An interview with Lisa Reihana

by Contemporary HUM

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Lisa Reihana and Governor-General, Her Excellency The Rt Hon Dame Patsy Reddy arrive for the official opening of the NZ pavilion 2017 on the Disdotona, with 18 rowers from the Canottieri Querini Rowing Club. Photo: HUM.



Lisa Reihana, *in Pursuit of Venus* [infected], 2015–17, detail: Cook's thigh being returned to the Endeavour's crew. Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist.



La Biennale di Venezia, 2017. Photo: HUM



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Installation view of Lisa Reihana, *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*], 2015–17 (detail). Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Photo: HUM.



Installation view of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, the NZ pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017. Photo: HUM.



Signage for *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, the NZ pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017. Photo: HUM.

New Zealand artists in Venice 2017 *is a series of interviews conducted by the Contemporary HUM team during the vernissage of the 57th Biennale Arte di Venezia titled* Viva Arte Viva*, from 9-13th May 2017. While the multitude of official national pavilions and the extensive group exhibition put together by an invited curator make up the oldest and most notorious art biennale in the world, an equally vast number of collateral projects and parallel events take place throughout Venice every two years.*

Heading over to Venice this May, we knew that five New Zealand artists would be exhibiting in both official and parallel venues in 2017, and it seemed important for HUM to offer a space for artists to talk about their own work and the international context of its presentation, but also the challenges and particularities of working across the world. Interviewed artists are: Lisa Reihana, whose project Emissaries *was New Zealand's official presentation at the Biennale; Francis Upritchard, included in Christine Macel's central curated section for the Biennale; Bruce Barber, Paul Handley and Kāryn Taylor, exhibiting in Personal Structures' recurrent exhibition running parallel to the Biennale, titled* Open Borders *in 2017.*

Alongside these interviews, HUM's coverage of New Zealand's participation in Venice includes the following commissioned essays: Urges of Imperialism Unravelled, Rhana Devenport's presentation of Emissaries*: New Zealand's Pavilion 2017; What recognition for New Zealand visual arts on the world stage?, transcribed panel discussion with New Zealand Pavilion 2017 Commissioner Alastair Carruthers; Reporting from the Front Desk, Chris Winwood's take on New Zealand's Architecture Pavilion in 2016; Will Gresson on the history of the New Zealand's contribution to the Venice Art Biennale (upcoming 2017).*



CONTEMPORARY HUM Lisa, what's it like to be the star of the show!? Your arrival to the official opening of the New Zealand Pavilion yesterday, [on Venice's largest gondola Disdetona, helmed by 18 rowers] was rather spectacular!

LISA REIHANA Star!? Whatever… Yes it was an amazing arrival. I'm now a member of the Canottieri Querini Rowing Club! But it's hard to gain a perspective because these past few days are all about being here in our own venue… I've talked to a few of the artists who are immediately next door, but I haven't actually seen anything else yet. Nothing!

I first came to Venice when I contributed to writing a document for our New Zealand government, as they were questioning whether

they should be investing in the Biennale in Venice. New Zealand didn't have a pavilion that year, because it was when they re-evaluated our participation. So it's really hard to tell. I just knew that if I wanted to bring my partner James here, I'd have to get the gig!...It's true! I thought, how can we experience this together? The only way I know how to travel is by working, creating opportunities.

HUM Yes, especially, when you're this far away—it's something we've discussed with other antipodean artists, that it's so far away, so expensive, to bring your work and yourself here, and even more so to have whānau around you.

LR Yes you need support. You need some kind of way of negotiating that process… I've been in lots of different biennales, but Venice is different!

I am looking forward to tonight because there's a cocktail event and that's the one time they bring all of the artists together. It's such a difficult place to work in that you're just in your own space trying to make it happen. There's just no way you can get outside to meet other artists. Whereas if you're working in an art gallery, it's a different infrastructure and support system so you can spend more time getting to know other artists. That's one thing I miss here so far. Like curators too—it's through a handshake that you get the opportunity to make a link, and which eventually leads somewhere else. I've talked to a few artists who say 'I want to be a Venice Biennale artist', and I say yup, but it's a really hard gig. Don't underestimate the complexity and the scale of work involved.

