

## Event review

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### HE MANA, HE WAHINE: LATE at the museum

***Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, August 9, 2016***

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The session that started the 2016 LATE at the Museum season, *He mana, he wahine*, was an enjoyable evening with dance performances, a Smart Talk discussion panel, and a public exhibition, *Kōrero mai, kōrero atu*, which tied the themes of the night neatly together.

The *Kōrero mai, kōrero atu* exhibition displayed crafted objects, taonga, and some of the museum's collection of cloaks. One of the artists whose work was on display was Areta Wilkinson, who specialises in linking taonga concepts with contemporary cultural and social practices. The juxtaposition in her work between materials associated with the western world, such as gold and twine, and the traditional symbols used lent itself to unique and eye-catching jewellery. Alongside her work, videos were played showing Wilkinson's whānau. This brought greater meaning to her work as it tied in an important essence of Māori culture: when creating something taonga, you involve your whakapapa in your work. The emphasis on the artists and their background removes the objectification of their art by highlighting their personal journey that led to the pieces on display. Te Rongo Kirkwood's art, also on display in *Kōrero mai, kōrero atu*, fused contemporary and historical motifs shown within the exhibition. Four kākahu (cloaks), designed by Kirkwood, were reminiscent of the traditional garments worn in the nineteenth century, each representing a different stage of life. Kākahu are a connection to your whakapapa; the spiritual and physical world becoming linked through the materials collected from the natural world that form the cloaks. When creating her pieces, Kirkwood was influenced by original nineteenth-century cloaks (which were also displayed in the exhibition) but incorporated glass in her creations to add modernity to the feathers and flax that were also used.

The significance of having Wilkinson and Kirkwood's work in this exhibit was articulated during the panel by Professor Ngahuia Te Awekotuku: 'women make craft, men make art. That was bullshit'. Māori women's artwork has been devalued in the western world, dismissed as merely craft. An example of this, Professor Te Awekotuku explained, came when the *Te Māori* exhibit was displayed in the USA, a milestone for Māori culture post-colonisation. In this exhibition, only male-created taonga were displayed, with an active dismissal of women's work. In valuing Wilkinson and Kirkwood's work in this exhibit, considering the context of Māori wāhine artists that came before them is crucial.

Preceding and succeeding the panel discussion were vignettes from *Mana wahine*, a performance by Okareka Dance Company performed by UNITEC students. The all-female performance drew its inspiration from the story of Te Ao-kapurangi, a woman who, in the early nineteenth century, rescued her people of Te Arawa from fugitives and established a permanent peace. The dance depicted themes of femininity, fluidity, and strength by integrating contemporary dance tropes with Māori motifs. Woven baskets, imagery of native birds, wiri hand movements, and pūkana facial expressions reinforced the integration of Māori culture

into the performance. *Mana wahine* portrayed the dancers' bodies as places of activism and of storytelling, depicting the strength of Te Ao-kapurangi alongside her femininity. As with Wilkinson and Kirkwood's art, the modern was woven into a piece that honoured the past, depicting traditional Māori culture adapting and shifting in response to western culture, rather than being swallowed by it.

The final and central part of the evening was the Smart Talk discussion panel of *He mana, he wahine*. It was moderated by the thoughtful and articulate Mihingarangi Forbes, an investigative journalist and television interviewer who works for Radio New Zealand as the Māori Issues Correspondent. On the panel was Rosanna Raymond, an internationally renowned Pasifika artist and poet, and the founder of the *SaVAge K'lub*, an installation space that contrasts historical and newly created artwork and performances. Courtney Sina Meredith was also present – she is a playwright, fiction writer, and poet whose book of poetry *Brown girls in bright red lipstick* was published in various languages and is influenced by Pasifika and contemporary life. At the end of the event, she read a short story from her new collection, *Tail of the taniwha*, to great applause. The largest presence on the panel was Professor Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, who awed everyone with her confidence, power, and history. Professor Te Awekotuku is a Māori, women's, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights activist and researcher who focuses on Māori culture, gender, and sexuality. Her publications include extensive work on te moko such as in her 2007 book *Mau moko: The world of Māori tattoo* and research surrounding Māori understandings of death. These women were joined by Dr Pala Molisa, a researcher and lecturer at Victoria Business School whose work draws on critical theory and focuses on the unique area of social and critical accounting. Dr Molisa provided a fascinating academic perspective within the panel.

