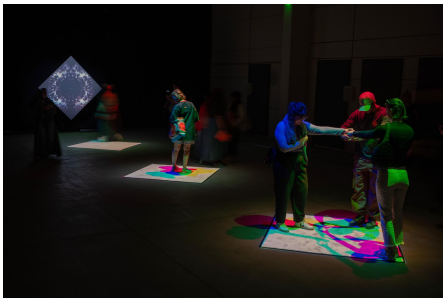
Te Matahiapo Collective in Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry

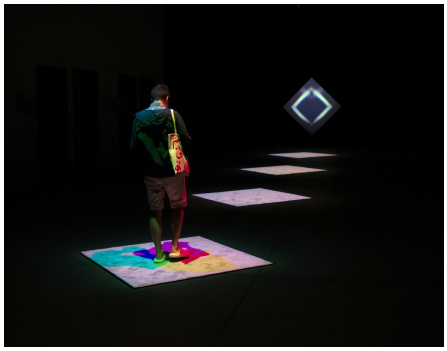
An interview with Contemporary HUM

by

Published on 07.05.2025



Te Matahiapo Collective, Ā Ē Ī Ō Ū - Ī Ō Ē Ā Ū*: Ko Pari Haruru*, 2025. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16, Kalba Ice Factory, Sharjah, 2025. Photo: Motaz Mawid.



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Inahaa Te Urutahi Waikerepuru, Stuart Foster and Kura Puke (left to right) during the opening week of Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry, February 2025. Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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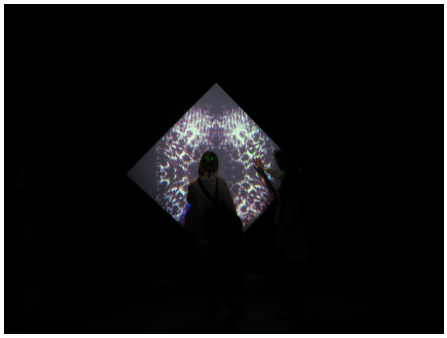

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Kalba Ice Factory, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, February 2025. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

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.*

HUM speaks with Kura Puke, Inahaa Te Urutahi Waikerepuru, Stuart Foster and Mike Bridgman of Te Matahiapo Collective, a research initiative whose multi-media installation work Ā Ē Ī Ō Ū - Ī Ō Ē Ā Ū: Ko Pari Haruru *(2025) is featured in SB16. They discuss their previous work with Te Matahiapo Collective, which has investigated the intersections between Indigenous concepts and technology, and the various affinities of* Ā Ē Ī Ō Ū *in Sharjah, which*

offers an embodied exploration of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge systems) through the vibrational and cosmological resonances of the five Māori vowels.

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've made a new commission for this Biennial. Could you explain how Megan Tamati-Quenell, one of the five co-curators of the Biennial, started the conversation with you and how you got to the idea of making this work? Was it in relation to the theme of the Biennial, "to carry," or were there other topics that were already informing the concept for the work?

KURA PUKE Āe (yes). We have been working and sharing ideas with Megan for a long time. Probably what drew her strongest interest is that Inahaa, Stu and myself are part of a collective that was headed by our late tohunga (skilled person, chosen expert, priest, healer), Te Huirangi Eruera Waikerepuru and Mereiwa Broughton. They were the cultural experts who wanted to pass on their knowledge through creative experiences and interrogate the meaning of ultimate reality; what wairua (spirit, soul) is, what's intangible, what is physical, how to define the virtual, and to have a big kōrero (discussion, conversation) about technology and an Indigenous understanding of it.

In 2015, myself, Stu and three or four others were commissioned to create a wharenui (meeting house) and a marae (courtyard in front of the wharenui; often used to include the complex of buildings around the marae), which is at the maunga (mountain) Pukeahu, where Massey University is situated in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa. Megan was very switched on to that and followed that project, which took seven years. It opened in 2021, and from then on we started conversations or kōrero about working as a collective and where that might possibly fit in to us doing a work for her.

In 2022, we created a work called *Ara Reo* for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Māori Language Petition, which called for the recognition and revitalisation of Reo Māori (the Māori language). Te Matahiapo created a work on the bustling Wellington waterfront, this time also with Mike Bridgman. *Ara Reo* was a big, bright public thoroughfare work; an expression through image, light, waiata (song, chant, psalm), karanga (formal call, ceremonial call, welcome call) and spoken voice for people to move through, connect with and experience the ancestral and future-centred power, emotion and energy that created the successful outcomes of new legislation that sought to protect and nurture Te Reo.

The work was based on the idea of karanga, focusing on "A, E, I, O, U", the sound energy of vowels. Then we moved forward with Megan in developing this next work, Ī Ō Ē Ā Ū, which is beginning to delve into the Māori understandings of the vowels, of the vibration, frequency and resonance of sound energy.

