

GALLERY SALLY DAN — CUTHBERT

About Māramatanga | Lisa Reihana: leading light

Alumna Lisa Reihana recalls the University's Waipapa Marae being built during her years studying at Elam in the late 1980s, and the development providing fertile ground for the young artist.

"There was this free flow of information between the carvers and Elam art school," recalls Lisa (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine, Ngai Tūteauru, Ngāi Tūpoto).

"We were all across it and a lot of discussion was happening. The opportunity really opened my eyes to what was happening within Māoridom. All these people who had been pushing to make things happen, their work was coming to fruition. It was an amazing point in time.

"And there was this real flourishing of Māori arts and a thirst for it in a way that hadn't happened previously, which was emerging not only nationally but internationally."

Lisa has gone on to become one of New Zealand's most celebrated artists whose work is exhibited and commissioned globally. She was awarded an Arts Laureate in 2014, represented New Zealand at the Venice Biennale in 2017 (the same year she was named a Distinguished Alumni) and was made a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2018.

Now, in something of a homecoming, the multidisciplinary artist has created a large-scale artwork for the University called Māramatanga, which she has described as a "love letter" to that time more than three decades ago.

The video installation, housed in the atrium of B201 on Symonds Street, was unveiled at a dawn ceremony on 26 June. Lisa was selected from among four leading artists invited by the University of Auckland Art Acquisition Committee to submit proposals to create a site-specific artwork for the space, after an initial expression of interest was sent to a wider group.

Māramatanga is the first video work by Lisa acquired by the University of Auckland Art Collection, which also holds several of her static photographic works. Running on a 20-minute loop, it features six performers embodying ātua, and other ancestral figures, many inspired by carvings in the whare whakairo of Waipapa Marae, Tāne nui a-rangi.

The walls of the meeting house feature captains and priest-navigators of the canoes that brought the ancestors of the different iwi to Aotearoa, as well Tangi'ia, an ancestor who connects the major islands of the Pacific with New Zealand.

The performers in Māramatanga embody the diversity represented in the pan-iwi, pan-Pacific meeting house – a diversity that also reflects the University's students today, says Lisa.

"I thought it provided a profoundly beautiful model," she says.

Many of the performers featured in the work are students, including Darren Taniue. Darren is in the last year of the Bachelor of Dance Studies programme and says the collaborative process of working with Lisa included the performers reading a book that explains the symbolism of the meeting house, from which they could choose a figure that they identified with to represent.

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Artist and Distinguished Alumna Darren, who has been performing for 13 years and is a pioneer of the New Zealand vogue scene, embodies the ātua Tangaroa, god of the ocean, and Tāwhirimātea, god of the weather, in the work.

“As a Niuean/Samoan I felt the most connected to Tangaroa because Tangaroa is present in both my cultures,” explains Darren.

“Tangaroa is part of one of the origin stories of Niue, and in other Samoan myths, Tagaloa was genderless.”

The dancers devised short solo dance works to embody their characters, which were then workshopped with Atamira Dance Company dancer and choreographer Maaka Pepene (Tūhoe Potiki, Ngāti Hine and Ngāti Awa), who also features in Māramatanga.

Dance studies PhD candidate Chas Mamea (Matautu Lefaga, Upolu Sāmoa; Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine) says collaborating with highly experienced artists was the highlight of her involvement.

“Working with Maaka and Lisa was helpful, because they’re part of a generation that built the foundations for us to be artists, Indigenous creators,” says Chas.

“During the process, they talked a lot about how back in their day it was quite hard to be a Māori artist working in Auckland. Hearing their stories about what that looked like for them and having them give me advice about my own journey as an artist was insightful.”

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The collaboration extended to Chas representing one of her own ancestors, Hineamaru of Ngāti Hine – one of the few female founders of an iwi.

Ngāti Hine is based in Northland’s Waiomio Valley and Chas, who grew up in Auckland, is in the process of returning to her papakāinga where she and her cousins plan to build homes. She learnt the story of Hineamaru through her aunty, who’s involved with the Ngāti Hine kaitiaki trust.

“I’m on this journey of self-connection and discovery in terms of my whakapapa, so I’m always having these conversations with my family at home. So, I asked Lisa if it was okay if I embody my own ancestor, because I just felt like I could connect better to that story.”

Another of the dancers, Yin-Chi Lee, reiterates the collaborative nature of the project. Originally from Taiwan, Yin-Chi is a third-year dance studies PhD candidate whose research explores Taiwanese diasporic identity from an Aotearoa/migrant perspective.

“My journey is a bit different than my Pacific peers featured in the work. I’m a little bit wary of suddenly becoming a figure when I don’t have that lived experience ... so we discussed that I’d take the perspective of a migrant guest in a meeting house,” says Yin-Chi.

“Lisa is very open and collaborative; whatever we put forward and tabled she responded and ran with it.”

Lisa worked with award-winning Tongan/New Zealand costume designer Liz McGregor, whose film credits include The Convert, The New Legends of Monkey, Mahana and Mulan, to create detailed

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costumes that help tell the stories of the figures depicted, as well as reflecting the individual dancers' unique identities.

Yin-Chi explains how she wore a hair braid during an initial meeting about the project, and this detail was incorporated into a belt in her costume. Yin-Chi's father is Hakka Chinese, from Malaysia, a culture in part characterised by migration and in which women traditionally wore their hair braided.

"It was really refreshing to see how attentive Lisa and her team were to whatever I was presenting myself as, and vice versa. It was a process of trying to find out what she needed from me, while she was doing the same, like a little tango," says Yin-Chi.

Māramatanga also features imagery of the natural world – the sea, mangroves, forest – and includes footage shot in Hokianga, the Far North and Te Uruwera. Many of these images form patterns in the backgrounds of the work, referencing the patterned tukutuku panels of Tāne-nui-a-rangi.

The act of binding, demonstrated through tukutuku panel weaving, is what B201 architects Jasmax used to conceptually underpin the building refurbishment. The concept signifies the exchange and release of kōrero, knowledge and energy – ideas that are echoed in Māramatanga, which translates as enlightenment.

Like carved figures in a meeting house, the dancers are presented as full figures in the work, says Lisa, and the large scale of the installation gives them an "awe inspiring" quality.

How do the dancers feel about seeing themselves, larger than life, on the big screen in the building where they come to study? Daniel, Chas and Yin-Chi all say appearing in the work is a privilege.

"The University to me is a place where you learn and you meet people, where you can create your path together," says Yin-Chi.

"To be able to work on this this project has been empowering and I want to translate that through to whoever might look like me or might share similar experiences to me – that we have arrived together in this meeting house, which is the University, and we have a place here."

Written by Caitlin Sykes, published on the University of Auckland website on 1 July 2024: <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2024/07/01/Lisa-reihana-artist-maramatanga.html>