The panel refreshingly included integration of Pasifika, Māori, and queer perspectives on feminism that is often absent from such discussions. One leading theme in the panel discussion was the role of colonisation in our understanding of society and feminism. Dr Te Awekotuku asserted that colonisation is *not* the root of all problems, as Aotearoa was a battlefield before colonisation arrived: 'To assume immigrants who arrived were responsible for all the problems is unfair and untrue', she stated to emphasise the importance of acknowledging this. Professor Te Awekotuku, along with Rosanna Raymond, discussed the erasure of Māori and Pasifika sexuality using examples of relics and art in the Auckland Museum whose sexual parts were literally cut off. Continuing the theme of colonisation shaping possibilities for Māori and Pasifika culture, the panel discussed how language shaped possibilities for gender when the shift to English caused nuanced understandings of gender fluidity to be lost in translation, such as the shift from no gender pronouns in describing characters of Māori mythology to the English default masculine. According to Raymond, this led to limited possibilities for presenting and acting gender. She mentioned that Pacific understandings of gender are fluid, using the example of her grandmother calling her and her brothers 'boy' before she was forced to fit into the western gender dichotomy. This can naturally cause problems in understanding your identity.

Much of the discussion, particularly from Dr Molisa, was about the patriarchy's role in feminism and the oppression of women. Dr Molisa very bluntly stated that patriarchal cultures are also rape cultures, with sexualised violence against women being the norm. He asserted that sexism is institutionalised and that the male violence in patriarchal cultures is due to an unwillingness to relinquish male entitlement to women, giving the example of marriage – where women are traditionally treated as property – and entitlement to power, seen in the wealth that is concentrated within male elites. Dr Molisa also said that this rape culture was brought into the indigenous culture in Aotearoa through colonisation, causing the rights of women to be

taken away. As discussed above, Professor Te Awekotuku disagreed with Dr Molisa's strong position that colonisation was the only cause of sexism in our country.

Dr Molisa went on to draw upon radical feminism to discuss sexual politics. Using the example of what he called 'porn culture', he postulated that systematic violence is intrinsic in the pornography industry and stems from the 'male sex right' – men's guaranteed sexual access to women's bodies. According to Dr Molisa, this is the result of patriarchy's construction of masculinity as social dominance over women and that patriarchy is built on a model of masculinity that rests on the violation of boundaries.

Courtney Meredith also drew on her experiences as a Pasifika woman when discussing her journey into feminism. As a woman of colour who wanted to pursue her dreams and her passions, she was deemed 'courageous', being labelled 'a rare breed'. Meredith went on to discuss the importance of feminism in being there for other women and encouraging women. She stressed that women who did not identify as feminists, or who were actively and vocally against feminism, were going against all the women before them who had fought for the privileges such as private space and literacy that afforded them the ability to disavow feminism today. She praised Aotearoa/New Zealand for the freedom that exists – to a point – in our country but reminded us that women are not free everywhere and that our thoughts and opinions are not yet as valid as those of men.

The panel closed with a discussion about men fighting for equal rights yet retaining their misogyny. Mihingarangi Forbes gave an example from the film *Straight outta Compton*: 'how a group of men like that could rap about equality with such passion but be so oppressive when it came to their sisters?'. Dr Molisa also drew on his experiences in Vanuatu, mentioning how men and women were a part of the social justice struggles in the country but when the protesting men came into power, they lost their rhetoric about equal participation. Dr Molisa attributed this to the men's strong identification with patriarchy that informs the institutionalised sexist hierarchy and retains the male dominance.

The panel displayed a seamless weaving of stories and academic discussion around feminism and equality, with the panellists displaying gratitude and awe for the mana wāhine that came before us. The evening provided an excellent location for these discussions, for quiet and empowering activism, with a great weaving of contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand with traditional Māori culture.

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## References

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