Crossing Currents: Episode 4

An interview with Elisapeta Hinemoa Heta in Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania

by Contemporary HUM

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Elisapeta Hinemoa Heta, *The Body of Wainuiātea*, 2024. *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania* installation view, Ocean Space, Venice, Italy, 23 March—13 October 2024. Co-commissioned by TBA21–Academy and Artspace, and produced in partnership with OGR Torino. Photo: *Contemporary HUM*.



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Elisapeta Heta Hinemoa. Courtesy of Ocean Space.



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Ocean Space, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Venice, Italy. Photo: Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy of TBA21–Academy.

This is the fourth of eight interviews in Crossing Currents: Aotearoa New Zealand Artists in Venice*, a podcast series produced in 2024 by* Contemporary HUM. *Listen below or wherever you get your podcasts. This is a transcript of the episode that has been edited for clarity and length.*

Speaking with HUM *from her home in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Elisapeta Hinemoa Heta (Ngātiwai, Ngāpuhi, Waikato Tainui,*

Sāmoan, Tokelauan) discusses her presentation The Body of Wainuiātea*, featured in* Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania*, an exhibition curated by Taloi Havini at TBA21–Academy's Ocean Space in the church of San Lorenzo in Venice.* The Body of Wainuiātea *joins a work by artist Latai Taumoepeau, both of which occupy one part of the church's split nave, which is bisected by an altar. As an architect, artist and mother, Heta describes being influenced by the Māori pūrākau (mythological tradition) of the atua (deity) Wainuiātea, who in one version of the Māori creation tradition embodies the whole ocean, but also possesses in her name a term of key architectural and ceremonial import: "ātea", the open area in front of a wharenui (meeting house). In this conversation, Heta relates this pūrākau as a starting point for reconnecting to the expansiveness of Te Moana Nui a Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean) and for re-establishing a sacred relationship to the ocean through storytelling, also discussing the many collaborations and conversations that guided the work into being, including with Havini and Taumoepeau.*

CONTEMPORARY HUM To start, it would be great to talk about how you came to present in *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania*.

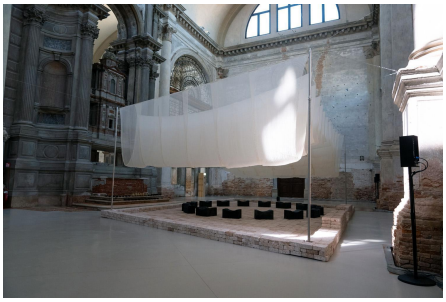
ELISAPETA HINEMOA HETA Actually, it was Ane Tonga that brought us together, myself and Taloi. She had created the *Declarat ion* show that was at Auckland Art Gallery and the symposium that followed. She asked me to come in and speak as part of the symposium for the day, and Taloi was one of the artists from the exhibition. I got up and did my thing, as I usually do, because I do a fair bit of public speaking; Taloi spoke about her practice and I was just, like, gobsmacked—immediate fangirl. "What a phenomenal person." We were sitting in the green room having a beautiful conversation, before and after we both spoke, but afterwards she was like, "Whoa, I love your practice and what you're into and interested in. This is great," just in the way that Taloi does. You can sort of see her weaving ideas in her head.

And we just kept in touch, basically. Last year, I happened to be heading over to Brisbane, funnily enough, to give another talk, and she was like, “Actually sis, I've been thinking of you. I'd really like to chat to you while you're here. Can I take you out for coffee?” And effectively, she just said, “Look, this is Ocean Space. I had this opportunity to be there, funnily enough, for the Architecture Biennale in 2021, in the thick of Covid”—she couldn't physically get there, but she was a [presenting] artist—and she said, “This opportunity has come up again for me to curate a show. I've already been in conversation with Latai,” and I'm going, “Holy shit, Latai is this amazing person as well.” These two women are “wow” people, big deals. And [Taloi] was like, “I'd really love for you to be involved in this. So, she started talking to me about her ideas, the foundation of Ocean Space [and] what they were trying to achieve, [which was] this relationship back to the ocean; the fact that they historically hadn't paid much attention to Te Moana Nui a Kiwa, specifically. I think when [Ocean Space] tapped the vein of Taloi in 2020, 2021, they were like, “We want to keep going with this.” [So, they] brought her on, and then she brought us on, and it sort of steamrolled.

