

Insight: Nephi Tupaea

Nephi Tupaea on her latest body of work, 'Whenua/Whenua', Colonial Child.

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I was born Māori on 5 January 1971 under the star sign of Capricorn. I am also fourth-generation Mormon and born Takatāpui. Three immediate strikes by an act of default.

My toi journey began by stepping into the world of Modern Abstract. I had lost all connection to whakapapa and had to find my way home. I had appropriated a painting by Pablo Picasso, *Three Women at the Spring* (1921). I tried a technique called *chiaroscuro*, an Italian term meaning light from dark, which gives an impression of the presence of Atua. I was being led to a potential Christ series, but I struggled painting the human form and the structure of cloth that would cover

Christ's body. I could not get my head around shading to create the folds and was not enjoying the process, so I reverted to applying kōwhaiwhai. This became my redeeming quality and spiritual connection to Te Ao Māori. It made perfect sense as my art journey slowly revealed the true nature of the cause. Kōwhaiwhai became a spiritual clothing and method of decolonising a colonial masterpiece into my own narrative, reflecting my own experience.

Importantly, kōwhaiwhai goes back to the point of origin of manaakitanga, a foundation that begins within the construct of the marae kitchen, where the importance of feeding your manuhiri gives a sense of love and security, the bond of everyone's wairua. I would also like to acknowledge Toimairangi, Sandy Adsett, Michelle Mataira, Wilray Price and Tracy Keith for guiding and installing those values of manaakitanga.

'Whenua/Whenua' is an offering to those who have walked in my shoes and to those who were forgotten—snippets from my life that have endured intergenerational trauma. The trauma as Māori stems from deep-charted colonisation, religion and annihilation. The sins of the parent will be visited upon the child.

This first offering, *Whakarongo ki te tangi* (2022), is appropriated from Paul Gauguin, *Nevermore* (1897). I am lying horizontally with my hands covering my ears. I am wide-eyed and dismayed. The array of kōwhaiwhai stands for turmoil. Te Kawau-a-Toru (the pet shag of Kupe) hovers above, with its wing stretched in a gesture of protection. The shag is a kaitiaki from Nelson, French Pass, where my grandmother is from.

My second offering, *I lay down with kaitiaki* (2022), is appropriated from Paul Gauguin, *Manao Tupapau* (Spirit of the Dead Watching) (1892). This is the first panel of a triptych that tells my story of excommunication from the church. I was twenty-seven years old when I was asked to stand in front of a Disciplinary Council. As punishment for the seriousness of my transgression—being transgender—I was given the choice of disfellowship (a lesser form of punishment) or excommunication (withdrawal of church membership).

The painting shows me lying on a bed face down, with hands raised on each side, an act of surrender. I have no facial features, only a silhouette. This suggests the shame I had to endure. There is a ghostly figure to the top left, of my grandmother, Nana Charlotte, who was with me, in spirit, during my trial. Three dogs are a symbol of the Holy Trinity. They are our kaitiaki belonging to Ngāti Koa-ta. The dogs are positioned in the foreground, midground and background in a triangular formation. My body is fully covered in kōwhaiwhai, a connection to tikanga Māori and the whenua.

My third offering, *Nga horoi ki te whakapono* (2023), is appropriated from Paul Gauguin, *Bathers in Tahiti* (1897). Two figures are the representation of a baptism taking place. To have your sins washed away is depicted by looking within yourself and enduring the judgements that have been bestowed by the many. It also

challenges the rhetoric of Anglo religion against a non-colonial spiritual belief of Te Ao Mārama and Mātauranga Māori.

I grew up navigating my way through prejudice and shame. It was not an easy path, but I would not be the person I am today without it. This series is my journey of healing, enlightenment, and forgiveness.

Header image: Nephi Tupaea, *Nga horoi ki te whakapono*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tim Melville