HUM This week?

LR Oh no—the two years leading up to it. It's amazing that you spend all that time working on one project. Although, I've done 20 exhibitions since our project was announced, I needed an income in order to support the project to get here. Being a filmmaker helps, because through the filmmaking process you have

to develop a broad range of skills including proposal writing, script writing, setting up a crew, finding the cast, making props, dealing with logistics.

HUM So it's not so different.

LR No, it's not actually. No knowledge is wasted, but it's not exactly the same either. The logistics are the hardest and most important part. And that's what you have to plan for, you plan for everything, and then you get here, and you work under Italian conditions!

HUM Venice especially has a reputation for operating in its own way.

LR It really does. I used to drive an Alfa Romeo—a little speedster car that I swapped with a friend for a piece of furniture. It was hilarious. Everything about it was backwards! Like the window wipers and the indicators were on the other side. Now I hop into cars and everything is on the other side! It's like that here. It's a mad ride.



Lisa Reihana and Governor-General, Her Excellency The Rt Hon Dame Patsy Reddy with La Biennale di Venezia President Paolo Baratta, NZ Commissioner Alastair Carruthers and 18 rowers of the Canottieri Querini Rowing Club at the official opening of the NZ pavilion 2017. Photo: HUM.



Official opening of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, the NZ pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* 2017. Photo: HUM.



Installation view of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries,* the NZ pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* 2017. Photo: HUM.



Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique, scenic wallpaper illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and manufactured by Joseph Dufour. (1804-1805). Courtesy of P. Plattier, Musées de Mâcon.



Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique (detail), scenic wallpaper illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet and manufactured by Joseph Dufour. (1804-1805). Courtesy of P. Plattier, Musées de Mâcon.



Lisa Reihana and Governor-General, Her Excellency The Rt Hon Dame Patsy Reddy arrive for the official opening of the NZ pavilion 2017 on the Disdotona, with 18 rowers from the Canottieri Querini Rowing Club. Photo: HUM.



Lisa Reihana and Governor-General, Her Excellency The Rt Hon Dame Patsy Reddy with La Biennale di Venezia President Paolo Baratta at the official opening of the NZ pavilion 2017. Photo: HUM.



NZ Commissioner Alastair Carruthers speaks at the official opening of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, the NZ pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017. Photo: HUM.

HUM Can you tell us about first encountering the French wallpaper work *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804–1805) in Australia at the National Gallery in Canberra? How did

seeing the wallpaper spark the ten-year project that resulted in *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*]?

LR I found out that there was a Bill Viola show in Canberra, I had been following his work for a long time but never seen it in the flesh. Installed at the time was the wallpaper in another gallery. Well actually my partner James Pinker saw it first. He grabbed me, and said 'come take a look at this, it's crazy!' The project was seeded so long ago.

Coming from New Zealand, often your encounters with art—it's different now, with the benefit of Google and computers you can see so much more work but when I was a younger artist, the way we encountered work was in books where you don't have a true sense of scale. You know, during art history lectures, where, they would put in the slides upside down or would project them on the wall? You're might be looking at an artwork that is either really big or really small, but projected in this way they were all the same size. It doesn't give you a true sense of how those works might be when you encountered them.

So, the video actually came later. I was working on a project at Hyde Park Art Centre with Bruce Phillips. They organised a collaborative project where New Zealander artists worked in Chicago, interacting with a variety of different communities—I met roller derby girls, homeless people, went to gay support organisations. We went into this Chicano barber shop—where these gang bangers hang out—they were pimping cars, it was really amazing. Hyde Park Art Centre have a permanent video gallery and had set up 10 projectors on this really long skinny catwalk, which you walk beside in day-time with blackout blinds. At night, they lift those up and project from the inside. Opposite the gallery are big apartment blocks. So up to 5,000 people can see this video! As a video artist, I wanted to use that technology, but technology for technology's sake is just a trick. There's not enough in it. We had a deadline to put the proposal together, and in our library at home is the catalogue from the National Gallery [in Canberra]. So, years later when I read the catalogue I had a Eureka moment. I realised, I had to animate this wallpaper and turn it into a video work. So that was about 7 years ago. I spent the first year just

thinking about the pixel ratio and how to put it together because nobody I knew had ever created anything like that.