So, it came about in the way all good things do: relationships and really lovely conversations, usually over coffee. But, it came about at a really opportune time too, because of a lot of projects I've been working on and some thinking I had been doing. I've been working on the Fale Malae project, which is a Pan-Pacific fale (Sāmoan: house, building). [This] isn't an architecture that exists, but the brief is to create a Pan-Pacific fale in Wellington. We won that job a few years ago and I've been working with Albert Refiti, who I name as one of my collaborators in the work [in *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania*]. Albert and I have been having these long conversations about what architecture across the Pacific Ocean looks like, and I'd been involved in a few conferences and things.

So, there's an amalgamation of a whole lot of conversations, [which] came together at this perfect moment, and Taloi said, “Hey, sis, do you want to be involved?” And I was like, “Actually, yes, I'd love to be. But, I'm also pregnant.” It was this really funny moment when we caught up, going, “When exactly?” And, “Wow. Okay, so this is all going to happen in parallel, but actually there's

something perfect about that." We just kept rolling with it. We knew it was all going to happen literally side by side, but it turned out to weave into the fabric of the way the work came together anyway, so that was fine. It's perfect.



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HUM Totally. You do get the sense when you're in the space that there's this sympathetic confluence or dialogue between the two works, which is very much to do with Taloi's curatorial thinking. They sit so well side by side but they're both such rich works in their own right. Your work is called *The Body of Wainuiātea*. Could you describe the structure of the work?

EHH *The Body of Wainuiātea* sits in the second room in San Lorenzo, which is an old, deconsecrated church. It's a really beautiful and kind of wild space. I've visited it, and we were told that there's somewhere between a seven- to 12-second-delay echo through the space. It was partly designed that way because of the nuns that used to sing in that particular space. The room itself is bisected by an altar, which I believe is the largest in Venice, so it's a very interesting space architecturally, which I gravitated towards. The first that I started to think about when I visited the space last year was the fact that when a lot of missionaries came to the [Pacific] Islands and to Aotearoa, a lot of churches were actually built on top of marae (courtyard in front of the wharenui, or meeting house; often used to include the complex of buildings

around the marae) or malae spaces [in Sāmoa], which were already our communal spaces. Part of what Taloi wanted me to create was a space for conversation and for storytelling, and I thought there was something interesting about that relationship: taking the marae or the malae or the ātea (open area in front of the wharenui) back and putting it inside of a church—not to subvert the church in any way, but to recontextualise it, instead of erasing it, like a lot of churches did. They took the communal aspect of it and built on it, but not in a great way.

That's where that conversation started, with the notion of the ātea or the marae, the malae, that cleared space for ceremony, for exchange. I started the design thinking about how you might create that clearing inside of a church. Usually, those things reference the compass points or the natural environment, so there's often a cosmological relationship. Because the space was physically inside [the church], I decided to keep it quite simple. The entry is on the eastern side of the ātea, facing west towards the altar. It means, as a person entering onto the ātea, you're looking directly at the altar. If you're standing at that entry, to your right—up the page, so to speak—is north, and to your left is south. It quite simply orientated itself in the room, and the chairs that are low to the ground are also set up on the compass point[s]. There are 16 chairs, [one facing] north, south, east [and] west, and then three in between each of those compass points. Usually, when we set ourselves up in an oratory way, say, in Sāmoa, the orators would organise themselves relative to their villages or their chiefly titles around the room. I wanted a simple way for people [to be] able to figure out how they might organise themselves in the space, relative to the cardinal points.

