

New museum artwork adds to rich lineage of local artists

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Nephi Tupaea, *Te Kaokaoroa* (2026), Acrylic on Canvas, 1530mm H x 1220mm W, Hawkes Bay Museum Collection. Reproduced with kind permission of Nephi Tupaea. Courtesy of Tim Melville Gallery. Photography Kallan MacLeod.

The Hawke's Bay Museum Trust's art collection brings together works by internationally celebrated artists, nationally significant practitioners, and those whose lives and careers have shaped the cultural landscape of Te Matau-a-Māui/Hawke's Bay.

The collection continues to grow through the strategic acquisition of new works, made possible by charitable donations to the Hawke's Bay Museum Fund. The latest addition, purchased by the Hawke's Bay Museum Foundation and gifted to the Trust for the people of Hawke's Bay, is *Te Kaokaoroa* (2026) by Havelock North-based artist **Nephi Tupaea** (Ngāti Koata, Ngāti Tiipa, Ngāti Koroki, Kahukura, Ngāti Kahungunu).

Tupaea is undoubtedly a creative force. Since the early 1990s, Tupaea has exhibited in major galleries, museums, and art festivals across the country and beyond, developing a multidisciplinary practice spanning performance, textiles, body adornment, and more. She has played a significant role in impactful artists' collectives, as a founding member of Pacific Sisters, a longstanding member of Iwi Toi Ngāti Kahungunu, and a member of SaVĀge K'lub.

More recently, she has focused on her painting practice, refining it through her studies at Toimairangi, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, where she completed a Maunga Kura Toi Bachelor of Māori Art in 2022. Locally, audiences may recognise her paintings from Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga/Hastings Art Gallery, where she was one of the 2024 recipients of the Te Matau-a-Māui Contemporary Art: Gwen Malden Trust Commissions.

When I first visited Tupaea's studio to discuss a potential acquisition for the museum, a series of completed paintings were carefully stacked and displayed, ready for transport. I had arrived at a particularly exciting moment as she was putting the finishing touches on a new body of work. What struck me most, seeing her work in person, was her use of the Mangopare kōwhaiwhai pattern (hammerhead shark motif), her painting's vibrancy and their unexpected texture, with many works punctuated by raised dots, adding a tactile quality that rewards close looking.

Our chosen painting, *Te Kaokaoroa*, is a beautiful example of her work, with these elements coming together to imbue the painting with rich meaning while speaking to our landscape.

As Tupaea explains:

“Te Kaokaoroa’ is my interpretation of the hills that run from the Peka Peka Wetlands through to Te Hauke in Heretaunga. Within the ancestral understanding of Te Tuarā o te Ika-a-Māui, this land forms part of the living body of Māui’s fish — where the hills rise like ribs along the spine of the whenua. The title comes from the words kaokao (ribs) and roa (long, enduring). I paint these hills as the ribcage of the land, while the nearby wetlands function as its organs — once sustaining life and movement for the people of Ngāti Kahungunu, who travelled these waterways as a living highway for gathering kai. Much of this system has since been drained, redirected, and fenced through colonisation and agricultural transformation. The kōwhaiwhai moves across the land like breath across bone, pressing into the surface rather than decorating it. There is no horizon here. The whenua is not backdrop. It is ancestor.

People often ask why I use such vibrant colours. For me, these colours come directly from the Hawke's Bay landscape. When you look across the hills, you're not just seeing the colours of nature—you see the changing sky, the seasons, the trees and the whenua, but you also see us. The bright colours of road signs, rooftops, cars moving through the landscape and the places we build all become part of Mother Nature. We don't exist separately from the landscape; we belong within it. Te Kaokaoroa is a reminder that both the natural world and the human world exist together, and that's why every colour has a place in the painting.

When people ask why I repeatedly use the Mangopare kōwhaiwhai pattern, it's because it has become a language within my practice. The Mangopare is a Kahungunu design based on the hammerhead shark. It represents courage, strength and resilience, and was designed by matua Dr. Sandy Adsett. As a Kahungunu artist, it is a pattern I feel deeply connected to. What I love about the Mangopare is that it isn't fixed. I can rotate it, extend it, manipulate it and change its direction, yet it still holds together. It becomes organic and almost alive, moving across the canvas in a way that feels natural. That flexibility allows it to become part of the landscape, the figures and the story, rather than simply being decoration. For me, the repetition of the Mangopare is also about finding balance. As I paint, it gives me a sense of perspective and grounding. It brings balance to my wairua and creates harmony throughout the composition. It has become a visual rhythm that connects everything together. It's no longer just a kōwhaiwhai pattern—it has become part of the way I think, the way I paint, and the way I express my connection to Kahungunu.”

Photographs don't do Tupaea's work justice; the image accompanying this article only hints at the experience of standing before this new acquisition. Thankfully, you can see *Te Kaokaoroa* in person soon, as it will be featured in several exhibitions at Kahukura Hawke's Bay Museum over the coming years. When it's not on display, the work will be cared for at Amokura, our new collections storage and research facility in Hastings.

Hawke's Bay is home to an extraordinary creative community, from internationally celebrated artists to exciting emerging practitioners. Hawke's Bay Museum is honoured to care for the work of so many artists whose lives and stories are woven into the fabric of our region. Through their artworks, they capture and preserve the people, places, histories, and experiences that define Te Matau-a-Māui/Hawke's Bay. Nephi Tupaea's *Te Kaokaoroa* is a beautiful addition to that rich lineage.

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