) appears in the sky heralding the Māori new year. Not knowing the work had been altered since my last viewing, I again climbed inside the van, sat quietly and watched the streets pass by. The view was soft and contemplative, the pace slow, a leisurely suburban daytime cruise. Somehow the sinister vibe I remembered had dissipated. There was an ambient soundtrack featuring taonga pūrō (traditional Māori wind instruments made of bone and wood) and other instruments,⁴ while the drive-by footage of streets and houses was misted over with pastel swirls of green and purple, pink and blue. Like the fine film of oil on a puddle’s surface, these prismic swirls lent a strange beauty to the mundane street scene. Of course, a disquieting undercurrent remained. The cruising van still made of *me* a watcher. And the gallery wall text informing me that these streets of Te Papaioea were the sites of four of the 2007 terror raids kept that other watchful entity, the White supremacist state, in the room. But who was I now, and what and why was I watching? Was I looking for trouble, or—as I settled into the more benign atmosphere of this van and made a home there—just gazing lovingly at the neighbourhood and my mokopuna (grandchildren), watching them play and grow? A different, warmer avatar animated the van now. Our journey was still troubled, but through the pink and blue swirls our ride quietly emerged as a different kind of object, differently inhabited, drawing on different resources (Fig. 2.1).

TAONGA TRENCH

To shift from this initial, percept-based reading of Te Tau’s work we need a fuller understanding of taonga.⁵ For this, I draw in part from Paul Tapsell’s now classic 1997 account, but primarily from Amiria Henare’s more contemporary, politically enabling account in ‘Taonga Māori: Encompassing Rights and Property in New Zealand’.



Fig. 2.1 Terri Te Tau, exterior installation view of *Unwarranted and Unregistered: Tē Āhua o te Hau ki Tē Papaioea*, 2015. Multimedia installation. Courtesy of the artist

In 1853, Henare tells us (2007, 58), two taonga were gifted to New Zealand's retiring third governor, Sir George Grey, by the Māori chiefs Te Rangihaeata of Ngāti Toa and Taratoa of my own iwi (tribe) Ngāti Raukawa. These were a whalebone club named Hine Te Ao and a green-stone ear pendant named Kaitangata. Hine Te Ao, Henare explains, was a 'maternal ancestor of the Ngāti Raukawa tribe' (2007, 59). Kaitangata was, implicitly, also an ancestor; hence Grey could report that 'The old chief then proceeded after the ancient Māori custom of "Hongi" to press the green stone to his nose, and pass it over his face in token of farewell' (Henare 2007, 58).⁶ Hongi is the Māori practice of greeting each other nose to nose, thus sharing hau (breath). These named taonga are people, and they have travelled on long journeys, gathering hau. As Henare outlines (2007, 59), Kaitangata was found in Te Wai Pounamu (Aotearoa's South Island) by Te Ngahue, then taken home to Hawaiki, prior to the Māori migrations to Aotearoa.

When passed down within iwi and hapū (subtribes), and occasionally gifted to other groups, taonga are handed over as loved ancestors, thus binding recipients into a duty of care—and creating a delicate state of

imbalance or indebtedness that calls for ongoing relationality and reciprocity between the groups. Simultaneously, the ancestor's hau, and mauri, mana and tapu (sanctity), meets that of the new holders of the taonga, joining them all together:

In *hongi*-ing the taonga, the chiefs were mingling their own hau or breath of life with that of the ancestor-object, thus binding the intertwined lineages of the chiefs and that of Grey together, re-animating the promises of the Treaty⁷ and focusing their relationship in the form of their ancestor, the ancient *taonga*. (2007, 60)

Henare stresses that taonga, 'more than simply 'representing', 'signifying' or 'embodying' ancestral efficacy and power, *are* it in specific form' (2007, 56); 'one taonga exchanged for another does not simply *carry* the hau of the gift, it *is* its hau', thus '[t]here is a precise identity ... between thing and spirit' (2007, 48). Taonga, like people, as people, *are* the living presence of ancestral lines of descent and relation. The ancestorhood or personhood that Henare highlights, via a focus on hau, is key to the *relational* function of taonga in Māori social life. This efficacy of hau is illuminated by Te Tau, who writes, 'the hau left behind by a person (e.g. footprints) is also still in them, connected to them' (2015a, 52). Similarly, Natalie Robertson states, 'the mauri can't be untangled or separated from the image just because the photographer takes it far away from its source' (2012, 103).⁸