That's the layout of the ground, which has been raised up with the use of 17 tonnes of brick, which have been locally imported. I contacted a lovely friend, who's a brick supplier in Sydney, who connected us with one of their suppliers from Italy. They sponsored us, so we were able to bring the brick in, and it will go back as well. There's a big concern with waste through the Biennale, and we didn't want to be holding on to too much, so: those bricks come in; they're locally sourced; they're from that earth; they're from that place, and they will go back to the supplier afterwards. The texture

and the colour was meant to fit with the general–I would say, āhua, but—feeling, vibration, of that room as well. That was its intention.



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Everything is meant to be kept quite raw material-wise, so it's performing its function as its material. It's not trying to disguise [itself as] anything else. Similarly, the chairs are single, solid pieces of wood that have had a scoop carved out of them to give the function of seating. Then, they've been charred or burnt black to elevate their purpose in the space; to be those beautiful solid things that stand out from everything else, [which] is quite muted in tone.

Draped above the ātea are 12 folds of a really beautiful, light, gauze-type fabric. It can depend on different villages, different islands, but some cosmologies will talk about the 12 levels of heaven. Certain ātua or deities had to climb the levels of heaven to search for the baskets of knowledge, [which] is one story in New Zealand. There are different versions through the Pacific, but there are always these consistent conversations about levels of heaven. What I thought was really beautiful is to have this kind of folding softness, this billowing above the ātea, because it's a really hard

space. You've got marble, stone, concrete. I've brought in brick. There's timber. There are lots of hard things. I wanted something really soft to disperse the light, as well. It relates back to that wider story of Wainuiātea and her relationship to Ranginui, the Sky Father, but it could also be seen as sitting underneath the waves and looking at Hinemoana (female atua, or deity, of the sea); she churns up the surf and things like that. So, there are a few ways of reading into that.

HUM Wainuiātea is an atua?

EHH Yes. I'll explain a little bit more about Wainuiātea soon, because she is an interesting story that I didn't even know about until I started this project.

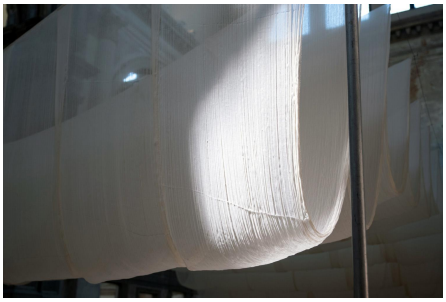
So, those are the physical aspects. You may or may not know, but when we tended to travel between the islands, we would often take objects with us and gift them. In places like Hawai'i—now, I'm going to use the word "altar", but it's not the word they would use—there are often offerings of things near their heiau. [In San Lorenzo] there's already an altar in this space, so I wanted to bring an offering of sorts to the room. I always wanted it to be something that invoked another sense. There are three things on the altar: hue or gourds, which we travelled with through the Pacific. They were water containers, seed containers [and] musical instruments. Hue also have a relationship to another atua, [so] they have a performative and a ceremonial purpose. The gourds that are there were made by Hiramarie Moewaka.

The other element that's there is 40 coconut bowls that have a combination of coconut oil and heilala fragrance in them. If you've been to the Islands, [you know that] we cover ourselves in coconut oil; we use coconut oil in our hair and our cooking. It's a pungent thing. It's ubiquitous [on] the Islands. For me, [especially] being pregnant when I went for my site visit, Venice is an overpowering, smelling place, and there's something about memory and story that are interconnected. That's what Taloi and I talked about a lot: this relationship to story and telling stories and invoking stories that have been lost. There's a direct correlation between smell and

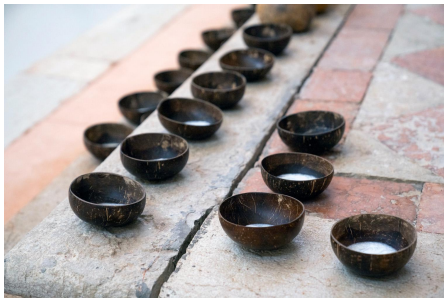
fragrance and memory, so I wanted smell to be in the room, and it didn't have to be overpowering to be present. That is the coconut oil and the heilala that sits on that altar; that offering to that scent of the ocean, the Pacific Ocean.



