

Work reflects Māori concepts of time and space

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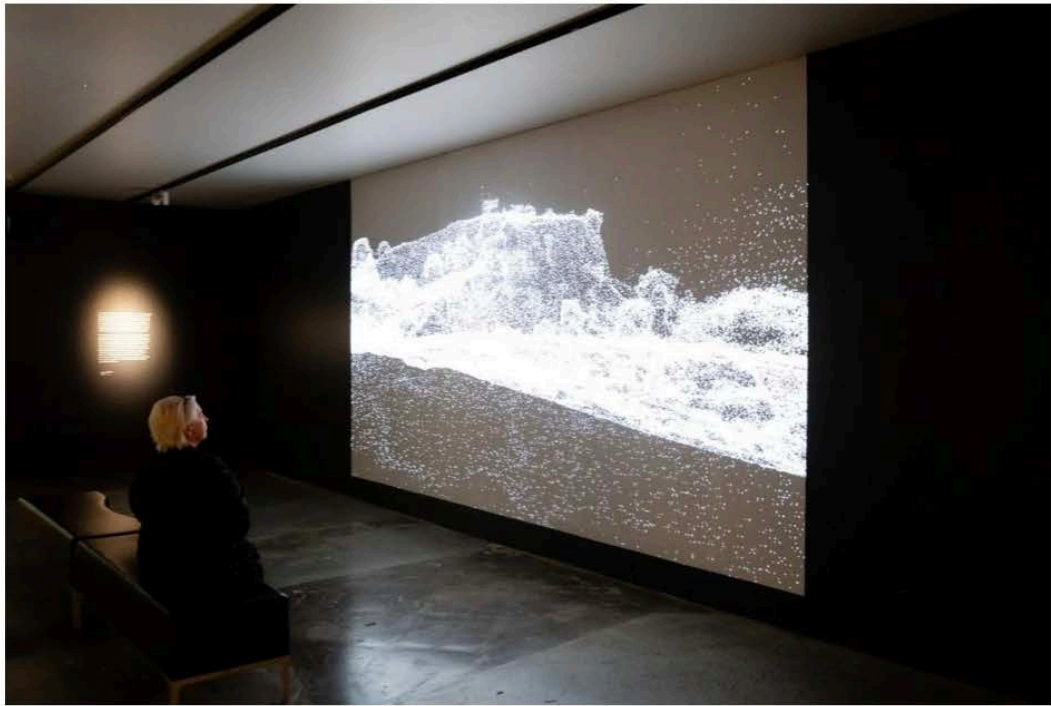
In a series of photographs called Tekau Mā Rua, Flatt depicts the ghostly outlines of kuia who belong to each wāhi tapu depicted. Russ Flatt: te atua, te wa, te atea exhibition installation. Courtesy of the artist and The Dowse. SUPPLIED

A new exhibition by Ngāti Kahungunu artist Russ Flatt, *te ahua, te wa, te atea*, explores wāhi tapu (sacred sites) that Flatt is connected to through whakapapa.

Showing at the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt, and at a time where rights to whenua (land) and waterways are top of mind for Māori, it seems pertinent to be making art that reflects these concerns.

The atmosphere in the room is weighty. The images of sites that have been alienated from their people – through “dubious means”, as the exhibition text states – are powerful and emotional. As an observer, you can’t help but be moved.

At the centre of the exhibition is a video work exploring wāhi tapu in Heretaunga Hastings. This was made using point cloud technology. These renderings of wāhi tapu are ethereal and otherworldly – we travel from real footage of rolling hills and rivers, into clouds of glowing dots that appear like ghostly outlines of the real places. Point cloud images fizz and shimmer around us as we fly over and through the whenua – while at times we also seem to fly through it, emerging from beneath the land and soaring into the sky.



At the centre of the exhibition is a video work exploring wāhi tapu in Heretaunga Hastings, made using point cloud technology. Russ Flatt: te atua, te wa, te atea exhibition installation. Courtesy of the artist and The Dowse. **SUPPLIED**

The video flickers through time and space – moving from an unoccupied landscape, to a roundabout filled with moving cars, from flowing rivers to the bridges that are built across them. In this way, the work reflects Māori concepts of time and space – everything is layered on top of each other, and all time exists at once.

As the video moves and the soundscape plays, a haunting feeling sends shivers down my spine. I'm unfamiliar with these wāhi tapu, but they emanate a feeling of importance. Although the whenua is silent, these places hold memories and stories – which we can only comprehend if we listen closely.

I consider my own ancestral whenua, and the sacred sites that I know back home – how the history of wars and other events that have taken place on our whenua lives on in the mauri of the space, even if the physical markers aren't immediately visible. I also reflect on how the Wellington region has been drastically re-shaped and shifted by Pākehā settlers in the past century. How the CBD went from being swamp and marshland, to being the bustling hub of Lambton Quay. And more widely, how sacred maunga (mountains) all across Aotearoa have been levelled to the ground due to the construction of public works, how awa (rivers) have been restricted and polluted by industry.



Ngāti Kahungunu artist Russ Flatt.
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The term wāhi tapu generally denotes that a place is a burial ground, a battle site or a place where tapu objects have been placed. I am often disturbed by how the sacredness of these places is not understood by so many people. I wonder if this is a language hurdle – if instead of wāhi tapu or urupā we called them “battlefields” or “cemeteries”, would they be respected? If we said, “you are building houses on graves” would developments on our wāhi tapu cease to be?

I’m reminded of an expose published by Māori journalist Meriana Johnsen about vineyards in the Wairau Valley that are growing on top of wāhi tapu – where people were shot and killed, meaning there is certainly blood in the soil. As this expose states, Māori histories are embedded within the whenua. The tapu of these sites needs to be respected.

Flatt’s works leave no room for misinterpretation. The images he presents powerfully convey the intensity and sacred importance of wāhi tapu. In a series of photographs called *Tekau Mā Rua*, Flatt depicts the ghostly outlines of kuia who belong to each wāhi tapu depicted. They sit on their walkers, on benches, or are caught walking through the bushes, occupying and haunting the whenua. Their connection to the land survives, even if the land itself has been alienated from its people.



Flatt's works, like this one, *Karamu*, leave no room for misinterpretation. The images he presents powerfully convey the intensity and sacred importance of wāhi tapu. Russ Flatt: *te atua, te wa, te atea* exhibition installation. Courtesy of the artist and The Dowse.

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These photographs, and the exhibition as a whole, remind me of the well known whakataukī “whatungarongaro te tangata, toitū te whenua – as humankind disappears from sight, the land remains“. This whakataukī is a reminder that the whenua will outlive us all. It holds the memories of our lives, but ultimately it is a larger entity than humankind, and will be here long after we have gone. It is up to us to take care of the land, and to respect her.

Te ahua, te wa, te atea will undoubtedly be challenging for some. The content is heavy and stirs the emotions. But like all great art, it gives viewers an opportunity to learn. This exhibition explores Māori concepts that are sometimes difficult to put across in words. It makes mātauranga and Māori ways of viewing the world accessible and digestible, while deepening understanding and empathy.

- *Te ahua, te wa, te atea* by Russ Flatt is showing at The Dowse Art Museum until November 3. .

– **The Post**