INAHAA TE URUTAHI WAIKEREPURU Kia ora. For me, I have resonance in terms of the mauri (life principle, life force, vital essence), the wairua (spirit, soul), and the mouri (intangible/ cosmic life force), with whatever our work entails. All of it is a declaration out into the wider cosmic arena of our connection to all that has been and all that's coming. We're the human that embodies all of that which is intangible. We're the walking, talking universe, I guess I could say.

We've done this work for a number of years. I think it's been Kura's inspiration to bring it together—the conception of it and bringing it through in a creative way. There's an inner experience occurring at the time that we are moving, or looking or observing the actual work of art. It's moving in the vibrational frequency wave and connected to us as the human vessel. The human vessel is the packaging of all that resonates—whatever the environment is giving to us. It's the orchestra that we don't actually get to see. But there's this dance that's going on from the inner, outer, backwards and forwards through all the dimensional spaces that we get drawn into once the universe itself becomes our dancing partner.

It's an amazing experience to be here. It's a first but it's not like a first. What I can say is that it's like walking in the footsteps of the tūpuna, of the ancestors, and a series of numerous prior lifetimes. We've been part and parcel of creating this planet in some way.

HUM The work, Ā Ē Ī Ō Ū - Ī Ō Ē Ā Ū*: Ko Pari Haruru*, is a very sensory experience. There are lights, sound and an element to touch, with vibrations and frequencies that you can really feel with your skin.

KP The work is based on the ceremony that occurs on the ātea (open area in front of the wharenui), and the welcoming karanga when you are brought onto a marae. In a way we are holding that tension in that space. It has the wāhine (women) voices, and the frequencies of the "A, E, I, O, U". There are five illuminated landing spaces, which white light splits into colour through the movement of people. Visitors move through these vowel sites towards a suspended panel, onto which are projected visuals created by beamed frequencies into water. These five vowel sites each have a parabolic speaker providing the proximity of the layering of wāhine voice, with each site also accompanied by speakers and the ātea space accompanied by subwoofers. We recorded aspects of frequency within different sites of cultural importance, so there's this environmental overlay with the voices; taonga pūoro (a traditional musical instrument) is playing. In the space, you're kind of hearing things from everywhere, and they fill the whole space.

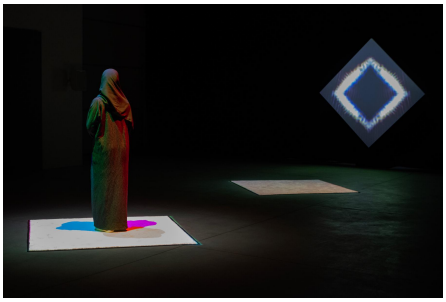
HUM The work holds its own mana (prestige, authority, control, power) and Māori concepts around pōwhiri (invitation, rituals of encounter, welcome ceremony on a marae, welcome). Did knowing the work would be shown in Sharjah influence or inform the concepts in the making of the work?

ITUW There's a bond which I feel is the ancestry and the bonding that's in Aotearoa too. The harmonics are here as well. It's

showing that there is collective unification from the seabed. Whether it's on sand or in water, there is no difference, because the energy is the same. All of us here have been a part of bringing it to this moment in time. We're all here, but it's been eons of time that it's taken to build the planet. I'm talking about the planet and its physical reality. We're the builders of that, those are the reflections that are coming out in the works that are being shown here at this time.

STU FOSTER Myself and Kura came here with Megan and we did get to have a look around. Perhaps the thing that resonated most about the Kalba Ice Factory, where the work is shown, was the journey and the landscape. The work starts as soon as you travel out of the city of Sharjah and across the desert and the big sky. Then you arrive at the ice factory and there's that moment with our work where you step into something else. The atmosphere and time changes. Hopefully that idea of the balance between the landscape and the immersive interior is evidence of something.

In some way all our previous work involves working with technology. The challenge of working with light, sound and frequency is that these are things that you can't hold, and so, in order to create a work that you can feel with those components, you really have to distill those things down to the essence. That's present within the work and the way that we've applied the use of technology. It's very careful. Everything is considered and every moment has a reasoning and a meaning. It's very carefully put together, assembled, maybe even disassembled and reassembled, until we start to feel it. So, when you're trying to translate something from Aotearoa to here, when you get those things right and they're together, then hopefully everybody can feel something.