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The last element in the room, which isn't physical, is the soundscape. There are two parts to that. One is a taonga pūoro, or Māori musical instrument, track, which was also played by the same woman who made the hue, so Hiramarie recorded that using several different taonga pūoro that actually all relate to childbirth and equally relate to Wainuiātea. That is meant to play a little bit with Latai's work in the other room, but is meant to give a kind of another layer of feeling, of memory, to that particular space. It doesn't play constantly. It pops up and down through the day. The other soundscape bookends every day. So, you have a karanga, or a call done by Māori women, that starts the day [to] open the space, and it also ends the day. The purpose of that karanga is to acknowledge Wainuiātea, to acknowledge the people that are coming into the space through the day, to clear the room for them, to set the intention for the exhibition. At the end of the day, it does the same thing by closing the space. Because there were no Māori or Tagata Pasifika people that could hold that space every single day and, therefore, bring people in and out of the room in a culturally safe way, the best way I could think to do that was

through karanga; to allow karanga to be the thing that would safely allow people to bring their stories in. That karanga can also serve as a ceremonial bookend to events that Ocean Space may or may not run through the year. They're running a lot of talks and different things in there, and they can run the karanga to begin an event and to end the event, similarly, to provide cultural safety. But, I also gave them a translation of what's being said, so that if they wanted to pass that on to people who were coming and going, they got a sense of that.

HUM It's a transformed space on every level: architecturally, sonically, sensorially.

EHH I wanted it to invoke as many of the senses as possible. I struggle with the “look but don't touch” aspect of art exhibitions, sometimes. There's a purpose to it. I understand that. But, for me, I enjoy the tactility of things and that people can sit on the things that have been created; [and] touch, smell, engage with [them], because it taps into the other parts of your emotions that I want the artworks to tap into. The only thing that [isn’t] there is taste, but, for most people, the coconut oil will go straight to a sense of taste anyway, because most of us have an understanding of what that might taste like. It's deliberately meant to tap into all the senses, and I would include the sense of spirituality, as well. It's meant to have a reverence, which churches tend to [have] anyway, whether you're spiritual or not. It's giving another layer to that.

I do really want to acknowledge again the huge work that Taloi did to bring us together, to weave our conversations and the works physically and spiritually in the space. She really held everything and still does, you know, she's quite the pou (post, pole or support, also metaphoric post) for that work. I've named a few collaborators in: Albert Refiti, and that's really through lots of deep conversation about this big wide discussion I'm still discovering about our ceremonial spaces across the Pacific. He and I will be working on that probably for the rest of our lives; Hira[marie], the deep conversations we've had and the creations that she's made for the

space were really critical, particularly when it came to the story of Wainuiātea; Rhonda Tibble, who recorded the karanga for us and composed that karanga, acted almost as a cultural advisor, you could say. It's a bit of a cheesy term, but I actually mean that in a beautiful way. As a Māori wahine with an incredible amount of experience, she really grounded that work for me. So, I just wanted to quickly acknowledge those people who helped us bring it all together; and my daughter, who was born a few weeks before this work opened, because actually a lot of the things that were physically designed came about while I was pregnant with her. I would dream about them at night time. Physically, the actual design of the thing largely came about while I was dreaming, and I have a feeling some of that influence might have been from her. I feel like the two were born, or birthed, at the same time, and that's kind of important.

HUM It's a collaborative work on so many levels.

You were going to say a little more about Wainuiātea?