The time-travelling relational function of taonga has been thoroughly delineated in a number of texts by Paul Tapsell—for instance:

Generations of the original kin group may have been born, lived and died without knowledge of their taonga's continuing existence in another part of the universe. Suddenly it streaks back into their lives, often as a result of some significant life crisis, reaffirming the kin group's connections to the ancestors who were originally associated with the taonga. (2006, 20)

But Henare emphasizes that it is by dint of their *objectness* (which provides a focal locus for the assembling of mauri and hau) that taonga have the capacity to produce and reproduce relations: 'the very partibility and motility of taonga ... their "thinginess" within a general state of flux, is precisely what makes them indispensable to the work of relating' (2007, 62).

This shifts attention to the kind of objecthood taonga allow us to think—one that ‘do[es] not necessarily invoke a subject’ (2007, 61)—because indeed for Māori there is no ‘ontological apartheid between persons and things’ (2007, 63). Nor do many other Western metaphysical dualisms (mind–body, spirit–matter) apply. Henare’s description of a live yet ‘subjectless’ kind of object is echoed in Mika’s account of things, which ‘we might call our “whanaunga” (relations), even where these have been deemed by Western science to be inanimate’ (2015, 61). ‘For Māori,’ he writes, ‘the thing in its most basic sense is like the self: it is immediately connected to everything else’ (2015, 61), and ‘[t]he self can be thought of as amongst those things whilst being constituted by them’ (2015, 64). Following Henare and Mika, I wish to de-emphasize the agency of a human ‘subject’ and emphasize instead the agency of these ‘objects’ that do not necessarily need subjects to think them (but may themselves call forth or *produce* selves—and thought): ‘one is in the first instance cognisant of a thing through that thing’s choice’ (Mika 2015, 67). This ‘choice’ is linked to the awareness within *te ao Māori* that all things live or vibrate: ‘be it rocks or birds, people or trees, “physical phenomena and people are held to proceed from a common primal source”’ (Marcia Browne 2005, 22, citing Anne Salmond). Although I may be telling the eels here according to *my* mind’s inklings and leanings, it is the eels’ prior existence and exigencies, their impenetrable aliveness, *their* self-disclosure of wairua, mauri and mana that call me to feel and think them. From Mika I also borrow the ‘possibility that things that are *imperceptible* ... may still have an effect on the self’ (2015, 62, emphasis added). Indeed, he adds, ‘whatever we perceive as Māori ... is comprised of what is not immediately there’ (2015, 62).

As subjectless objects that call for conscious engagement, taonga both perform and are performed. The ‘performance’ includes the handling, hongī-ing, sometimes crying over, but *pivots* on the telling of the kōrero (talk)—the narrating of a taonga’s whakapapa, people, places, events and travels near and far. Tapsell writes:

as taonga travel from one generation to the next, so too do their complex, genealogically ordered histories, or kōrero, which are individually attached to each item. (1997, 328)

Without kōrero, the item ceases to communicate, loses context, and fails to link a kin group’s identity to specific ancestral landscapes. (1997, 332)

Panoho quotes Hirini Mead in this regard too—referring to art now, but clearly activating a taonga view in the process:

Eventually, what invests artworks with meaning are the words and stories we tell about each one. For the Māori, the words comprise the *kōrero* ... There are hundreds of stories to tell, there are hours of listening to do. (2015, 251)

But as you might guess, even when they are not being held, seen, performed and told, taonga's power is not diminished by this 'dormant' state. And if they are dormant because far from home, they are presumably being cherished by their 'foster holders'⁹; if anything, when they return their prestige has grown:

If a taonga does return after being launched by an earlier generation on a comet-like trajectory, it arrives home carrying an intensity of *mana*, *tapu* and *kōrero*. (Tapsell 1997, 366)

Taonga not dwelling with their familiars or otherwise held in known hands are *wāhi ngaro* (in an unseen place). Panoho writes of the Tainui taonga Korotangi: 'there was a period of *wāhi ngaro* or a phase involving "the realm of the unknown" ... It might be argued [that Korotangi] was never lost: that it continued within an oral tradition while its physical form was temporarily not revealed' (2015, 256). The confluence of this with Mika's 'imperceptible things' is clear.

