Ana Iti in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry

An interview with Contemporary HUM

by

Published on 23.04.2025



Ana Iti, *A hybrid made of both*, 2025. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Al Dhaid Clinic, Al Dhaid, 2025. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic.



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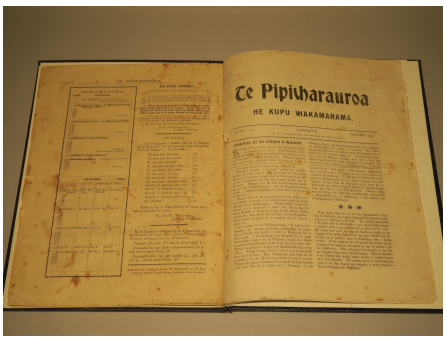
Ana Iti pictured with *A hybrid made of both*, 2025. Sharjah Biennial 16, Al Dhaid Clinic, Al Dhaid, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Ana Iti, *A hybrid made of both* (detail), 2025. Sharjah Biennial 16, Al Dhaid Clinic, Al Dhaid, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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Ana Iti, *A resilient heart like the mānawa*, 2024. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Kalba Ice Factory, Kalba, Sharjah, 2025. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Shafeek Nalakath Kareem.



Ana Iti, *A resilient heart like the mānawa*, 2024. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Kalba Ice Factory, Kalba, Sharjah, 2025. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Shafeek Nalakath Kareem.



The co-curators of Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, left to right: Alia Swastika, Amal Khalaf, Megan Tamati-Quennell, Zeynep Öz and Natasha Ginwala. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

In February 2025, Contemporary HUM was on the ground at the opening week of Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, speaking with the Aotearoa artists who were present.

Following her 2024 win of Aotearoa New Zealand's most prestigious contemporary art award, the Walters Prize, Ana Iti takes part in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, co-curated by Aotearoa curator Megan Tamati-Quennell. In this conversation with Contemporary HUM, Iti reflects on SB16 as the first major international presentation of her work, and how she has found taking the Walters Prize artwork to Sharjah—despite obstacles and delays—which she presents alongside two earlier works.

This interview has been supported by individual donors and Creative New Zealand. With generous thanks to Sharjah Art Foundation for the press invitation to Sharjah, which enabled HUM to cover this significant event for Aotearoa artists.

CONTEMPORARY HUM You're presenting several existing bodies of work at Sharjah Biennial 16, one of which is still travelling to Sharjah as we speak: *A resilient heart like the mānawa* (2024), which was awarded the Walters Prize in 2024.

Each of the five co-curators of the Biennial are responsible for their own curatorial project and inviting artists to participate, but there are some overlaps between their projects as well. How were you invited to participate in the Biennial, and how did you end up presenting two bodies of work in two different venues?

ANA ITI About eight months ago I started a dialogue with Megan. She had been in a conversation with Zeynep Öz (another co-curator of SB16) whose curatorial project for Sharjah is about technology, and she was asking Megan if she would write something about the use of the printing press in New Zealand.

Megan knew that I had done a research project about that, resulting in the work titled *Like everywhere, words come one foot after another*, which is from 2019. Megan said to Zeynep, "Oh, I think that you should talk to Ana." Then they co-curated me, basically, to bring my work here. I think that Megan selected it, but it fit in with the conceptual framework for Zeynep's programme.

HUM Some of these works in Sharjah were shown at The Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt, in the exhibition *Strands* (2019-20).

AI Yeah, there are two works from The Dowse. It's these sandbox works, which are based around this historic Māori language newspaper called He Kupu Whakamarama: Te Pipi Wharauroa, which, for a brief period, used these hybrid letter forms for sounds of te reo Māori. The sandbox works recreate those letter forms in an empty sand casting form.

It was interesting, because that work is from a time when I had just freshly graduated from my Masters. The work didn't exist anymore. It was quite ephemeral, so I had to reach back into my memory and revisit the methodology. They're made with the sand from the site. We're just borrowing it for a little bit and then it will go back. But it was a cool way to engage with Sharjah and the materiality of the place.