EHH What we would call the pūrākau, or the story, the narrative, of Wainuiātea was something that I was told about during a hapūtanga wānanga, a pregnancy wānanga (seminar, conference, forum, educational seminar).[01] While I was creating the work, and we were thinking about the ideas, and I was workshopping a lot with Taloi, one of the big things that kept coming up for me was wanting to come back to this reconnected relationship that we used to have as people of the ocean. Most people are aware of Epeli Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands" and this notion that it's the colonial view that we are separate, small islands. This smallness is a new concept, but actually we existed before in this way of thinking about ourselves as being part of the ocean. So, maybe the continent of the ocean is a better way of thinking about it, or I like to think about the body, the body of water that we all come from. Growing up in Aotearoa, there's always been this "Māori *and* Pacific peoples" and somehow we've separated ourselves out from that thinking of being a part of the

ocean. There's a desire to go back to that relationship or that whakapapa (genealogy) to the Pacific.

When I went to the hapūtanga wānanga, Hiramarie was running it, and she told us the story of Wainuiātea that she had also learnt from another woman. The story is that one version of the creation of the gods started with Wainuiātea and Ranginui, not Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui. In this version, Wainuiātea is the whole ocean, the whole of what we now know as Te Moana Nui a Kiwa, and she and Ranginui were in a relationship. His name was not Ranginui; he had another name that changed when he became the husband of Papatūānuku. But, Rangi and Wainuiātea created the female gods, so their relationship brings about all the goddesses of water, fresh water and salt water. Their first daughter is Hinemoana, which is the top layer of the ocean, and on and on it goes.

Effectively, Wainuiātea realises that they keep creating ira wahine, this female energy, and it's throwing the universe out of balance. So, she decides to make the ultimate sacrifice of her love to Rangi and asks her first daughter Hinemoana to split her waters, to allow Papatūānuku to rise up through her, so that Papatūānuku and Rangi can come together as a partnership, as we know they do, and then they create the male gods. There are a lot of different versions of how the gods came together. There's very much a colonial view that appeared once we had settlers come to Aotearoa that only talks about Papatūānuku and Ranginui creating men. There are other stories that will talk about them creating men and women, but I'd never heard the story of Wainuiātea before, and this relationship to the whole ocean and her being this huge body of water. I thought it was amazing, and it's a birthing story as well.

Each of the female gods that they create—which I can't even get into, because there's a whole list of them—all have these roles, and what I thought was really interesting as well, coming from the nerdy architecture side of things, was that the word “ātea” was in [Wainuiātea’s] name. We also often tend to contextualise tikanga, or protocol and customs, with having very specific male roles, but, the idea that Wainuiātea has “ātea” in her name for me was a clue that there's a balance with the wahine (female) and tāne (male) side of things that we've lost. I’ve always been really interested in

the role women play that is critical to the way all of our ceremonies come about. We know that karanga is the first voice that is typically heard on the ātea in Aotearoa, but it made me think about the fact that, for example, in Aotearoa, people always talk about the ātea as being the domain of Tūmatauenga, the god of war. But actually, I've heard that, yes, Tūmatauenga is definitely a part of the ātea, but that manuhiri (visitors, guests) are first brought on by Hinemoana as the wave that washes and brings them into a certain point on the ātea, and then she washes back. That links to an older story or an older relationship to our marae being the space between the beach and the outer coral atoll; that your boats that come in and out are being brought in and out on the waves of the ocean. It's this long connection that we have as Māori to our many Hawaiki (ancestral homeland), the many different parts of the ocean. Wainuiātea and her story was the first time I'd felt like there was an atua that connected us all in a succinct and quite beautiful way, because a lot of it is very Aotearoa-centric, right? That was what blew my mind.

HUM Something that struck me being in Ocean Space is that the Venice Biennale is a nation-focused event, whereas in Ocean Space there's a sense of an oceanic connection between cultures, between land masses, like Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands". They aren't the cleanly demarcated boundaries that are the product of colonialism. Being in Venice, that was such a breath of fresh air.