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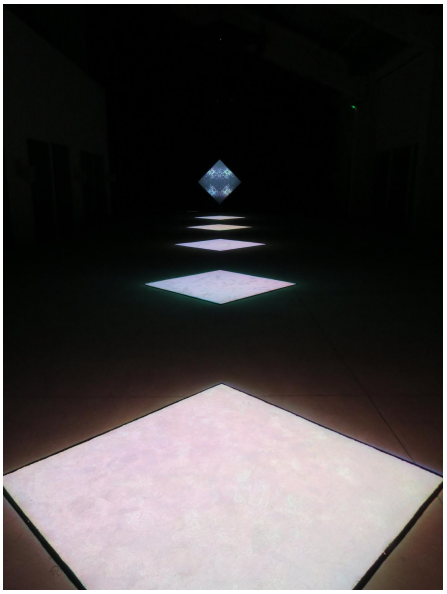

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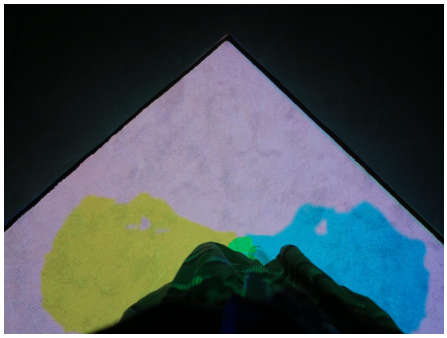

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HUM How does this work in Sharjah relate to projects you've done together in the past, in terms of scale or effort? How did you come as a collective to produce this work?

MIKE BRIDGMAN We produced it mainly in Aotearoa, with some very thorough and precise installation by the Sharjah technical team. It was last year, before the trip when some of the Collective came to view the site. We had a series of variable but interconnectable designs. Our last work, *Ara Reo*, was a structure that had five sound chambers, or sound pou (posts, supports, poles, pillars). The idea was a pathway of knowledge, mātauranga. You kind of go through the currents of those frequencies and sound. The way you inhabit the space changes the mix, so often when sound designs happen, there's a deliberate placement of speakers and how you sit there and everything comes, but we have a sense of that movement; you're on the ātea, moving across the different sounds. The audience gets involved from that perspective straight away. They're invited to explore and not observe from one particular place.

Ara Reo was in regard to commemorating Ngā Tamatoa's Parliamentary petitions that enabled Te Reo Māori to be studied,

because in New Zealand it was banned—it's pretty crazy to think that that was 51 or 52 years ago. We were invited to make this work to respond to that idea and give whakamana (to give authority to, give effect to, give prestige to) for Māori Language Week. That's where the notion of these chambers came from, expressing aspects and connection of this ongoing journey. "Ara" means path, and "reo" is language.

In this particular work in Sharjah, it's not like a written mōteatea (lament, traditional chant, sung poetry) where there's lots of kupu (words), it's more like a sounding of those bass sounds—the energy of the vowels—that resonate. That's what's different to the last work. But it's similar in that sense that there's these sound spaces within the overall work, so you can kind of go through the path.

HUM How do you find Sharjah? We were talking yesterday with Ana Iti about how the hospitality here is similar to Māori or Indigenous values, the way people are hosted and taken care of.

MB It's pretty mind-blowing. I am grateful for the manaaki (hospitality) here, the people and all the spaces, the mixture of old and new. I think that's a really interesting idea that our work holds. It holds some of that history and the past, but also the future. It carries those metaphors in a refined way, into sonic frequencies. There is some vibration going on in there.

During the call of the prayer times here, I've felt that rippling through all the stone and through the alleyways, how it synchronises over different mosques. I think our work speaks to that. It's refreshing to see all this other work and other artists who are trying to carry the theme and come at it from wherever they are.

HUM It's a significant moment to have so many artists and presentations from Aotearoa at the Sharjah Biennial. Those works share Indigenous stories, thinking about future hopes or

projections as Luke Willis Thompson does or looking back to tūpuna (ancestors) as Fiona Pardington does.

KP For Te Matahiapo, the most exciting moment was being invited and probably not knowing very much about this biennial and this part of the world. We were so excited to see that it was curated by women and featured artwork speaking to diverse, unique and non-Western sources of knowledge. That's like the whole world has opened up. The universe has opened up. That's been the long-held dream: that you can do Indigenous art and expression and it's being seen and read, felt and celebrated with other people who understand that. For me, it's a huge privilege and the beginning, really, of what we've all envisioned: things turning into something global and wider and freer. All those conversations about colonisation, it can all lift off for this moment as this comes into a shared space.

Biographies



Te Matahiapo Research Organisation was formed in 2011. The guiding Ahorangi/leaders: the late Dr. Te Huirangi Waikerepuru and the late Mereiwa Broughton, with Inahaa Waikerepuru, Te Ngaruru Wineera and Kura Puke as researchers, cultural guidance and artists who might support cultural, creative learning experiences within the layers of iwi of Aotearoa New Zealand and other diverse indigenous groups and communities around the world. For Ā Ē Ī Ō Ū - Ī Ō Ē Ā Ū*: Ko Pari Haruru* (2025), the collaborative team was Inahaa Waikerepuru, Kura Puke, Stuart Foster and Mike Bridgman.