Before turning back to contemporary art, I want to reiterate that almost anything can become taonga. If Tapsell focuses on material taonga *tuku iho*, Henare's essay articulates an expanded field of taonga. For instance, text 'enabled a form of distributed personhood involving the *mana*, *tapu* and *hau* of the person—their ancestral efficacy and power, in other words—as well as their "thoughts"' (2007, 54). The Treaty of Waitangi is a taonga: 'In drawing their moko marks onto the Treaty, the chiefs extended their own *mana* to the document, rendering it an instantiation of their personhood, as the "living face" of their line' (2007, 52). All the taonga in Wai 262—including 'indigenous flora and fauna, genetics and genetic derivatives, silica sands and cultural motifs' (2007, 49)—are claimed as 'distributed parts of persons, and as persons in their own right'; and thus as 'fundamental requirement[s]

of relationality' (2007, 62). Henare also cites references to 'Māori language, Māori knowledge ... and processes' (2007, 49–50), 'biodiversity [and] natural resources' (2007, 51) as taonga. To this latter category, of course, tuna and pāua belong.

Henare's expansive definition resists the suggestion that taonga as a cultural concept has suffered a 'tragic though inevitable decline into inauthenticity' owing to its 'incorporation by global capitalism and modernity' (2007, 63). She argues that instead of hybridizing, assimilating or otherwise 'working from within a single perspective, Māori are shifting between registers of value in a move enabled by the encompassment of one—that of commodities—by the other—that of taonga' (2007, 64). She paves a way for contemporary, non-essentializing expressions of tino rangatiratanga (Māori sovereignty) and kaupapa Māori research (including Māori arts and even Māori art writing) to continue their operations within not just Pākehā but mainstream international circuits. This 'way' recognizes that we may have '(untranslatable) concepts' and 'distinctly Māori kinds of objects with a creativity of their own' (2007, 63); and simultaneously acknowledges that there may be positions (perhaps even created objects) that are 'wholly Māori *and also* European' (2007, 64):

This commensurability is consistent with Māori notions of relatedness, in that, according to the workings of *whakapapa*, Māoriness encompasses other identities without obliterating or diluting them ... a majority Irish ancestry does not make one any less Māori. (Henare 64)

The tuna keep swimming. They have been spirit and matter, subjects and objects, objects and relations. They have been instantiations of genus and species; they have been taniwha, named and immortalized in different kōrero, different stars. It is *all* kōrero. They pass but live on, still calling us.

SPAWNING

At Te Tohu o Uenuku I read the wall text again and it clicks: in this van I am tupuna (ancestor), and these are my pāua-shell eyes. Pāua, a shell-fish abundant in Aotearoa harbours, is valued by Māori on many levels. Its meat is delicious creamed or fried. Its iridescent, peacock-coloured,¹⁰

shell adorns customary Māori whakairo (carving) and raranga (weaving). This iris-like, light-reflecting shell was especially favoured for the eyes of pouwhakairo (carved figures depicting tupuna and gods), and was associated with the stars, the eyes of our tupuna. Pāua feature in whakatauki (sayings), pūrakau (legends) and contemporary literature. In the legend of Tinirau and Kae, the treacherous Kae places pāua shells over his own closed eyes before sleeping, to trick his visitors (rightly suspected of ill-intent) into believing he is awake through the night. Patricia Grace, in her novel *Potiki*, writes of the kahawai fish, ‘its eye is small and gaudy, like the pāua-shell eyes that watch unblinking round all the many edges of the night’ (1986, 113). Pāua, like eels, have whakapapa leading back to Tangaroa (god of the sea) and, before him, to Ranginui (sky father) and Papatūānuku (earth mother)—who are our ancestors too, meaning we humans are pāua’s cousins. Our frequent encounters with pāua are constant reminders of their value not just to us but to our tupuna, who caught, shucked, ate, polished, cut, narrated and chanted karakia (incantations) over today’s pāua’s ancestors. As sacred instantiations of Tangaroa’s own hau and mana, they hold the potential to reawaken us to our entire complex relationship with the sea *if* we engage appropriately with them.