EHH We had hoped through our conversations, and it sounds like from your experience of it thus far, that it's part of what would bring a kind of symbiosis between what I was creating and what Latai was creating. Latai's mahi (work) [concerns] thinking about the deep urgency required to think about this huge problem that is deep sea mining. It's scary. It can make you filled with anger and rage and fear. All of those things that are quite real, but she addresses it in the way Latai does, with this beautiful clarity of thinking, through performance and through [the viewer's] engagement with it. All of that is stacked in layers [so] that you don't even realise they're going to punch you in the face

quite the way they do. [With] *The Body of Wainui*ā*tea*, [the works] are not meant to sit in opposition to or as binaries of one another, but to say, “Okay, so we have these emerging issues that are popping up with climate change, with the sea level rising, with things like deep sea mining.”

I believe that things like retelling our stories and connections to one another [in a way] that bring[s] about a sense of bigness again, and the idea that we might come from a single body, might actually draw us away from this need to keep pulling in the colonial powers to give us money and to solve our problems and to help our perceived smallness. That's where some of these issues are coming from, but we can also pack a punch when it comes to these big critical conversations about things like sea level rise. We shouldn't be going along with whatever consequences the world is going to throw at us, because we're actually a third of the world. When you look at the whole of Te Moana Nui a Kiwa, it is a third of the mass of the whole earth. So, that's what we were hoping to pull on: there are these emerging conversations to have, and maybe these are ways to start thinking about ourselves again; and also to reposition ourselves in the minds of places like Europe, because it is an unusual conversation to have in Venice, right? You're sort of extracting parts of your culture and prettifying it for this epic thing that is the Venice Biennale. It is a strange thing, but that context is important, because they also need to understand the position that we are coming from, [which] has been thrust upon us [and] that we have now ingested [and] need to change. Wainuiātea was the first time I'd been able to grapple with that as an idea, really.



Latai Taumoepeau, *Deep Communion sung in minor (ArchipelaGO, THIS IS NOT A DRILL)*, 2024. *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania* installation view, Ocean Space, Venice, Italy, 23 March—13 October 2024. Co-commissioned by TBA21–Academy and Artspace, and produced in partnership with OGR Torino. Photo: Giacomo Cosua. Courtesy of Ocean Space.



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HUM Latai's work is called *Deep Communion, sung in minor (ArchipelaGO, THIS IS NOT A DRILL).* Amazing title; it's all in there.

EHH What's the work about? Read the title!

HUM It's this really clever participatory installation with rowing machines in an auditorium scene. When the rowing machines are activated, they play the sound of the Me'etu'upaki, an ancient Tongan choral ritual. When we were in Venice, we saw Latai organise a performance with some amateur local rugby and basketball players…

EHH I was going to say: or a soccer team. There are a few different sports teams that came through.

HUM And, like you say, there's a total sense of urgency. The performance is very moving because you feel that collective appeal for change and for attention to the moana (ocean, sea). Latai is also very interested in creating that kind of ceremonial ground, like the marae or the mala'e in Tonga, so those are the parallels between your works. When you were in discussion with

Taloi and putting together your work, what was the extent of your communication with Latai? Was there a lot of dialogue or did your works take shape in their own ways?

EHH There was a little bit; they took shape in their own ways. Latai is a full-time artist. She's living and breathing her practice daily. It's not that I'm not, but I'm practising in the architecture space every day, so my world is slightly different. Her mahi did come about through deep conversation with Taloi much [earlier than when] I had come into it. If you know Latai's work, it's coming about as a part of a lot of the other mahi she is doing. So, they had an idea of what her work might be. She was thinking about the production of it, and then Taloi brought me on. We would have these hilarious conversations on WhatsApp, video calling, and Taloi would be somewhere in the world, because she was never in one spot at any given time; Latai seemed to always be on public transport. Literally, she was always on the train or the bus. And I was at work. It was this humorous, but beautiful, tactile thing, where we would talk about our lives and about these things we were thinking about and the production meetings we were trying to have with the gallery. So, our works grew apart, but together. We kept knocking back into one another. I'd be like, "Oh, Latai's thinking about this, and that's amazing, because I'm thinking about this other thing over here, and it makes sense in relation to her work."

