Fiona Pardington in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry

An interview with Contemporary HUM

by

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Fiona Pardington, *Portrait of a life cast of Takatahara (painted), Aotearoa New Zealand*, 2010 (2024 reprint). From "Āhua: a beautiful hesitation", 2010. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



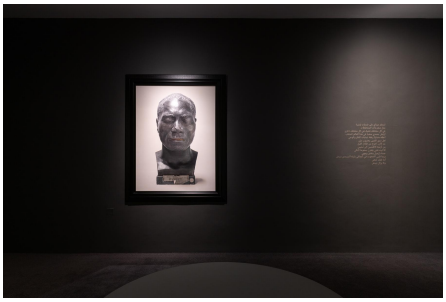
Megan Tamati-Quennell giving a talk next to selected works from "Āhua: a beautiful hesitation", 2010. Courtesy of the artist, Starkwhite Gallery, Auckland, Musée de l'Homme (Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle), Paris, and Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris. Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Hamriyah, Sharjah. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, February 2025. Photo: Contempoary HUM.



Fiona Pardington, various works, 2010. From "Āhua: a beautiful hesitation", 2010. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Ivan Erofeev.



Fiona Pardington, *Portrait of a life cast of Piuraki/ John Love Tikao (painted), Aotearoa New Zealand*, 2010 (2024 reprint). From "Āhua: a beautiful hesitation", 2010. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Ivan Erofeev.



Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, February 2025. 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.*

Here, Contemporary HUM speaks with Fiona Pardington, participating artist in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry *and recently announced as the representative for Aotearoa New Zealand at the 61st Venice Biennale in 2026. In this conversation, Pardington discusses her presentation of three photographs from her series "Āhua: A beautiful hesitation" (2010) and her desire to give power to the images as depictions of tūpuna (ancestors). Looking ahead to her presentation*

in Venice, she also offers some early insights into the project as it is taking shape.

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CONTEMPORARY HUM You are presenting works from an existing series at Sharjah Biennial 16, "Āhua: A beautiful hesitation" (2010), which feature photographs of life casts of Ngāi Tahu rangatira (chiefs) that were made in 1840 by a French phrenologist.

Could you talk about how Megan Tamati-Quennell, co-curator of Sharjah Biennial 16, approached you for the Biennial, and why you decided to bring this work to Sharjah?

FIONA PARDINGTON It was a suggestion from Megan. I love working with her, so I didn't really think twice about it. I trust her curatorial strength. It's a very comfortable thing for me, working with her. She is really a joy to listen to and every time I work with her, I learn a lot. I've got mad respect for her.

The work was made quite a long time ago now, but Megan wanted to show the photograph of Heroua in particular, alongside Takatāhara and Piūraki. In the past nobody's been particularly interested in Heroua, because of her visage and her demeanour, and the cast is kind of unsettling.

The casts were made by the phrenologist Pierre-Marie Dumoutier and are kept at the Musée de L'Homme in Paris. It's good to have Heroua here. It's said that she is the wife of one of the ariki

(paramount chief, high chief), but we don't know much about her at all. Nobody's found her yet, though it would be nice to have a genealogist do an extended search for her.

My editor for the publication of the initial exhibition of the series, her husband is a specialist, and he suggested that she may have had a goitre. Her neck and one side of her face looks to be swollen. But she also has traditional cuts of mourning on her face, which I think is something that Megan felt quite connected to and emotional about.

HUM Did you make the selection of work yourself or did you make them together with the curator?

FP Megan just said to me that she wanted to work with our tūpuna (ancestors), three of them. I was excited because she was the one that initiated the whole idea of not neglecting Heroua as she has been. I suppose that's because Megan intimately understands the feelings that we have as an iwi (extended kinship group, tribe, nation, people) and as people that are connected to our ariki, and why we would want to look past the fact that they were casts made by a phrenologist.

A lot of people might turn their noses up at that, but I refuse to corral esteemed tūpuna, or have them eclipsed by the fact that their visages are brought forward by men involved in a pseudoscience. That's in the past. I don't see why they should be continuously recolonised by anybody. I'd challenge anybody to explain to me why we should keep them in this kind of eternal victimhood. They're never victims. You don't have to agree with the process of phrenology. But it's a fact that it was there and it's given us—for all the completely different reasons and different outcomes than any of those people back then could have understood—a portal into their touchstones and to the reality of those esteemed chiefs and that woman, Heroua.

Dumont D'Urville, a cartographer and botanist, took the phrenologist on board on his voyage to Aotearoa because It was the most precise way of capturing information on humans. It was pre-

photography. Everybody knows that now. The way the process was justified historically, to racially categorise humanity—that's bullshit. I'm not going to let our tūpuna be enlisted or be captured by that. I don't want other people pushing them back into that state either. It seems short-sighted.