Using Aura Reading Software and Adobe After Effects (Te Tau 2015a, 84), Te Tau has rendered visible the hau of the people and places of Te Papaioea, in the form of shimmery haloes or auras.¹¹ Simultaneously she has created a semblance of a ‘tipuna gaze’ (87), for the whole view is distinctly pāua-coloured (Fig. 2.2). This tupuna gaze is one taonga traversing the artwork. As pāua-shell-eyed taonga we live, and look, on. You may need to have some familiarity with pāua-shell-eyed tupuna, as taonga, to really ‘get’ this experience. Moreover, we who do will each think of different whakairo, different tupuna as we sit and gaze. I think of the tekoteko (carved gable figure) in my own wharetupuna (ancestral meeting house), who was retrieved from a long hibernation in a swamp before coming to us, whose kōrero still awaits further telling and whom I now suddenly long to see again. I think of favourite pouwhakairo in other wharetupuna I have slept in, and of that sense of being cradled at their feet. I think of tupuna whose names and mana have resonated strongly for me, though I have never seen them represented visually.



Fig. 2.2 Terri Te Tau, interior installation view of *Unwarranted and Unregistered: Tē Āhua o te Hau ki Tē Papaioea*, 2015. Multimedia installation. Courtesy of the artist

The call to respond to tupuna in their liveness here and now—as a living face of my own tupuna—is what I experience in Te Tau’s van. I feel called ‘back’ at the same time as some of my own tupuna are called ‘forward’,¹² to co-inhabit this space and join hau and renew the cycle. It is unnerving and delicious—like being embraced by a long-gone kuia (grandmother), but simultaneously becoming that long-gone kuia and feeling the love she feels for the place we are seeing. I feel what this does to the streets of Te Papaioea—also in need of a good granny hug, and now getting it.

Of course (deflecting here any hegemonic, recuperative tendencies), this is not an arrival in individuation, and the tupuna are not accessed as subjectivities—no more than the passers-by are. I am awakened by this tupuna-gaze (sharing hau with the hau of ancestral pāua, pāua crafters and pāua-shell-eyed tupuna) *at the same time as* it holds me at bay, holds this as *its* space, not mine. I see through its eyes for a moment, feel the abiding hau and mauri of my tupuna and reconnect with them—and

with a great sea of connectivity—but I do not penetrate their interiors, do not ‘know’ them in *that* way. (To my mind a ‘subjectless object’ is precisely one like this that is ‘impenetrably’ alive and connected to everything else. Another living person or thing can only be known in its opacity. To penetrate it is in a sense to kill it.) I see through its eyes while being *this* living face here and now. I am reminded of the whakaaro (thinking) without knowing that Mika describes (2015, 66), and the kinds of things thought in this way:

the spaces of obscurity where ‘whakaaro’ is called by things to speculate but not necessarily penetrate into;

The ... data here ... is thoroughly unknowable and crucially its own master; delight in the thing’s mercuriality may, in turn, promise a counter-colonial answer. (2015, 67)

Even as I see ‘through’ this tupuna gaze, the mercurial tupuna preserves its own opacity.¹³ But I get to feel the aroha (love) of connection. Meanwhile *I* am not being subjectivated as an embodied, knowing, seeing agent; instead I feel myself encompassed by something bigger that includes me, *moves me* and also *cares about me*. I am not looking at someone else’s taonga (*or* at a contemporary artwork) in a museum vitrine. I am immersed in a ‘taonga experience’. This cannot be objectified on the classic Western epistemological orientation of distance *and* penetration. Mika one more time: ‘not everything is available to us. The thinker is therefore not outside matter; he or she is instead within it’ (2015, 65). This tupuna gaze, this taonga experience, is about producing not knowledge but relationality and aliveness. Indeed the taonga is barely seen—it is seen through. Te Tau’s invitation, clearly, is to take off the surveillance helmet and put on a tupuna gaze instead. The van has travelled, and travels us, into a mode of survey that enhances rather than reduces mana. A mode of survey that precludes the precise knowing of objects by their ‘interiors’—but lends us the warmth of *being known—and loved*. A view vaster and older than the paranoid view, *always* working to bring things back into its safe embrace.

