

Shannon Te Ao

*Mā te wā*

Mossman, Wellington

12 Sep – 10 Oct 2020

Except from a conversation between Shannon Te Ao and Matariki Williams, on the occasion of Te Ao's solo exhibition *Ka mua, ka muri* at Remai Modern, Saskatoon, 6 August – 3 January 2021. *Ka mua, ka muri* is co-commissioned by Remai Modern and Oakville Galleries, with the support of Creative New Zealand. The exhibition at Remai Modern is organized by Rose Bouthillier, Curator (Exhibitions).

*I am tied to the centre of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Our great lake Taupō-nui-a-Tia and the mountain ranges of Tongariro plot my tribal location. These days, several hours drive from Wellington eventually brings me to the Rangipo Desert. Set between the Kaimanawa Ranges to the east and the mountain ranges of Ruapehu, Ngāuruhoe and Tongariro to the west, this region marks the southern border of Ngāti Tūwharetoa lands. A sixty-kilometre stretch of highway cuts through the inland volcanic plateau, peppered*



*with hundreds of electrical pylons that follow the road, informs a stark and barren vastness. This area is managed by the New Zealand Army as a training facility. At times, I've seen plumes of smoke in the distance, presumably fallout from a detonated charge. Something is compounded here – the reality of this landscape and its signalling of a return.*

*Just above the northern arc of the lake, I exit the highway on the way to a different kind of return. Usually at the beginning or the end of a long weekend visit, I'll stop by to pay respects to my father who is laid to rest near the small village of Mōkai. It is a completely rural setting, apart from the masses of infrastructure that support the geothermal power station nearby. The urupā is now encircled by privately farmed lands, some owned and operated by local hapū, some not.*

*All of this prompts is a conflated sense of how I am both connected and disconnected. Somehow the ambivalence I carry with me is mirrored in what I see outside.*

Shannon, your surname is made up of the 'A' and 'O' categories, the junior and senior relational categories of Māori linguistics. When combined, they encompass the whole Māori world. Night, day, death, life.

Te Whiti o Rongomai's whakatauākī goes, "*Ko te pō te kaihari i te rā. Ko te mate te kaihari i te oranga.*"

The night is the bringer of the day. Death is the bringer of life.

Te Whiti was a leader of the Parihaka settlement, whose people practiced passive resistance in the face of insatiable colonial hunger for land. These forces eventually razed the settlement to the ground, imprisoned the men and sent them southward, and assaulted the remaining women and children.





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Living in the small military town of Waiouru, children of an army man, our returns home to iwi lands in Rūātōki would traverse the windy paths of the Desert Road through the North Island's Central Plateau.

When I was very young, my older siblings told me of a spider that lived in the gully of a bend on the Desert Road. A giant spider, "Can you see it?" "Where?!" "Where?!" "Oh. You missed it."

For years I strained to see the gully-dwelling giant, leaning so far into the window I thought our van would tip. I never did see it. I still look for the spider, though I know I'll never find it.

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Shannon, your work always has me thinking of death. Perhaps it reveals a default to the darkness I never knew I had. Or maybe it is the lamentation of women, bodily excising their pain, that calls me to the dark.

These women, you know the ones, are veiled in black and parekawakawa. They are the whānau pani draped around the tūpāpaku of their loved one. They beckon people onto the marae.

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*Karere ana mai te reo powhiri ki ngā manu e korihi mai nei i te ao awatea. The voice of welcome bellows to the birds singing as dawn breaks.*

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Shannon, these roads have gathered many stories for me too: “Remember that time we saw a pig freshly-killed in the middle of the road and Koro such-and-such told us to pull over so we could take the pig?” This too is the road we take, when they call us home, before body and wairua separate.

The rest of us are beleaguered by three days of tangihanga on our feet: cooking, cleaning and harirū with the pressing of noses. They are the three days heading toward a final send off and a feast fit for royalty.





Night falls and the wails turn to waiata, seeing us into a new dawn.

These waiata echo with us in the days after whānau from far-flung cities, and worlds, leave again after their fleeting return. The hard part is in the differences that widen between them and the home fires with every passing year. In the car ride home, alone in company, their presence is a comfort, but not comfort enough to be able to let your pain flee your mouth like your wailing Nannies do.

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The hardest of all is the knowing and the unknowing. The realisation that the time has come for you to be the Aunty wailing and the Koro directing the van. We take these roads and arrive as the passers of knowledge, future generations learning from us.

You are the echo of the past, the father and the mother.

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*Tai timu! Tai pari! Rere noa e iiii! The tide ebbs!  
The tide flows! It flows on endlessly!*

Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui) was born in Sydney in 1978. He holds a BFA from University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts and an MFA from the College of Creative Arts at Massey University Wellington. Te Ao's recent solo exhibitions include: *Ka mua, ka muri*, Remai Modern, Saskatoon (2020); *Ka mua, ka muri*, Oakville Galleries, Toronto (2020); *my life as a tunnel*, The Dowse Art Museum, Wellington (2018); *With the sun aglow, I have my pensive moods*, The Edinburgh Art Festival, Scotland, and Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Auckland (2017); *Tenei ao kawa nei*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu (2017); *Two shoots that stretch far out*, Taipei Contemporary Art Centre (2017); *Te huka o te tai*, Artspace, Auckland (2017); *Untitled (McCahon House Studies)*, City Gallery Wellington (2017); *Untitled (malady)*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington (2016); and *A torch and alight (cover)*, Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Auckland (2015). In 2016, Te Ao was awarded the Walters Prize.

Matariki Williams (Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Hauti, Taranaki, Ngāti Whakaue) is Acting Senior Curator Mātauranga Māori at Te Papa Tongarewa. With Stephanie Gibson and Puawai Cairns, she is the co-author of the publication *Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance*. Matariki is the co-founder of ATE Journal of Māori Art with Bridget Reweti, and her writing has featured in multiple online publications including *frieze*, *Art in America*, *e-Tangata*, *Pantograph Punch*, *The Spinoff*, and *ArtZone*.