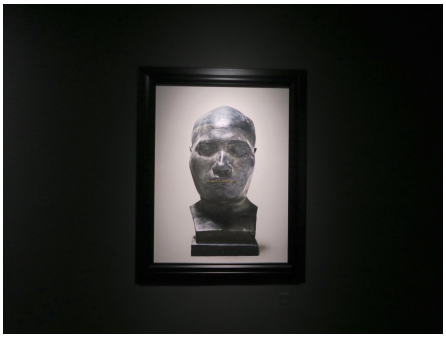
HUM Would you consider it a re-appropriation of sorts?

FP Well, yes, but I don't really see it as an appropriation, but rather a kind of revelation. To me, it's never not existed, that relationship. It's just a matter of revealing it, bringing it to light. Who are you looking at? We're looking at our esteemed relatives. That's what's important.

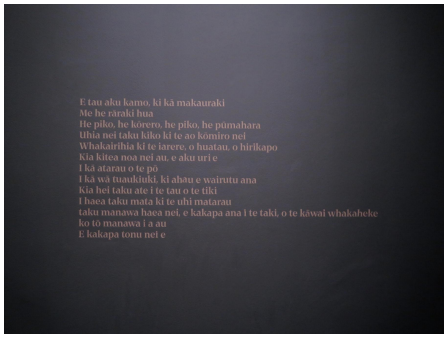
That's what Tahu Potiki (Ngāi Tahu leader) told me. He was the person that told me that the casts existed. This was a long time ago when we were at a wānanga (seminar, conference, forum) in Wanaka. He set me on the trail, and he said, "We need to discover our people and bring them back home." So that's what I've done. If it's right by our elders, and it's right for family, and right for those that are within the iwi, then it's right. I'm not going to have them endlessly recaptured by this notion of phrenology. It's just trivial in relationship to the precious connections with the ancestors.



Fiona Pardington, *Portrait of a life cast of Heroua (painted), Aotearoa New Zealand*, 2010 (2024 reprint). From "Āhua: a beautiful hesitation", 2010. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Ivan Erofeev.



Fiona Pardington, *Portrait of a life cast of Heroua (painted), Aotearoa New Zealand*, 2010 (2024 reprint). From "Āhua: a beautiful hesitation", 2010. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Hana O'Regan, *E tau aku kamo*, mōteatea (chant). Installation view in Fiona Pardington, works from "Āhua: a beautiful hesitation", 2010. Sharjah Biennial 16, Old Al Diwan Al Amiri, Al Hamriyah. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

HUM Have you been to Sharjah before, or is this your first time?

FP No, I've always just transited through on the way to Europe, mostly to France. This is a unique opportunity, and also just to be rubbing shoulders with some artists I really respect.

HUM Is there a particular significance in showing the photographs here in Sharjah, compared to showing them back home or even elsewhere internationally? Or is it not so relevant, because they carry their own knowledge and whakapapa (genealogy)? This notion of “carrying” has been important to the Biennial’s curatorial premise and the cohort of artists that were brought to Sharjah.

FP Well, for instance, I've spent some time talking to my taxi drivers here, and I've talked to them about family and the significance of their relationships with their wives, because they'll often say, “Where's your husband? Why aren't you travelling with him?” We like to discuss the dynamic that you're looked after very well by your husband and I go, “Yes, I'm really blessed because he looks after me, I look after him. It's an awesome relationship.” That's a functioning dynamic that they really understand.

Then they'll ask you about your children. A lot of the drivers might be from India or Pakistan and they talk about their mothers. I'm saying, “I bet your mum misses you,” and they say, “Yes, and we send money back every month.” And I'd say, “Isn't that an awesome thing that you're able to do that, because I love looking after my family. It makes me feel great.” For me, that's all I need to do. That whole idea of the connection of family and their historical understanding of their bloodlines, that larger community; here, I suppose that's what I feel most strongly, and that relates to me, to our ancestors, who were very important tribal members. That's how I'm reading it, just from a quotidian, day-to-day feeling while I'm here, as the artist that made that work.

HUM In my conversations with the other exhibiting artists, we also talked about there being an ethos of hospitality, or manaakitanga, that is very similar to the kind that we are used to in Aotearoa.

FP There are a lot of other things that have been said and that you could say about my work, but for me, I want that relationship to keep evolving and for me to continue to understand it as I get older. As the work is further and further in my past, I want to see how it's functioned, its relevance, how it'll blossom out in different communities. In Sharjah, it makes a lot of sense. As I said, because the phrenology is effortlessly eclipsed by the relevance of identity, bloodline and respect.

HUM What would you say about the importance as a contemporary artist from Aotearoa to be showing at the Sharjah Biennial?

FP My response would probably be the same as everyone else's. If you think about your aspirations as a young artist, as a student, it's a great honour. To rub shoulders with so many great artists, that's just a joy. I've heard and seen some really cool things and opportunities that are available to other artists and curators here, and I'm just really happy to see it.