HUM What, in the wallpaper itself, sparked your desire to respond or react?

LR Seeing these strange representations of Pacific people, and not being able to recognise them, and knowing that it's from us and from home, that we have a shared cultural knowledge, and seeing a reflection of that from another historic time. It's wacky, but really beautiful too. What I responded to as well was that this wallpaper for its time, was a technical triumph, using new technology. They could now make wallpaper because long strips of paper had been engineered for hot air balloons. And this in turn lead to new ways of seeing the world. The first hot air balloons were made out of paper, frightening given that they are filled with gas and fire! That's why they often fell from the sky and a lot of people died. So, this incredible moment of being able to see the world from a different perspective coincided with taking your life into your hands. The wallpaper emerged during a time when people were looking at the world in a very different way. That's where the inspiration came from, me wanting to resist those earlier representations and provide an updated, contemporary view.

HUM You said earlier that you always thought this could be a project for Venice. How come?

LR When I came to Venice to write that document for government, we were meeting curators and I gained a first-hand insight into the Biennale. The invitation is from government to government, not from a curator to an artist—so it's a nationalistic endeavour, you must understand this if you wish to become involved in a National Pavilion. Emissaries has many nations in it. Samoa doesn't have a pavilion, Tahiti doesn't have a pavilion. he Pacific doesn't have a pavilion. They don't have the support structures or the possibility of creating such a pavilion. Friends in

Hawaii have said they're thrilled to be represented here, because they're in the work. Having that support from other indigenous people, is so important. It's so hard, as a Māori, it's political to go out and re represent other cultures. The sort of questions you face are 'why are you doing it?'

Because here we are in the Venetian waterways, being in the heart of the Arsenale, where ships were launched… the heart of early Empire. There are many things that resonate in this choice of building, and Tese dell'Isolotto—translates to the little island. Even the wall the video work is projected on to, behind it is the water—everything about it feels right.

HUM Has this vision for the project to come to Venice developed over many years? I admit writing a couple of times 'In pursuit of Venice' by mistake!

LR I know, that's an uncanny slip of the tongue! But it wasn't initially in my mind. Even setting about making the work was really hard… we don't even have a dedicated video gallery in New Zealand—there's the film archive in Wellington, but I'm in Auckland. It really was a difficult project to pull together.

HUM Yes, so often when you see panoramic film installations with multiple projectors, you notice that darker strip of overlap. But *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*] really looks flawless technically, and your image is moving laterally too.

LR Yes, it's historic, but also totally contemporary at the same time. There are multiple languages embodied in the work and it's been really satisfying bringing it here and working with local people for our New Zealand at Venice project.

The Canottieri Querini Rowing Club are new friends—we've gone to their premises. Peter Gordon and Alastair Carruthers [Commissioner] have been trainees, rowing with them three times so far, 6am they go out, hardcore. They have different boats. The

Disdetona [used to carry Lisa Reihana and New Zealand Governor-General Dame Patsy Reddy to the New Zealand Pavilion opening] is the grand dame. It's the biggest gondola in the world. It only comes out once a year for the annual regatta. That was really special—bringing the Pacific to the old world, arriving on their boat, and being greeted by their people. This performs a reversal of arrival, re-enacting these ceremonies and moments of encounter where it's not just about colonisation but people's curiosity about each other. I mean, why do we travel? Why do we go too far flung places? It's because we're curious, and seeing ourselves in sharp relief from home is one of the great values of travel. I think you begin to understand yourself differently when you are somewhere else.



Chief Mourner at the entrance of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, Biennale Arte 2017. Photo: HUM.



Interactive telescopes at the entrance of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, Biennale Arte 2017. Photo: HUM.