The tupuna gaze is one taonga traversing *Te Āhua o te Hau ki Te Papaioea*; a taonga that perhaps I had been forgetting for a while. But the experience it offers could be just a semblance of a taonga experience

(into which anyone can insert their own narratives) until we turn to ways in which *Te Tau*'s taonga are performed here. Specific iwi narratives and whakapapa are not given with the van installation, although the wall text refers us to Operation 8, and the Māori place name Te Papaioea (instead of the English name Palmerston North) in the work's title is enough to indicate that ancestral narratives exist. However, Te Tau has also written a novella providing a fantasy backstory about pāua-shell eyes, *Beyond the Corners of our Whare [House]* (2015b), copies of which were given out at the first exhibition of *Te Āhua o te Hau ki Te Papaioea*. The novella doesn't just use the pāua-shell eyes motif familiar to Māori readers. It doesn't just offer some context and explanation of the motif's significance, for non-Māori readers. It also holds, restores—and guards—genealogical information belonging to Te Tau's people. The novella centres on the existence and traditions of the lake Hāpuakorari, halfway between Greytown and Te Papaioea, and derives from them a narrative of tupuna, tohunga (priests, experts) and taonga:

Those people who came up through the lake from the world beyond had eyes that shone with pāua shell. They shimmered like rainbow trapped under-water.

Time moved differently at Hapuakorari and they talked for so long that [the tohunga] didn't realise he had become submerged in the lake. He began to drown.

The people pressed pāua shells to his face which buried themselves deep into his eye sockets in the same way that pāua attaches itself to a rock. (2015b, 34)

Hāpuakorari is a taonga of Te Tau's Rangitāne iwi. If the book itself is a fiction, it springs from tribal narratives connected to real taonga-places, and its kōrero activates the tupuna-gaze-taonga in the van differently (while the van features large in the novella). That kōrero follows the intergenerational journey of one tohunga's pāua-shell eyes (bearing the gift of hau-sight) through many hands. Emerging from a freshwater lake, slipping and sliding in the story between wāhi ngaro and visibility, these eyes, their hau and the whakapapa they accrue, instantiate the singular, local and ancestrally connective ways in which taonga operate. Te Tau's fictionalizing is also true to form, for the real Hāpuakorari (which may even be two lakes) is 'full of mystery' and 'shrouded in mysticism'

(Potangaroa 2015); no one tells *all* the kōrero. Tapu tribal knowledge is not given away lightly.

Meanwhile, Te Tau's doctoral thesis contains images of whakapakoko (carved ancestral guardians with pāua-shell eyes) at Te Tau's nearby marae, Papawai (another tupuna). They are another part of the fabric woven by Te Tau's many-threaded kōrero as she recites and revives tribal taonga (Hāpuakorari, Papawai, the whakapakoko, their eyes), and folds her own work into the narrative too (do not forget that text can also become taonga). The kōrero is warmed and updated in turn, releasing and mingling the hau of this post-Operation 8 place and time with the hau of all those other people, places and times. All these stories swim across and through *Te Āhua o te Hau ki Te Papaioea*, putting things back into perspective.

Perspective: the great healer. But not the god's-eye-perspective of distance; rather, a felt 'midstness' within a vast sea of connections—which we might instead choose to call 'aspective'.¹⁴ Mika describes being 'amongst' what he thinks or speculates about—a 'withinness' related to whakapapa, 'which ensures my active participation amidst the term' (2015, 65). Again, 'not everything is available to us. The thinker is therefore not outside matter; he or she is instead *within* it' (2015, 65). Such 'withinness' is surely all the stronger and more embodied for those who first heard their whakapapa chanted to them as babies, by tohunga, before they had even acquired language, and who have participated in its ongoing recitations ever since. This connected, immersed perspective, approaching an object-oriented 'aspective', is there also in Tapsell when he describes the taonga's assertion of a whakapapa landscape overriding any individual human experience:

