

*Huriawa Pā,
February 7th, 2023.*

Madison Kelly,
Jess Nicholson
& Moewai Marsh

They watched us in and led us out

The last time I visited a site for collection, I sat on a hill, watching while the others worked. They knew what to do, and where to go. I was tagging along, and even if I had been confident to join, I didn't know what to do with the whenua under my feet—all of its pigments and potentials.

Kāitahutaka is diverse in its expression. So are the ara/pathways that lead us into it. When I was very young, I relied on a toki pounamu gifted by my parents. I held onto it often, knowing in very simple terms: that stone was from the South Island and so was I. I lost it swimming in Blue Lake at St Bathans—a body of water birthed by sluicing.

As I got older, learning whakapapa became my go-to ara. This would include human ancestors, but I found it hard to conceptualise them as living, breathing with the whenua. It seemed abstracted and complicated by the recent divisions of language, terraforming, and population dispersal. Other ancient relatives were more immediate and easier to meet.



These were the local birds, plants, reptiles, invertebrates. The more I met, the more I noticed, the more ara became obvious, even at unfamiliar sites.

When invited to collect with Jess and Moewai, I was curious who would be there to meet us. Secretly, I hoped I could recognise some whanauka; bolster my anxiety with some relevant stories or information that could be interesting to the others, so that even if we got lost we could appreciate the plant life.

Collecting whenua demands some off-roading. The site was guarded by steep inclines, but held strong by the root systems of coastal grasses and tūmatakuru (matagouri, a charming and brutally thorny shrub common around the east coast). You can read the lines where these plants sit along dunes and hills—they match up with little ledges in the earth. We followed these up with surprisingly few missteps.

The collection itself was gentle. We shared karakia, and spent time taking what we needed, talking about the Paemanu network of Kāi Tahu artists (an unplanned

conversation, but appropriate). The weather had been unseasonably dry and hot. Much of the whenua at the surface was crumbly. I collected jars of pebble-like maukoroa for a project about rocks and mokomoko/ lizards, water and mineral use.

Lizards are important indicator species. If resources and conditions are stable, they stay put in the same place for a very long time. They know plenty about their whenua, and especially about rocks. Doesn't matter if they are old rocks or new rocks, mokomoko will figure out how to live amongst them if conditions are good. There are scree skinks distributed around the St Bathans mountains—maybe they need more time to get to the rocks around Blue Lake.

Meeting mokomoko is equal parts intimidating and affirming. Even if the environment is lizard friendly, you need a calm headspace to actually notice them nearby.

When you do meet, it feels like an indication that you're visiting at an appropriate time.

After collecting, we followed our grasses down to a tiny stretch of beach and met a newly dead pakeke/sea lion without eyes. Although we didn't see many manu flying, we did find a strong primary flight feather from a gull, stuck amongst the rocks. Immediate waves aside, the pakeke and feather make the ocean stretching into the distance feel very close.

I was at the front on the climb back and heard rustles. Before me, southern grass skinks were working their way through the tussocks. I tried to point them out to Jess and Moewai, but you have to spot them from a few metres away (before they move for cover) so it was tricky. Nonetheless, the entire climb up, every few metres, another skink would be basking in the flattened track we had made earlier, then scatter uphill. I watched for them the whole way, until suddenly we were safely at the top again.

The path in and out felt clear that day, the conditions felt right.

Madison Kelly



Kia ora koroua

It was a hot day, much hotter than I expected an Ōtepoti summer to be. Dizzy on a cocktail of nerves and excitement, I left the house five minutes later than I said I would. Madison was walking down the steps outside, her car parked on yellow lines.

Her tall stature and goofy grin eased some of my nerves. We jumped into the front seats, and I put on a Groove Armada CD I'd borrowed off a friend. Seeing a Punk cassette on the car floor made me think ... maybe Groove Armada wasn't quite the vibe.

When we rocked up to collect Moewai, she was already at the front door. Her crochet bucket-hat bounced like a woollen halo as she walked towards us.

On the drive we talked about how we planned to use the kōkōwai from the pā site we were visiting—how I planned to use it as a slip, a clay maukoroa, even though the red pigment would certainly burn out and go brown. I wondered whether kōkōwai was still kōkōwai after this transition, whether it would still render the items it adorns as tapu.