Nootka figure visible through a telescope at the entrance of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, Biennale Arte 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



Lisa Reihana: Emissaries, Biennale Arte 2017. Photo: Michael Hall. Image courtesy of New Zealand at Venice.



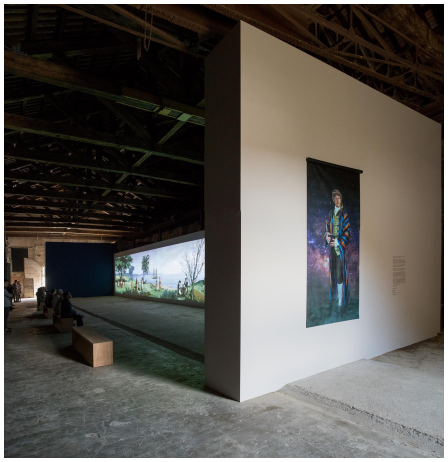
Slide visible through a telescope at the entrance of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, Biennale Arte 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, the NZ pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017. Photo: HUM.



Lisa Reihana, *detail in Pursuit of Venus [infected], 2015–17*, Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist and New Zealand at Venice.



Lisa Reihana: Emissaries, Biennale Arte 2017. Photo: Michael Hall. Image courtesy of New Zealand at Venice.



Tese dell'Isolotto. Photo: Michael Hall. Image courtesy of New Zealand at Venice.



Entrance to *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries*, the NZ pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017, Tese dell'Isolotto. Photo: HUM.

HUM *In Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*] is not a completely new work produced for the Biennale, unlike most previous New Zealand presentations. However since it was shown at the Auckland Art Gallery in 2015, several new segments were added. Why did you feel those were important additions for presentation in the context of Venice?

LR Well, the most important thing wasn't actually about Venice, it was about the hierarchy of racism that developed through the journal entries by explorers and scientists like Cook and Solander. It was really to do with Aboriginal Australia, and I've been travelling to Australia since 1988, the year of the Sesquicentenary. They have a horrific history and relationship to Cook. Their dark skin scared the white explorers, and it was recorded that they didn't own anything, they didn't make anything, they are the poorest of the poor. In the *Les Sauvages* wallpaper, they're the really dark people you can hardly see in the

background. I wanted to bring them forward, but also for me as a Māori woman I want to align the oldest culture on earth who are right next door to us, to the youngest—stitch us together, try to create a balance. Ours is the last landmass to be peopled. Even having [photographic banners with] Banks at one end of the exhibition, and Chief Mourner at the other, you have a sort of western and pacific bookends for the work, so you can look at it both ways. This was another way to bring balance to the work, to bring in the maritime craft of Tahiti, the waka from New Zealand, Samoa, Nootka Sounds.

HUM These were not part of the earlier version of the work?

LR No, all I had was The Endeavour so that supported a Western idea of Cook's discoveries, but of course Pacific and Maori people were already here, so I needed to create balance by including our navigation traditions in the water. And this also pushes the perspective back, making the work much deeper. I really wanted to bring more focus to the water, it's moving—very gently. Te Moana Nui a Kiwa, that's the activation, the way in which we were able to meet each other.

The other addition is the female Cook. There are two 32-minute sequences. In the first one, Marek Sumich plays Captain Cook all the way through. And in the second 32-minute sequence I have Julia Waite play Captain Cook. It relates to when Cook arrived in some Pacific Islands and he was perceived as a god. Because he wore britches, and he didn't sleep with the local women—Captain Cook was a Quaker—they couldn't see his genitals, and therefore didn't know whether he was a male or a female.

I try to push representations of gender and ways of seeing. For instance, there's a number of ceremonies where I've looked at Tupaia, the Tahitian navigator who travelled with Captain Cook. When he came to New Zealand, Māori thought The Endeavour was his, because he was the one who could communicate with Māori, and he conducted the ceremonies, which is completely different to the way the English perceived him. So—examining ways of looking

and seeing and perceptions of knowing—which is why Joseph Banks and Chief Mourner bookend the show, two guardians who greet you as you enter.

HUM Can you tell us about the five telescopes installed in the foyer of the exhibition?