The performance of taonga by elders effectively collapses time and reanimates the kin group's ancestral landscape, allowing descendants to re-live the events of past generations [and] ... be fused back into a powerful, single genealogical identity. (1997, 330)

For these reasons, the semblant taonga-experience Te Tau's *art-object* may offer 'outsiders'—however affectively powerful—cannot be equated with the effects of the pāua-shell-eyed taonga for those fully participant in pāua-shell-eye genealogies. Nonetheless, Te

Tau's *taonga* has the ability to fold 'outsiders' encountering it now (in an art-object) into its *kōrero*. Taonga are *always* weaving their connections.

ELVERS SWARM

Tribal taonga are similarly activated through *kōrero* in other contemporary Māori artworks. *Ōtākaro* (2016), a collaboration between Te Tau and Bridget Reweti, features a mirrored real-time video of the dawn gradually lighting up the river Ōtākaro (Avon) in Christchurch, and a voiceover narrating a story that again leans towards fantasy and futurism yet is anchored in Māori connections to place and taonga (the river, eels, whitebait). The striking film with its shimmering black and green geometries echoes the narrative's futurist sensibility (Fig. 2.3). If these artists practise their tikanga (Māori ethical protocols) with care, they are equally steadfast in their refusal of visual tropes that might trap them in a Māori essentialism. When taonga collapse time, breathing ancestral hau into the present, the past is reactivated but does not dominate. Meanwhile, *Tirohanga* (2016), a Reweti exhibition of site-specific camera obscura photographs and video exploring both colonial and Māori views of Aotearoa landscapes,¹⁵ might remain elusive and opaque to a mainstream public blind to the work's irony, until they read the gallery text divulging snippets of place-based tribal narratives also traversing the work.¹⁶

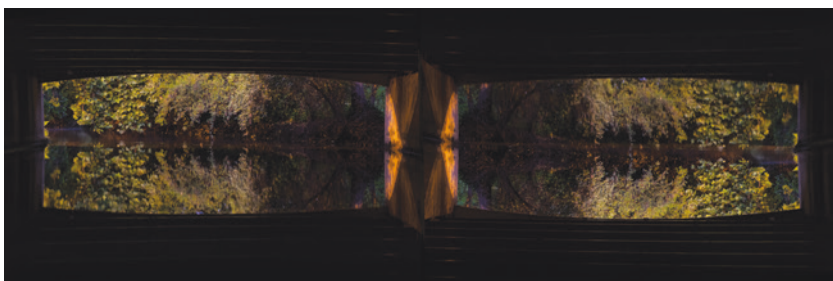


Fig. 2.3 Bridget Reweti and Terri Te Tau, still from *Ōtākaro*, 2016. HD Moving image, 40 min. Courtesy of the artists

All these artists are operating consciously on at least two paradigms (neither of which is static). They are creating artworks grounded in (a fluid, evolving) kaupapa and tikanga Māori but also able to operate effectively on contemporary art circuits. It is not cynical to do so; it is just the Māori reality. The works' efficacy is not uncomplicated: they slip and slide between paradigms, and sometimes into eel-knots (like this essay), their passage activated or disabled according to artistic decisions but also according to their viewers' background understandings and assumptions and willingness to engage with the kōrero. As the works thus shift from freshwater to salt, information is gained or lost; taonga appear or disappear. But I suspect glimmers of understanding carry over. Something stays open. The 'personhood', hau and mauri of everyone who ever crafted a pāua-shell gaze has arrived here, however virtually (but we are experts at virtualities!); reinstantiated in *this* pāua-shell gaze. It's here. We're back. Hau can't be shaken off. And the taonga, at first feeling like an invisible cross-current or undercurrent, comes to wrap around and encompass the artwork, thanks to its expansive, open-ended journeying, its inclusion of whomever it encounters—or gazes upon or breathes upon—within its sphere of meaning.