Then there's this text-based work (the wall work made in situ, titled *A hybrid made of both*, 2025), which is more poetic and abstract, more about connecting with language and thinking about the materiality of something being transformed from something that's spoken to something that's written down.

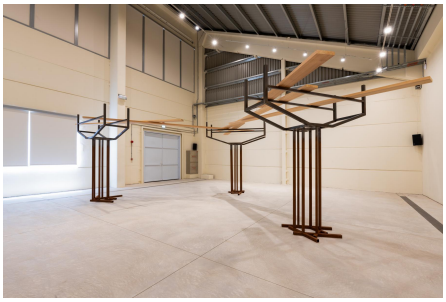
I think that fits in with the things Zeynep's thinking about. Also included in that was a more recent work from 2021, which is a video work (*A dusty handrail on the track*, 2021), also about language, but it connects with three female Māori writers and texts that they've written. It's about Māori thoughts in English language.

So that was the first thing that I was going to bring, and then later on Megan invited me to bring the work from the Walters Prize, which was exciting.

HUM Even though you weren't commissioned to make the work for the Biennial, *A resilient heart like the mānawa* fits really well with the Biennial's theme of "to carry".

AI That's why I was so happy to bring it. I thought it would be perfect, actually. Even though it's in reference to the Hokianga (in Northland, Aotearoa New Zealand), and it's so connected there, its meaning is made by being away from there, because it is about going on a journey, about returning, or the wharf as a site to leave from and return to.

I think it fits so well into the overarching [framework], because it is, for me, about carrying a relationship to the Hokianga away from there. Because the sculpture was made to not be shown there. It's referencing something that's here, away from there, like a photograph or a memory. The sound in the work, a lot of it is field recording. It's really memory-based for me. It's a good carrier for that theme. Or the theme's a good carrier for the work, maybe.



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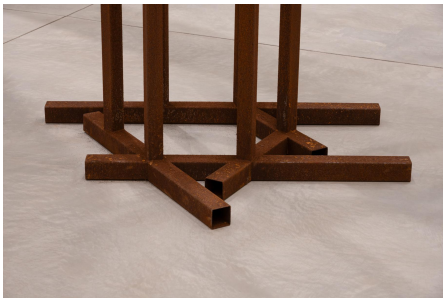

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Ana Iti, *A dusty handrail on the track*, 2021. Sharjah Biennial 16, Al Dhaid Clinic, Al Dhaid, 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Ana Iti with visitors to Iti's presentation during the opening week of Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, February 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM You said that the work got stuck in Singapore on the way from Aotearoa. It's a little bit delayed and will be installed after the opening of the Biennial, but you've decided to take it in a relaxed way.

AI Yeah, it's out of my hands. What can we do? That work is about ports and journeys, and all that sort of stuff, so in some ways it is fitting that it is currently at sea.

There's an audio work with the sculpture, so we were able to install the audio and do a level check across the exhibition. I was in the space listening to the audio. It's all these sounds from the ocean, from the wharf in Rāwene (in the Hokianga) and I thought, "These are all the sounds that the work might be hearing now." Very funny!

HUM This is your first major international presentation. What's the significance of that for you? Does it differ to showing the work in Aotearoa?

AI For me, part of it is about the ability to sustain a career. It's really hard to have a practice as an artist if you can only show at home. I wanted to be able to expand my ability to show overseas and to show my work to a wider range of people, but I think it is a really important milestone for me and my work.

I love making art and I want to keep on making it. At home there's amazing opportunities but, now that I've been showing for quite a while, I feel like I don't want to be taking up space that other people could be going into, so I'm happy to be able to spread.

HUM You've been in Sharjah for over a week now. How has it been to be here, installing your work and getting to know the local people and culture?

AI I love being here in Sharjah because it's a totally non-Western context. It's like a breath of fresh air, actually. Of

course, the politics here are different, the problems are different, but it helps you put things into perspective. It's quite a generous environment, and the Emirates is quite diverse. There are lots of people from other places.