An example of that [is] when I went to Venice. I happened to be going there anyway, before Taloi had even approached me. I had booked a trip, and I was going to New York, Copenhagen, Venice and Paris, so I happened to be in the space, and when I got there, I was struck by the altar as this huge thing in the middle of this space that didn't operate quite the way a church normally does. It's usually that thing that you approach at the back of the room, right? Those are deliberate architectural devices. The fact that it was in the middle of the room, [I] was like, "I have to organise whatever I'm doing to face it." There was something about the room. The altar couldn't be ignored. It couldn't be a wall in the room. It had to be a part of the thinking. And I had told Taloi and Latai that. They went on their site trip later in the year—I think [in] September; I was there in July—and Latai came back to our

group chat and she was like, “Oh my God, sis, I absolutely get what you mean.” She had actually designed the space to be facing in the opposite direction. Her whole work was faced around the other way. We realised that the altar was like this portal between the two conversations we were trying to have, and that maybe Ocean Space had previously—I don’t know if they were doing it deliberately—wanted to shy away from the church aspect of the room, and it hadn't necessarily been folded into works before. [In] some it had, but more as a podium to display things. Latai and I were like, “No, no, no, both of our works are deeply spiritual in really different ways. The altar has to physically form a part of it.”

So, [as] our production came together, we riffed off each other's thinking quite a lot, and Taloi is this phenomenal mind, who could stitch and weave between the two of us, the gallery and the people helping us produce the mahi in such a way that it all felt like it was coming together at the same time. It felt like we were all sitting next to each other constantly. It's a funny thing to feel like we did it in isolation, because we didn't, even though they were quite uniquely different things. I actually think that that’s the brilliance of Taloi as a curator. Her mind really shows in the way our works have come together.



HUM Is the gallery you're working with TBA21?

EHH Yes, they've got a lot of different things going on that are all a part of this kaupapa (principles and ideas that act as a base or foundation for action), which has to do with [our] relationship to the ocean [through] education, health, artistic exploration, et cetera. That sits under TBA21, as far as I understand.

HUM Something we're interested in is parsing out the kinds of resources it takes to get to Venice and present your work. Where did you have to gather these resources from? Was it supported by TBA21 and their subsidiary arms, or was New Zealand involved as well?

EHH I personally and we didn't receive any funding from Aotearoa, which is fine, because largely the funding has come from TBA21. I did—badly, mind you, and kind of late in the piece—approach a couple of people at Creative New Zealand to ask if there was a conversation I could have about getting myself and potentially a couple of other people over [to Venice] to do a poroaki, a closing of sorts, in October. I've always sat slightly outside of the art world in a funny way. I tend to come in and do projects that I'm often asked to do. I have ideas and I do research and I do writing and all sorts of things, but pretty much every art project I've ever engaged in has [involved] me being approached to produce work, which is cool. It usually means that there's funding already sitting there, so applying for funding has always been a bit of a funny old thing.

It was actually part of the reason, I have to admit, why Taloi asked me to be involved. Two things: she thought it was funny that she was asked as an artist to be involved in the Architecture Biennale and thought it would be a nice reciprocity to ask somebody in the architecture world to be involved in the Art Biennale, which I loved. She was also mindful of the fact that this was going into Ocean Space, and she wanted to present something that felt like it

was coming from women from the ocean; to bring someone from Aotearoa over, herself [and] Latai. We've all got really different whakapapa, really different upbringings and perspectives to come at this, and my architectural bent was part of that. She curated us to come together, but it also means the funding looks funny. We're all coming from really different places.

HUM It's always interesting, especially in the context of arts funding in New Zealand, to think about the sorts of go-arounds people need to figure out to make work. Seeing as we've been talking about Oceania and oceanic artists, I would love to ask you about your thoughts on this year's Biennale being a huge success for artists from Oceania, with Mataaho Collective winning the Golden Lion for the International Exhibition and Archie Moore winning the Golden Lion for the National Pavilions. What are your thoughts on that?