The potential is here for Te Tau's activation of hau, grounded in ancient knowings, instantiated in this object now, to weave people together in ways that have no concern for the boundaries of the art object as it is constituted by the gallery, nor for the art knowledge of art-viewing subjects on that paradigm. The magic of hau is that it bridges difference, joins what was separate. If the hau of the taonga accompanying this artwork is activated, and felt (as an open-ended obligation to reciprocate) by new groups of people, then perhaps even the art-object van itself might be on its way to becoming a taonga too—creating new allegiances between 'art people' and 'taonga people'. This does not mean that art people know now what taonga people know—if anything, they will know better what it is that they *do not know*. We all get to hold our opacity, and our tapu knowledges, too, while enjoying (hopefully!) the encompassment. Bound together in kōrero. This art of cultural multiplicity needs a rhythm for swinging viewers between inclusion and necessary blind spots or closed doors, and helping them embrace their blind spots too. We all need to close our eyes sometimes to see.

Terry Smith challenges 'transnational artists' to 'resist the temptation of slipping into a new kind of distracted exoticism, one that

would permit viewers gently guided tours through signs of the Other rather than obliging them to undergo genuine encounters with its intractable difference' (2011, 322). His challenge is contemporary art oriented, assuming global, not local, viewers; it comes from outside. I would hazard that our artists are nailing it. And they are standing strong in their tino rangatiratanga too. They are artists as uri, whanaunga (relatives) and hunga tiaki (custodians). In a quite casual, everyday way,¹⁷ they perform their taonga, speaking the kōrero, breathing the hau, feeling the mauri, handling it with aroha, passing it on. The about-turn hidden inside their contemporary art objects is this potential for de-individuation, this subjectless, not-knowing-but-connected orientation asked of us by the taonga-tupuna. Te Tau made the art, but she didn't make the taonga. They—those pāua-shell eyed tupuna—made her.

For tuna, the rivers of Aotearoa—where they are loved as taonga—are home. But they also need the ocean deep. Perhaps we all need to venture into darker waters to regenerate ourselves. The taonga in art such as Te Tau's and Reweti's might become more distant from us as they journey through international galleries (and less visible, to international viewers); but there they are, conserving and renewing their powers while art people gaze. Who is serving whom? Who is parasitic upon whom? I am much heartened (for *all* my whanau, Māori and non-Māori alike) by the idea of a Māori ethos of connection, protection and care that is only strengthened by its travels, encounters and colonizations, *even if* that strengthening sometimes waits decades, or centuries, to disclose itself. The swim between paradigms keeps us alive—as taonga, tupuna, journeying hau and whakapapa artists well know.

It is almost Matariki again, and a few months from now elvers will pass over pāua-encrusted rocks to gather in the estuaries. Called on by ancient knowings, preparing to drift upstream—back to our watchful gaze. We do not know what they are, what they know, what they think. But there they really are, in their diminished numbers, still taonga people. And here we really are, still taonga people, donning pāua-shell eyes, working hard to shift the timbre of our watch from fear to aroha (love). Tihei, mauri ora!¹⁸

Ko tēnei taku mihi ki a Terri Te Tau, ki a Bridget Reweti, ki ō mātou tupuna, ki ngā tohunga mahi toi katoa o te ao Māori. Kei te mihi, kei te mihi, kei te mihi.