Especially connecting with other Indigenous artists is amazing—through Megan's programme as well. The majority of the artists in her selection are First Nations artists from around the world. I haven't got to meet all of them yet, but it's nice to be within that cohort.

HUM When we were chatting earlier, you mentioned that there is a relationship of care that you found here in Sharjah which reminds you of Māori values too.

AI One of the things that Megan told us would [make us] feel comfortable here is the strong manaakitanga, or consideration for guests.

That's also part of how she has framed her project around [the notion of] waewae tapu (newcomer, rare visitor), about being a good guest when visiting someone. That has helped, I think, because when I was thinking about showing my work away from home, it was a bit of a question, because I've never done it. I've done residencies overseas, but to present work that is so connected to home, especially these works, I wasn't sure how it was going to feel or how it would sit, but that framework makes it easy. Also to be in the company of other artists from Aotearoa and to have Megan, I feel very comfortable and happy.

HUM Historically, the Sharjah Biennial has engaged in political subjects, while the state is more conservative. For some artists, this is a point of apprehension when it comes to participating or engaging with the Biennial.

AI Well, I was led here by Megan and she couched it as the respect for a place and its culture. That's just the way we have

to approach it. That's how I find it anyway. But I find a lot of things are really similar to home, like [the] strong connection to hospitality, manaakitanga, hosting people. Taking care of each other, or being taken care of, actually!

HUM Regarding the theme "to carry" and the critical aspect of this Biennial, how do you see this focus on Indigenous artists in relation to current discussions back home, with the government's threats to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, as well as current international debates?

AI That's quite a hard question. It's good to see Māori artists out there shining on an international stage and being amazing, being the best, and while the conversations at home are disturbing and depressing, I think that it's going to pass. It's a moment in time. It's not a good moment to be living through, and of course it's creating a lot of discord and tension, confusion for people.

That's also part of connecting with the other Indigenous artists, to see how their experiences have been similar, or what happens in other places, and how people move on from that sort of stuff. But the best thing is to be prosperous and to look towards the future.

HUM The Walters Prize is the biggest contemporary art prize in New Zealand, and it also has an international judge. In 2024, when you were awarded the Prize, the international judge was curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung. It's nice that now that work gets to be shown in an international context.

AI The thing about the Walters Prize is: that exhibition would have been one of the greatest exposures of my work to an audience, and now it's come to an even more gigantic place, and more eyes will be on it. It's building on itself, the work. Sometimes things go out and they have their own… things happen around them. They get out of your hands.

HUM What's next for you?

AI I received a fellowship grant from Creative New Zealand last year. It's going to support me to undertake research for the next 18 months. I think it's going to be really good for me, because I have a few shows coming up this year, but I'm really wanting to try and develop my work outside of making things for exhibition, to work more towards a project rather than to a deadline.

It will enable me to return to Northland. The research I've proposed is around looking into the kauri tree. Where my hapū (kinship group, subtribe) has land was kauri forest and now it's a pine plantation. I'm always interested in that spot of tension. There's also this guy in Dunedin, this entrepreneur who's planting a kauri forest down there, which has become possible because of the changing climate, because it's become more warm. It's quite an open-ended research, but I'm really grateful for it.

Biographies



Ana Iti (Te Rarawa, Pākehā) is an artist currently based in Te Matau-a-Maui Hawkes Bay, Aotearoa New Zealand. She has a BFA (Sculpture) from the Ilam School of Fine Arts in Ōtautahi Christchurch (2012) and a MFA from Toi Rauwharangi Massey University in Te-Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington (2018). Iti has shown extensively throughout Aotearoa in leading institutions and project spaces and her work is held in the collections of national institutions including Te Papa Tongarewa, The Govett Brewster, and The Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū. In 2024 she was the recipient of New Zealand's premier contemporary art award, the Walters Prize.

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