LR I worked with Cambridge Museum, a couple of the artefacts are from their collections. Generally when museums record artefacts, they are photographed on neutral backgrounds. The Nootka figure appears with an image I sourced of the North West Coast to give him a local context. You can't always repatriate [objects] out of those collections so in a way it's a repatriation of him as an ancestral figure because he would have had a name, he would have represented somebody—this is what I find working with museum collections, unless there's a really good recording, sometimes items are stolen or traded several times so they lose their identity. It's trying to give a sense of having an identity and the Nootka figure being someone in the world. I mean they are beautiful in the collection too but they have histories and stories from somewhere else.

HUM So those telescopes, are they repurposed, borrowed originals or remakes?

LR They are original telescopes, I've been collecting them, they come from all over the world. I love the surveyors table top telescope, that's from Germany. It's an old telescope, and it looks old and huckery. Making the slide films now is difficult in New Zealand, because it's old tech, we're digital now. It's a reversal of what the telescopes are designed to do—look far away—now you're looking at something close up. When you look into the viewfinder you see an image that says 'because we are from the future', I love that. When Rhana and I first came to meet the Venice Biennale people two years ago, to find a space big enough to host this work. Even then they thought we were very early for the Venice

Architecture Biennale, but we said no, we are here because 'we are from the future', so we're here for the next Art Biennale. I always quip that we are the people who hail from the beginning of the world, we are the most youthful nation, and we are the first to see the light of day.

Also, I wanted to include telescopes to make a connection to Gallileo who came to Venice to grind the glass lenses for his telescope which he used to view the heavens and the stars such as Venus. Why else did I use the telescopes? Well I thought they suited the maritime history here, and also playing homage to technology. It strikes me as funny when cellphones have old-fashioned telephone ring sound, -and now people are taking photographs or selfies at an arm's length away, not looking at things close up or looking through a viewfinder. I like the physicality of having to peer into them, some images are not so easy to see, because they're not bright, it's like looking into the past. Also telescopes are used to view the stars, but you're looking at the past because stars can be millions of years old. You are having an experience that is in the moment but it's also of the past. Much Māori thinking and language often honours past, present, and future.

HUM Yes and in Emissaries, you employ both contemporary and historic references. You've reinterpreted the landscape and people depicted in a very old wallpaper that was a product of the colonial history of New Zealand and the Pacific, but your interpretation has a very different spin on that history. In the essay we published last month, Rhana Devenport mentions your resistance to what you call the 'festival gaze' of 'brown bodies on show'. In the context of your exhibition in a foreign land, it's interesting to consider whether visitors may also see this romanticised portrayal of Pacific and indigenous people in the work, until they start looking closer and noticing that the characters acting in it may not look or behave according to stereotypes of the Pacific at the time of Captain Cook's travels.

LR Sure, it's really hard to resist the exotic. And you could be considered stupid to try in a way, because all the actors in

the work are beautiful, and I want to embody that beauty as well, but also to show that these events and ceremonies are done for our own pleasures. For instance an image taken directly from the wallpaper, is based on the three graces, three women dancing together. For this scene I worked with a group of girls who call themselves the Sexy Savages. I filmed them dancing with each other and not necessarily for an outside gaze. Sometimes we positioned people so they're not directly looking towards the camera. In particular, I'm really aware of the fascination with haka around the world, perhaps because of rugby—not that I'm against it—but our haka scene is recorded from behind, a view many people generally don't see, there's a nice butt in there too!

So it's a reversal, you in the audience become the tangata whenua they are representing. I build on that, so that the audience are intrigued and stay, it's not easy to make people stay the duration with video. It has to be good otherwise they will move on. The pay off is an accumulation of knowledge, and through that the audience starts to pick up on the nuances of what is actually going on here.



Lisa Reihana, *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*], 2015–17, detail: the three graces performed by the Sexy Savages. Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist.



Lisa Reihana, detail *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*], 2015–17, Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist and New Zealand at Venice.



Lisa Reihana, detail *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*], 2015–17, Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist and New Zealand at Venice.