NOTES

1. Te Tuna-Whiri is a constellation within the Māori family of constellations Te Awa o Te Tuna, The River of Eels in the sky (Te Ao Turoa 2005, 22). Biologists do not know the exact spawning ground of Aotearoa's tuna kuwharuwharu (longfin eels)—thought to be around the Tonga Trench—nor exactly how they navigate the ocean. I have based my tuna imagining on a range of kōrero, some current, some less so, without excessive concern for empirical fact.
2. English terms such as 'animism' and 'spirit' often invoke metaphysical dualisms that do not apply in te ao Māori (the Māori universe); and even when defined differently in non-dualist contexts they hold meanings not present within the Māori cosmology. The English translations offered for Māori terms here are mere glosses to facilitate reading.
3. Terri Te Tau and Bridget Reweti are both members of the Mata Aho Collective, which represented Aotearoa at Documenta 14 in Kassel, 2017.
4. Taonga pūoro played by Rob Thorne, a musician who also uses the instruments for healing purposes (Te Tau 2017).
5. When reading Western contemporary art, it is not unusual to start from the perceptual and sensorial experience composed by the artist/s, then interpret its implications within an expanded geo-socio-political field through a progression of affects, concepts, semblances and other associations. To 'read' taonga Māori calls for different start points and end points, based not in perception and sensation but in whakapapa.
6. Amiria Henare is quoting Sir George Grey's correspondence with the Duke of Newcastle.
7. The Treaty of Waitangi: Aotearoa's deeply problematic 'founding document', co-signed by the British Crown and some chiefs of some Māori tribes in 1840. Henare's discussion focuses on Wai 262, a claim brought to the Waitangi Tribunal (the commission charged with investigating breaches of the Crown's promises under the Treaty of Waitangi).
8. There is a fine distinction between hau and mauri, as Māori Marsden explains: "'Hau-ora"—"the breath of life" is the agent or source by and from which mauri (life-principle) is mediated to objects ... Mauri without the qualifying adjective "Ora" (life) is applied to inanimate objects; whilst hau is applied only to animate life' (2003, 44). I have followed Henare in focusing on hau, to highlight the 'peopledness' or personhood of the objects (taonga) in question.
9. It has been the source of considerable grief that such gifting, once it began occurring across cultures, was not understood; expected levels of care were often *not* bestowed by Pākehā (settlers) upon the taonga Māori they received. For the taonga were received into different registers

- of value, and entered different economic circuits, often, for instance, becoming museum ‘artefacts’ in the process.
10. Especially so in Aotearoa owing to their local diet of brown and red algae and bladder kelp.
 11. Te Tau uses ‘aura’ as a translation of hau, the flyer accompanying this installation stating: ‘Hau is an auric field that encompasses the vitality of man and the essence of land.’
 12. It might be more correct, on a Māori understanding, to say I am called forward and they are called back, but we haven’t the time here to digress into Māori temporalities.
 13. In using this term I am thinking of Edouard Glissant: ‘A racist is someone who refuses what he doesn’t understand ... Opacity is a right we must have ... Why wouldn’t I accept the other’s opacity? Why must I absolutely understand the other to live next to him and work with him?’ (2011, 14–15) To me this connects directly to Mika’s comment that ‘there must be an ethical way to comport oneself towards things so that they are discussed in a way that does not constrain them’ (2015, 62). One ethical way to comport oneself is by accepting opacity.
 14. In aspective representation, ‘the artist tries to show the object as it is at all times, regardless of any change in the position of the viewer. In this way, the object is at the centre of its world, fixing its own viewpoint and dictating its features to the artist’ (Neich 1993, 134). Although Neich characterizes aspective representation (in Māori carving) as an attempt at objectivity (134), I am more interested in the way it places the viewer (and the artist) ‘amongst’ the object’s world; again, this would be an object/objectivity without a subject (least of all a transcendent god-like subject), or perhaps an object that is its own subject. For further discussion of aspective representation in contemporary art, see my analysis of Alex Monteith’s art practice (Barnett 2014, Chap. 6).
 15. For more about this work and Bridget Reweti’s wider practice, see my Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) online profile of Reweti, ‘Strange Land Singing’ (2015).
 16. Many other Māori contemporary artists have attended to more or less distant taonga in different ways in their work, from Fiona Pardington’s *Mauri Mai, Tono Ano* (2001) to Lisa Reihana’s *He Tautoko* (2006) to Kura Puke and Stuart Foster’s *Te Ara Wairua* (2014, with Te Matahiapo Research Organisation), though not all these works perform the taonga as taonga via kōrero reviving whakapapa connections. A quite different case of taonga intersecting Pākehā ‘art objects’ is the Partington Collection of Whanganui Māori photographs, discovered in 2001 and put up for auction. The arrival of uri (descendants) of the photographs’

- sitters, come to bring home their tupuna, swiftly repositioned the images on a taonga trajectory (and closed down the auction).
17. Not to be confused with the more formal rituals and karakia (incantations) of the tohunga.
 18. Tihei, mauri ora! A ritual exclamation punctuating beginnings or ends of whaikōrero (oratory) and ceremonial processes; also used as a greeting. Commonly translated as ‘I sneeze; it is life!’, a statement of the speaker’s (ancestrally given) life force or aliveness.

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