It's not just about wishing that something good is going to happen for yourself, but really celebrating the success of others. That's how I think about its importance. You're only going to have it function in a healthy manner, as an artist that's exhibiting internationally, if you are really happy for other people's successes.

HUM It's also nice to have different types of practices and different generations present.

FP Yes. I'd just like to see some kids at biennales, too. When I was in Venice recently, there were all these very little

kids, beautifully dressed, holding hands in a row. They were ushered along by their teachers and they had their little backpacks on. It reminded me a lot about when I was that little, when you used to sit on the mat and you used to hold hands to go places, in school and on holiday trips.

It became really obvious to me that one of the most important things for my upcoming exhibition in Venice and the people I'm working with is that we provide information for children. We're working with Hana O'Regan, my cousin, who is an esteemed Ngāi Tahu language expert. I've talked to her about providing kete (baskets, kits) for the children over there, and we have to find out more about the way that they learn and about what kind of information will be functional, relevant and teachable for them.

When I went to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, all these tiny little kids were sitting cross-legged in front of Max Ernst paintings. I'm just going, "Oh my god, this is so good. I mean, I can't see the work properly, but I'm so glad the children are there." I think that's really important for biennales and large exhibitions. Creativity is the lifeblood that children need to be—I won't say bathed in, because that's kind of vampiric, but you know what I mean. It has to be there from the beginning, because it certainly was for me as a child. That's where everything started, with my grandmother taking me to museums and art galleries, and nothing's changed. That's why I want the opportunity to just share freely with children.

HUM Yes, congratulations on being chosen to represent Aotearoa at the next Venice Biennale! So your Venice project will be thinking about different generations?

FP We have that opportunity to provide for children. It's really for the biggest kind of exhibition, so the information that we funnel them is going to be language-based and cultural. But you also want something that children are going to respond to, and so for me that's a challenge. It's a welcome challenge, and a pleasure.

Of course, you can't have any of that unless I've got the exhibition concept in the first place. But because we are a community—we're generations, we're a community—I'm not stepping outside my normal practice. They're not asking me to be somebody different to what I normally would be. And I've got a great team. As I said, I'm working with Hana O'Regan and we're very close. She's provided mōteatea (chants) here in Sharjah and has worked with me in the past. I'm really blessed to have her. I'm also working with Andrew Paul Wood, so I've got that really nice balance going on there.

HUM What other ideas or thoughts are informing the project at this point?

FP We're looking at how I can bring an Italian acknowledgement into the exhibition, particularly through colour: the Venetian reds and the colours of the churches, the colours of the bricks. The colours of the marble. Colours of the sky and sea. The difference over the passage of the day and evening, that kind of crepuscular light. For me, it's cool, because I grew up on water and boats. I love living on the water.

I'm also interested in rock art. I'd like Gerard O'Regan to be involved too, because he's the rock art king. He's the guy that's in charge of that waka (canoe, vehicle). I want to go with him, and with Hana and with Neil Pardington, and sample the colours of the rock art. I've found a stream up in Earthquake Road, close to where I live in Canterbury, Aotearoa, where you can find a lot of the pigments that are identical to the ones that are on the rocks not far away from that stream. It'll be another wonderful opportunity to experience being there with my collaborators and sampling the colours. How I'm going to get them involved with responding to the Venetian colours is another thing. I'd quite like to take them over there to do that, because that's quite an important thing to weave those two physical experiences.

I was also looking at their velvet. I went to one of the big velvet makers, one of the last ones that is still operating out of Venice. I'd

like to use some of the velvet in the background. I'm just waiting for the funding to turn up so I can start producing. It costs around $1500 NZD a metre! Felicity Milburn, one of the curators at Christchurch Art Gallery who is organising the New Zealand Pavilion together with their Pouarataki Curator Māori, Chloe Cull, had a fantastic dream that the bridges of Venice were swathed in velvet. So I thought, “Ooh, that's a tohu (sign). Thanks, Felicity!”

HUM It sounds like you're well underway. That's very exciting!

FP When Christchurch Art Gallery was approached by Creative New Zealand to lead the Pavilion, they wanted to work with me. I felt that it's a good partnership. Blair Jackson, the Director of Christchurch Art Gallery, is a dream to work with. Ngāi Tahu are really behind us. We've got great connections there with family, so it's pretty darn exciting. I wasn't expecting it.

Biographies



Fiona Pardington (b. 1961) is of Māori (Kai Tahu, Kati Waewae and Ngāti Kahungunu); Scottish (Clan Cameron of Erracht); MacDonald and O’Niell descent. Her photography explores themes of memory, time, history, photographer and subject and includes taonga Māori (historical treasures), nature specimens and other museum artefacts.

Pardington has a Doctorate in Fine Arts from Auckland University, and has had work included in countless international group exhibitions, biennials, and public collections, including LACMA, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, and the National Gallery of Canada. In 2016 she was made a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by France, and a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2017.

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