EHH "Isn't it high time that Indigenous artists were finally paid their dues?" is one way of thinking about it. "They're producing the best work anyway" is my very biased opinion. I'm good friends with some of the wāhine from Mataaho and I'm a huge fan of their work, always have been. I wrote a chapter about them in my Master's thesis that I hope nobody reads. Archie's work, which I've only seen through photographs, made me cry, because there's a feeling about so much of the Indigenous work that I've seen through the imagery that is just mind blowing. It's touching on a nerve. It's touching on a political nerve. It's touching on an environmental one, a spiritual one. All of those things are so critical. It's the world that I live in anyway, which sounds obvious to say. But everything I do, regardless of whether it's performing, singing, writing, making, is always about coming back to this Indigenous storytelling thing, whether it's my own stories, trying to find stories [or] trying to create space for others. The fact that these amazing artists are doing exactly that and are getting the recognition that they should [be getting]... it's high time, and it's exciting.

There have been some phenomenal artists that we know, Indigenous artists, [who] have been going to the Biennale year in year out. The cynic in me wants to say, “Is it a trend that people are waking up to, to how fucking awesome we all are?” Maybe. That's okay. I'm happy with them making those realisations, because there's a lot more there to be said. There's a huge amount that we all have to contribute to that discussion that will be exciting to see. I think the Indigenous mahi that's been created, that I've seen, grounds [Venice] as well. It grounds what could otherwise be full-on Disneyland.

From what I've seen and what I've experienced myself, I feel like we're having really important conversations, but we're making [them] beautiful and accessible, which isn't a word I'd usually use in this context, but I mean that it kind of hits everybody. It makes me feel like I have a place in a thing like the Venice Biennale, because of the works of people like Mataaho. All of those things are contributing to a global conversation about Indigenous voice being really impactful at the moment and critically impactful about important things. You can't deny that if our arts are thriving, you know that we've got somewhere to go. You're not sitting in total survival mode. If you're just in survival mode, you can't create beautiful art, right? For me, that's a really important thing, that we are able to make beautiful, impactful, important artwork that says something about our future. I think that's really important and exciting.

Crossing Currents: Aotearoa New Zealand Artists in Venice *is an original podcast series produced with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, with editing and mixing by Hamish Petersen. Cultural advisory is provided by Matariki Williams, graphic design by Emma Kaniuk and music by João Veríssimo.*

Click here for the third interview in the series: Caitlin Devoy in Personal Structures

Footnotes

01. Clarification from the artist: "The kōrero (narrative, story) that Hiramarie gave at a wānanga hapūtanga (a space for learning and teaching related to pregnancy) she facilitated was the first time I had heard of Wainuiātea and was the spark that ignited the initial whakaaro (thought, plan, idea) that lead me through this haerenga (journey). I want to acknowledge the late Hinewirangi Kohu Morgan who is widely recognised for her dedication to Wainuiātea. As the work developed, there were other women who shared related stories and ideas. The kōrero I have given here is my representation of what I have learnt so far on this journey."

Biographies



Elisapeta Hinemoa Heta (Ngātiwai, Ngāpuhi, Waikato Tainui, Sāmoan, Tokelauan) is a multi-disciplinary artist, designer and mother, living and working in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Heta is Principal and leader of Waka Māia, an initiative founded in 2015 that guides architecture firm Jasmax on an inter-generational journey towards becoming an authentically bicultural design practice. She has contributed significantly to cultural design outcomes of major projects at Jasmax and is an advocate for change, speaking internationally to provide Māori and Pasifika perspectives on the importance of place to design and cultural identity.

In 2022, Heta received the prestigious Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects President's Award. Her industry work includes roles as Co-Chair (2017–2018) and core team member of Architecture+Women (2013–2018), and as a Director on the Board of the New Zealand Institute of Architects (2016–2019), representing Ngā Aho – Aotearoa's national network of Māori design professionals. Recent exhibitions include *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania* (2024) at Ocean Space, Venice, Italy, and *NIRIN*: 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2022) together with Māori artist John Miller, at Campbelltown Art Centre, Gadigal Lands Sydney, Australia.

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