Lisa Reihana, *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*], 2015–17, detail: Arioi man giving birth. Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist.



Lisa Reihana, *in Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*], 2015–17, detail: Cook's thigh being returned to the Endeavour's crew. Ultra HD video, colour, sound, 64 min. Image courtesy of the artist.

HUM So what is going on?

LR Oh there's all sorts going on! At any moment multiple scenes are visible, and within each scene, it can have 3 or 4 ideas that are being played out. One hilarious scene shows an Arioi man giving birth. It's fucking hilarious, I love it. There's gender reversal there too he's giving birth to a baby with a beard. It's actually about infanticide, the Arioi were a tribe—that generated ideas about sexualisation in the Pacific—they were a traveling group of beautiful men and women, and they contained their numbers through infanticide. So it's funny and bleak at the same time, again referring to multiple ideas and ways of seeing.

A lot of people don't realise that when Captain Cook died in Hawaii in 1779, he was dismembered into about 36 pieces, which the crew

found horrific. But the Hawaiians returned his thigh and his hat, which by its association to his head—considered the most sacred part of the body—was significant. In Pacific feasts pork is chiefly food—when they cut the pig up, the prized piece offered to the chief or the head priest is the leg. So the Hawaiians gave the most prized parts to the crew. So the scene demonstrates something that's either horrific or honorific, according to what you know.

HUM How do visitors access this information, especially in the overwhelming context of the Biennale where walking through the Arsenale is like being bombarded with information? How can viewers go beyond what they see and decipher the complex scenarios you are presenting?

LR Of course, there is much printed material—the catalogue is absolutely gorgeous and now during the vernissage it is gifted to a lot of people. There's a lot of information in that. We have a handout translated into Italian, English and French. I've met a couple of people in the last few days already who said they will undertake research. I want people to learn for themselves, I'm not claiming that my version of this material is the be-all-and-end-all. Also, it's interesting that some consider I have recorded history incorrectly. Some things were made up—the turtle tribe scene where three lads sit wearing turtle shells as the biggest taonga you've ever seen for example. There was never such a tribe, but clearly there could have been one!

HUM So *Emissaries* should not be seen as attempting to correct history, it is partly fantasy.

LR Yes and the wallpaper offered me the opportunity to do that so I don't feel like I have to be constrained. It's an artistic interpretation and to go back to your previous question, people in the work are Pacific people and they are embodiments of their ancestors so that is the contemporary face of the people who met Cook. The other thing I did was to explain what the work was

and invite talent to tell a story, to create a space for speaking back through time. I often didn't know what was going to happen, there was an element of trust and honour in the making of this work.

HUM To conclude, what is coming up next for you after this long and exhausting, but equally hugely prestigious, task of being *a Venice artist*?

LR I've had a script for a new film on the back burner for a while. I'm going to have a little break and then delve into it. What I've learned from making this work is not to underestimate data-wrangling—we've broken so many computers making this video. The technical side excites me because it allows you to create magic. I have friends who are filmmakers who are encouraging me to make a feature film... I like making high end video for the art world, so I have to decide if I'll make it into a feature or not, but I feel like making it for the art world because it has a very different time signature, and the way the audience experiences it requires different storytelling skills to making a piece for cinema.

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Biographies



Lisa Reihana (b. 1964) is a multi-disciplinary artist from Aotearoa New Zealand (of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Tū tribal descent) whose practice explores how identity and history are represented, and how these intersect with concepts of place and community. The subjects of Reihana's portraiture inhabit a world in which the boundaries of past, present, and future are mutable; their identities are likewise unfixed and transgress everyday expectations of cultural and social norms.

She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland University, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1987, and recently completed her Master of Design through the Unitec Institute of Technology. Reihana has an extensive exhibition history in New Zealand and abroad and in 2014 she was awarded an Arts Laureate Award by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand. Her works are held in private and public collections including Te Papa Tongarewa; Auckland Art Gallery; Australia National Gallery; Staatliche Museum, Berlin; Susan O'Connor Foundation, Texas and Brooklyn Museum, New York.



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