We talked about our whakapapa and, of course, we're all Kāi Tahu cousins. Since moving to Te Wai Pounamu, I felt strangely comfortable. The significance of the occasion tasted thick in the air as I chatted away with my new whānau.

Eventually, we found the entrance to Huriawa Pā. As we walked under the waharoa, Madison shared some of its history. It was established by Chief Te Wera just before James Cook arrived. The land is surrounded by kaimoana, has a fresh water supply, and a panoramic view. Tī kouka and toitoi stand sprinkled across the wāhi tapu. They waved enthusiastically at us as we walked by, like grandparents greeting their mokopuna.

We walked off the beaten track. Madison and Moewai had been here before with the Paemanu crew. The grass was long and dry, and the sun pricked our skin—thankfully there was a breeze.

As we walked, the hillside opened up in front of us like a wound, weeping all shades of kōkōwai—from light yellow to dark red.

Before gathering the material, we paused and read karakia.

I climbed higher up the bank to rest at the base of a small shrub for balance and shade. Up high was where the reddest red was, more closely resembling a dark pink.

Once our containers were full, we made our way back up the hill.

Madison spotted some southern grass skinks scuttling through the long grass. We took this as a good omen, a warm acknowledgement of our presence.

As we walked out through the waharoa, we waved back to the toitoi and the tī kouka and said goodbye to the whenua.

Jess Nicholson



On our way home...

Madison and Jess picked me up from my nan's house and they were greeted by my two chocolate fur babies, Boy and Ted. (Yes I have two chocolate labs, they're whānau dogs that live at my nan's). I was so excited for today as we were all going out to Puketeraki to gather kōkōwai. It was my first time meeting Jess, and her first time going out to Puke! So special to be all together, traveling to our whenua.

I love connecting with people, especially other like-minded creatives, all with the intention to connect to the whenua. I felt humbled to be a part of this experience of gathering kōkōwai with Jess and Madison, as I remember my first time gathering kōkōwai. It was an experience I'll never forget and that connection to the land gets stronger every time you go back. To take from the land means building a relationship with the land you're on. You find ways to give back when you can, you make connections, you learn about your whenua, and you let your tūpuna guide you. A whole process starts from the moment you're on your whenua. You see the layers

of whakapapa start to unfold, you feel the mauri of the pigment in your hands, and you feel your ancestors watching you connect and learn.

We all became in tune with this process the moment baby Ted jumped up to give Jess and Madison a slobbery kiss. The day was perfect, we couldn't have chosen a better day. It felt like the clouds were disappearing and the sun shone brighter the closer we were getting to Karitane. We popped into the Rūnaka office to say Kia Ora and headed up to the Huriawa Pā to start our hīkoi. We acknowledged our awa on the way and imagined the Arai-te-Uru waka voyaging in front of us. We tried to picture what our tūpuna would be talking about if they were here with us, noticing the berries we would walk past, our mauka Hīkaroroa in the distance by Puketeraki, really taking in the beautiful whenua we were own on. There's so much powerful history on the Pā and I felt that during the hīkoi.

We started our mission of a walk to get to the site to gather kōkōwai. Typical me always wearing the wrong thing ... a long

dress and sandals that are not good for hiking through long overgrown grass, and steep jagged hills (I did this last time wearing the exact same sandals, you'd think I'd learn by now). I ditched the sandals halfway through and got to feel the yummy whenua on my feet. I should've worn my Crocs like Jess did although she ditched her Crocs too.

We got to the site and said a karakia before we gathered the kōkōwai admiring the beautiful taoka in our hands and through our toes. We'd come prepared. When you work with pigments you never throw away a container or a jar as it's perfect for gathering. We all took only what we needed. We could hear Takaroa watching us from below. Our kaitiaki that day were all the lizards that Madison kept seeing crawling along the whenua on our way back. We dipped our feet in the ocean, being the haututu we all are, picking up shells, and seaweed, noticing all the pretty colours and textures of papatūānuku. As we were heading back to the car the wind picked up heaps and the weather really started turning. It's like Tāwhirimātea was telling

us, ‘right, get outta here now!’ well that’s what we thought. We felt an immense amount of peace and gratitude traveling home with our jars of kōkōwai/maukorua. Another experience on my whenua I’ll never forget.

Moewai Marsh





Ayesha Green *Kowhaka* (details) 2025, clay and kōkōwai.
Manufactured by Jess Nicholson