Firmly rooted in place: the rise of rock art in contemporary toi Māori praxis

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Over the last few years, there has been a significant increase in contemporary Māori artists exhibiting work made from earth pigments. This resurgence has come from artists researching, reconnecting, and rebuilding a community of shared resources and knowledge. This process has been difficult and painful at times, but it has resulted in a network of ringatoi Māori who model their practices through a dedication to the lands they belong to.

As Māori artists using earth pigments, we get to flatten time, see our lineage painted onto limestone walls, and gather material from places we have ancestral links to. Some material is conceptual, some material is practical, some is just so beautiful it calls to be used. Earth pigments carry histories and the mana of the people who once occupied those places. As sovereignty was never ceded by Māori in Aotearoa, even if we don't currently physically occupy our traditional lands; we have always been, and continue to remain tangata whenua, the people of the land.

To stand in front of an adorned rock shelter and trace not only your cultural identity, but your artistic identity back through time, brings a sense of belonging that I never quite felt as an artist. I've always been Māori, and I've always been an artist, but it wasn't until I was faced with ngā ana whakairo for the first time that those identities became so blatantly intertwined.

In a daunting epiphany, I realised my arts education had been so deeply Western that the Māori conceptual basis of my practice always seemed to be fighting to be seen and heard. Throughout my arts education, I was never taught that paint making was accessible, that paint could be made from natural resources, and had the potential to be returned to the land with little impact. I mourn for student me, struggling with finances and buying plastic tubes of plastic paint. If I had known you could make paint from earth and a binder—what a difference that would have made.

Every time a Māori artist exhibits earth pigments, our cultural practice is extended. Not only do these works often provide beautiful, thought-provoking content to general gallery audiences; they extend the lineage of our customary materials into contemporary realities, which is a service to our Māori community. It's education, it's sharing mātauranga, it's cutting down the colonial barriers that have cast these processes into the background for generations.

There was a date when our ancestors were severed from our rock art sites. These dates differ up and down the country as land was stolen at different times and often given to settlers to farm. But there are actual dates when whole groups of people were forced to walk away from the places they know and love—some not knowing where they were relocating to, just walking. Unjust land 'sales' and 'confiscations' still impact us today, but we're still here, working hard and extending our cultural practices into the future.

These are sites that were used for generations for sacred ceremonies, shelters along highways travelled on foot, navigational way-finding points, altars, teaching and learning tools, all steadily-maintained places of communication were mapped out and fenced up by the Crown. Most sites were stolen so violently that we don't fully know the original intentions of their creation. The cultural practice was interrupted by colonial theft and actual, physical gatekeeping. Some rock art sites were blown out of the land with dynamite and sit fragmented in museums, others sit dormant, alone in now-remote locations.

Many Māori rock art sites all over the country were desecrated by one particular culture vulture white artist who repeatedly damaged and drew over the top of ancestral mark making at wahi tapu. The dude thought he was white-saviour-ing a dead practice. This artist and subsequent Pākehā underlings continue to be lauded as modernist heroes to this day. Even though there's more dominant rhetoric

about cultural appropriation now, they still get shows over living Māori artists who flex their modernist muscles with belonging and integrity.

Despite the waves of colonial systems determined to disconnect us from customary land practices, like that of whenua as an expressive art material; these may have been interrupted, but they've never disappeared. Tūāhu continue to be raised, carvers rub red whenua mixed with oil into wood, weavers place processed harakeke into iron-rich black paru mud pools, kōkōwai is used as a sacred communication tool in ceremony and performing arts, mineral-laden clays are applied to the body as rongoā, and painters make paint with rock, soil, silt, and clay.

Ayesha Green and I came to painting with land at a similar time. We exchanged messages online expressing the daunting nature of using such a loaded medium. There's power and responsibility that comes with harnessing ancestral materials in contemporary arts practice. As Māori artists, we are held to systems of accountability to tikanga, to whānau, to whenua, to our peers; it can be intimidating! We nudged each other along the paint making processes, reassuring each other that we whakapapa to these practices, that we belong. The unnerving sense of exclusion we were both experiencing came from histories of colonial gatekeeping—both physical and conceptual, both external and internal, both from the Crown and unfortunately, at times, from Māori upholding patriarchal colonial systems. I've come to understand an antidote to gatekeeping is generosity. Over the last few years, a community of Māori paint makers have shared mātauranga, materials, and experiences that have built each other up.

Last year, in 2022, dozens of Māori earth pigment practitioners exhibited all over the country. Waitaha, Kāi Tahu, and Kāti Māmoe artist Ross Hemera was awarded a Te Tohu Toi Kē a Te Waka Toi/Making a Difference award at the annual celebration of Māori art excellence, Ngā Taonga Toi a Te Waka Toi. His practice is deeply entrenched in Kāi Tahu rock art motifs and techniques, and has been an inspiration to generations of up-and-coming ringatoi Māori. Dunedin Public Art Gallery held the beautiful *Paemanu: Tauraka Toi* exhibition (December 2021–April 2022) where Ross led the way as a rock art stalwart and adorned the walls with maukoroa. *Paemanu: Tauraka Toi* also supported newcomers to earth pigments, Moewai Marsh and Kate Stevens West. Raukura Turei's momentous work, *Te Poho o Hine-Moana* (2021), was acquired by the Auckland Art Gallery. Raukura was also runner-up at the Waikato Museum National Contemporary Art Awards 2022 with her piece *He Tukuna* (2021) made with onepū, oil, and pigment on linen. Maraea Timutimu gave an artist talk with her parents at Tauranga Art Gallery about her exhibition of rock portraits, *He kāwai whenua He kāwai whakapapa* (2022). In Wellington, Sian Montgomery-Neutze developed a body of work using her finely tuned whenua-based watercolour techniques for Ihorei Gallery, and Ashleigh Taupaki exhibited her extensively colourful pigment practice with Jhana Millers Gallery.

Currently at City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, Ayesha Green's *Folk Nationalism* opens and closes with a work called *Scenic Beauty* (2020). This humble piece is contemporary rock art in action. Ayesha has sourced paper made from stone, a weighty stock which is typically used in the high-end retail industry for carry bags. On the surface of the tremendously processed 'recycled' stone are marks made with raw iron-rich kōkōwai from her Kāi Tahu homelands. The artist's hand is traced with rock on rock, a marker of identity, the maker's hand in stone for us all to feel her presence. Like the ancient ana whakairo sites from the past, Ayesha's gesture communicates, 'the Māori rock painter was here', but this time we're not in limestone country, down a gully or in a rock shelter. *Scenic Beauty* is presented in 2023, in a frame on the wall of a Western art gallery, and to me it says 'the Māori rock painter was always here, always was, always will be.'

Ayesha Green *Scenic Beauty* 2020,
kōkōwai on stone paper, 420 × 290mm.