

MATARIKI WILLIAMS
A PERSONAL RESPONSE

NGATAIHARURU TAEPA
POU RONGOĀ
19 MAY – 11 JUN 2022

In his own words, *kōwhaiwhai* are transmitters of a visual language, so what is it that Ngataiharuru Taepa (Te Arawa, Te Ātiawa) is telling us? First of all, let's sit on this idea of *kōwhaiwhai* as communicator and imagine a time when all Māori were fluent in this language. Consider the immediacy of entering *whare tīpuna* and having the walls speak to us, telling us of our hapū exploits. These *kōrero* flowing from the walls for us to pick up and carry on.

*Kōwhaiwhai was the writing of our ancestors. That's the way they decided to describe what they saw in the world through the written language of tuhituhi or kōwhaiwhai. I'm quite conscious that this artform pre-dates, in our culture, the written word and part of my master's was the impact of the written word on our visual culture and on kōwhaiwhai.*¹

Consider again, the impact of the written word and what it has eroded away from a general comprehension of visual languages. Herein lies the possibility of revitalising visual languages, and of course Taepa's work is at the fore of this. Connecting to the title of this exhibition, *Pou Rongoā*, revitalisation is a healing of sorts in that it works against the predominant actor of *mātauranga* and language loss, that is, colonisation. The thread of revitalisation is present also in the titles of the works themselves, which are drawn from a *karakia*, and express the encompassing environment that aids in knowledge acquisition and retention. Here I am drawn to the many phases of the morning that are invoked and recall the description of 'te atakura' which is mentioned in the well-known *karakia* 'Whakataka te Hau'. Te atakura is the time prior to dawn, before birds have awoken, and is known as an ideal time for learning without distraction. Beyond revitalising the use of te reo and visual languages, so too should we consider the other ways our knowledge can be revitalised through methods of teaching and learning. The *kupu* in this *karakia* also evoke thoughts of the *māramataka* as the phases of the moon can be read in the *whiwhia*, *rawea* and *kupu* related to growth.

In his titles can also be read the continued homage paid by Taepa to those who have gone before. Taepa has cited senior Māori artist Bob Jahnke (Ngāi Taharora, Te Whānau-a-Iritekura, Te Whānau a Rakairoa o Ngāti Porou) as one of his influences, alongside Jahnke's contemporary Kura Te Waru Rewiri (Ngāti Kahu, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Rangī). Jahnke's own expositions with light, positive and negative space, and the evolution of Māori artforms are well-documented in the works that constitute the multiple series of ATA works.

¹ <https://www.pagegalleries.co.nz/artists/58-ngataiharuru-taepa/overview>

Here I am inspired by Taepa's ability to create anew these artforms while existing within a whakapapa of making that can be, as is primary in this visual form, read by viewers. Onward again will new makers be inspired by Taepa's evolutions in kōwhaiwhai. As a viewer, his works have already adjusted how I will consider the heke in Rongokarae, one of our whare tipuna in Rūātoki, where the realistic rendering of tāne in maro snaring birds are simple to read. Alongside the kōwhaiwhai, whom I have always found harder to read, Taepa's work has compelled me to look again. Taepa's work has compelled me to consider how one might revitalise a way of seeing and a way of reading work like his, to then take this approach home and use it there.

Matariki Williams (Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Hauiti, Taranaki) is Pou Hītori Māori Matua Senior Māori Historian in Te Pae Wānanga (the Research and Publishing team) at Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage.

She was previously Curator Mātauranga Māori at Te Papa Tongarewa and is an independent writer and editor. She is co-founder and co-editor of [ATE Journal of Māori Art](#) and co-wrote the award-winning book [Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance](#) alongside Stephanie Gibson and Puawai Cairns.

She recently relocated from Te-Whanganui-a-Tara to Whakatāne with her partner and tamariki.