HIRIA ANDERSON-MITA
Manaaki

ge Galleries
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Hana Pera Aoake

In the European tradition of portraiture, the intent is always to capture and record the likeness of a human subject. For the artist Hiria Anderson-Mita (Rereahu, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Apakura), this idea has been extended through the ways in which as Māori we acknowledge the mauri, life force, within all beings and matter, whether this is a feed of maccas or a tupuna rendered into pou tokomanawa, the carved posts that support the ridgepole of a meeting house.

ia Anderson-Mita, *Maanaki*, 23. Installation view, Page lleries, Te Whanganui-a-a Wellington, July 2023. oto: Michael Manhe Lamb

POSITE
ia Anderson-Mita, *Ātea*, 23, oil on canvas, 60 5 cm. Courtesy of the st and Page Galleries

In a suite of twenty paintings, Anderson-Mita's *Manaaki* at Page Galleries in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington shows everyday scenes of her life. These might be her own whānau, or the community that she lives in. They serve as a recording of these realities of everyday life and how the politics and dynamics of the past and the present are always entwined. As the Māori academic Kathie Irwin writes, Māori women have the ability to tell stories that show "strength and comfort [and] are taken from the balance, from the context, from the reality of the world we write, paint, think and dream about."[1]

When I think of the word 'manaaki', I think not of the often-co-opted idea of hospitality, but of the ways in which we show care and respect to the life around us, building a set of reciprocal relationships based on much older rituals instilled within Māori cultural practices. The main component of this kupu is 'mana', a word that is both a noun and a verb, as it describes prestige, authority, power and status, but also whether something is legal, and a force that is inherent within a person, place or object.[2]

Raised by her grandparents, Anderson-Mita had the verb 'manaaki' instilled into her as a central tenet within her life, which inherently informs her approach to painting and gives her work its rich cultural grounding. In *Aho* (2023), we see three chubby babies in white nappies with a red line or string that each is playing with. Perhaps these babies are cousins or maybe they are triplets. The word 'aho' can mean string, or fishing line, but can also be translated as a line of descent or as radiant light. In raranga, the weft or horizontal threads that go across the warp, the whenu, are known as the aho. This red string moving through the middle of the canvas reminds me of an umbilical cord, an aho that connects whakapapa together.

In *Manaaki*, whakapapa is sometimes depicted through the absence of people but, through the webs of entanglement Māori have with all life forms, even those that aren't seen are still present. *Ātea* (2023) shows the mahau of a marae, which is where the women of the marae perform the karanga for the manuhiri coming onto the marae grounds. *Afternoon at the pā* (2023) shows the other space that forms the manaaki you show manuhiri, the wharekai, where you feed your guests and lift the tapu from the day's earlier proceedings. In a Māori worldview, the marae is a living ancestor, so the whakairo and tukutuku panels in *Marae Reflections* (2023) are a portrait, in many ways a self-portrait. Inscribed within these spaces is the embodiment and sentience of the people who made them, cared for them and live(d) with them from the past, present and future.

Anderson-Mita's work allows for the complexities of history to reveal themselves. In *Khyber Pass* (2022), we see a view of the underbridge on Khyber Pass Road in Tāmaki Makaurau, the one you turn off to get on the motorway back south towards the Waikato. This road leads to Great South Road, a road built by settlers to facilitate the invasion of the Waikato in 1863, constructed on an ara hīkoi, or a traditional walking path, used by Māori for travel and trade. *Heading back to the Waikato* (2023) is a scene of endless rolling green hills and power lines appearing on either side, with a group of indecipherable gang members on motorbikes ahead. This work, to me, recalls the consequences of colonisation, with the swathe of whenua raupatu, land that was taken after the land wars, that was then drained and turned into European farmland, which caused the alienation of Māori not just from their land, but from traditional hapū networks. This disruption of Māori society resulted in the formation of gangs by children who were taken into state care, as a stand-in for traditional whānau groups.

Small in scale, Anderson-Mita's paintings intimately reorder the European gaze to tell stories from a Māori perspective and, in this way, reveal the living breathing mauri that exists between all people and histories even in their absence. The scale underlines the intimacy of the subject matter, with a number of the works speaking to her partner's illness. In the series 'Mātai Rongoā' (2022), half the works are of pills and the other half of tukutuku patterns. The artist's vulnerability contextualises the duality of Māori life that we live as colonised people under late-stage capitalism; as underscored by the late activist Eva Rickard, "When you fail to sustain your beliefs, sovereignty and freedom, you become lost in yourself as you are subsumed by those whose customs and practices you must now serve."[3] Anderson-Mita reminds us of the importance of a Māori worldview, where we care for, share and manaaki our collective histories, and think through ways of understanding the world that recognise the agency of everything that is human and non-human, coming from the past and leading us into the future.

Kathie Irwin, 'Introduction: Te Ihi, Te Wehi, Te Mana o ngā Wāhine Māori,' in *Toi Wāhine: The Worlds of Māori Women*, ed. Kathie Irwin and Irihapeti Ramsden (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1995), 11.
Te Aka Māori Dictionary (2018), s.v. 'Mana'
Eva Rickard quoted in Annette Sykes, 'The Myth of Tikanga in the Pākehā Law,' *E-Tangata*, 7 February 2021