

Being in Place

Being in Place brings together four artists from territories an ocean apart who tell stories about place. Installations by Māori artists Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tuwharetoa) and Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) unravel colonial histories and express guardianship using performance and experimental moving image. The works of these artists from across the Pacific, from Aotearoa New Zealand, will be seen through and alongside the local voices, images and narratives of xʷməθkwəyʼəm (Musqueam) artist Debra Sparrow and Vancouver-born Métis/Cree/German filmmaker, Kamala Todd. What is generated by bringing together the work of artists from two distinct places and putting them in dialogue? How do we relate to land and place as both a host and a guest? Common visual languages and approaches emerge as this exhibition loosely weaves together these common threads of relationships to place.

For this exhibition the Or Gallery’s street-frontage windows are covered with a Coast Salish design, based on Debra Sparrow’s traditional weaving. In this way, the exhibition is both literally and figuratively entered through a xʷməθkwəyʼəm (Musqueam) visual storytelling process that is local to here. When Sparrow started on her path revitalizing the spinning and weaving work of her ancestors, she announced her desire to “cover Vancouver with our Coast Salish patterns.” This installation is a nod to expressing territory in traditional ways. The patterns come from the environment, though Sparrow confirms that some knowledge of the visual stories did not survive colonisation: “as weavers we can only inspire ourselves about what some of these designs mean. The zig zags might be the mountains seen in profile or perhaps the ripple effect of a canoe in the water.” Water can also be seen in the design selected for the Or windows, a reference to the specific downtown location and the changing shoreline as the settler city developed.

In her newly commissioned film, Kamala Todd works to “Indigenize urban eyes” by upholding relationships to the unceded Coast Salish territories that Vancouver is built upon. Todd’s work highlights relationships between people and place as she gives agency to a variety of leading voices from the unceded Coast Salish territories (including Debra Sparrow) who speak about their responsibilities to this place. In the film, xʷməθkwəyʼəm (Musqueam) Elder Larry Grant exemplifies the way knowledge can be stored in culture; it is as much science as it is historical fact: “In the words of our old people, we have been here forever, we have no stories that bring us overland, or across the water, or any other means of being here.” Elder Grant’s narrative exemplifies the way oral traditions and teachings have developed a rich knowledge base, formalizing relationships between people that have been in place for millennia. Kamala Todd also speaks to this sense of rootedness in her video work: “a lot of us, who are not from here, don’t have that sense of Indigenous laws that are here and a sense of our obligations and responsibilities.” Hers is a work of creative solidarity, as Todd encourages viewers to be mindful of where we are, and not overwrite Indigenous relationships to place as we become more connected to these places ourselves.

Bridget Reweti’s installation, *Irihanga* (2017), was first created in her home territory in Tauranga, very close to Te Irihanga, a Māori settlement destroyed during the Tauranga Bush Campaign of 1867. Exploiting fears that the growing movement of Māori faith called Pai Marie had encouraged rebellion, the British 12th Regiment destroyed numerous Māori settlements and cultivations across the region, from Whakamarama to Waiuku, following a punitive scorched earth policy which effectively crippled the communities. A voice-over by the artist’s grandmother recounts the events. In employing film to speak this narrative, Reweti has a chance to literally and figuratively bring to light a long-held grievance from her tribal group.

Irihanga, a word that also means “to suspend” or “to hang”, projects video onto 150 reflective trail markers, of the type that one would find in New Zealand marking a bushwalking track, to signify the 150 years that have passed since Te Irihanga was devastated by colonial forces. The geographic lexicon of the track markers also refers to the local knowledge of the terrain that provided greater safety for the local Māori from the invading troops, who were in unfamiliar territory. Projected onto the markers are close-up shots of flora endemic to that area of the Kaimai Ranges. This in turn evokes the confined proximity of fighting and resistance that took place in the bush. Reweti claims that this narrative “positions my people as the active protagonists in our own narratives.”

In *Temporal Actions for New Arrivals* (after Rākaihautū) (2012) Shannon Te Ao uses storytelling to articulate twice-over a Māori perspective on the land. The video performance explores the Ngai Tahu narrative of the arrival and subsequent actions of Rākaihautū, the first Māori explorer, on the landmass now known as New Zealand’s South Island. After making landfall, Rākaihautū carved the mountains and lakes with his kō (digging stick). Te Ao chose the filming location thought to most accurately represent this landfall: the Waimea estuary. He physically references these exploratory movements in a series of physical actions in the mud of the estuary, articulating Ngai Tahu narratives for the purposes of cultural documentation. Te Ao then layers this interpretation of a traditional story with his perspective as a Māori subject who is also a visitor with territorial and familial claims elsewhere. The work’s title interweaves Te Ao’s position as a new arrival in this space with the idea of discovery and exploration. As a manuhiri (guest), the artist was himself also “making landfall” and responding to the environment. He says, “the performance itself correlates with the history of Rākaihautū and my own [history]; it carries a duality.”

In its current context of display at the Or Gallery, place adds a layer to this work. In the specificity of downtown Vancouver, on the opposite side of Te Moana nui a Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean, this work is also a visitor, a new arrival. A local Coast Salish name refers to the estuarine history of this site: Skwachàys¹ is a Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish) language name for the territory in the vicinity of the Or Gallery’s site, at the head of the False Creek mudflats; the name refers to the spring waters that once covered the area.

Each of these artists make work not just about place, but in dialogue with specific sites and their cultural histories. As Altamirano-Jimenez and Parker write: “place is defined not merely by physical location but also by a sense of belonging to that place and by the practices that shape people’s livelihoods and social relations.”² The artists Reweti, Sparrow, Te Ao and Todd use storytelling to manifest visual sovereignty.

Stories contain – and storytelling expresses – Indigenous knowledge. These stories are not simply representative of, but constitutive of relationships between peoples and places.³ As such, they express Indigenous ways of being and offer powerful

commentary for considering a variety of relationships to our environment. In this exhibition, the artists and their contextual relations to place are activated through a variety of narrative and graphic methods that evoke context and relationships, among people within space, and between people and space. “Place can be understood as an intricate web of economic, political, social, spiritual, and environmental relations that together constitute people’s surroundings.”⁴ These artworks remind us that both our individual relationships to space, and social relations between people, can be understood as spatial.

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Bridget Reweti is an artist from Ngāti Ranginui and Ngāi Te Rangi in Tauranga Moana, Aotearoa. Her lens-based practice explores landscape perspectives and contemporary Indigenous realities. Currently based in Wellington, Reweti holds a Masters in Māori Visual Arts, (First Class Honours) through Massey University, and a PGDip in Museum and Heritage Studies from Victoria University. She is a member of Kava Club, a Wellington-based collective of Māori and Pacific artists, performers, activists and supporters that produce thematic public events that disrupt formulaic modes of representation of minorities. Reweti has a collaborative practice with Mata Aho Collective; four Māori women artists who produce large-scale textile works, commenting on the complexity of Māori lives. For *documenta 14*, (2017) Mata Aho developed *Kiko Moana*, a large textile installation with an accompanying website of taniwha (guardian monster) narratives supplied by family and friends of the collective. These narratives sit alongside *Kiko Moana* to acknowledge the many diverse ways taniwha exist, highlighting the multiplicity of Indigenous knowledge. Bridget is currently on residency at Cemeti – Institute of Art and Society, Yogyakarta, Indonesia and has been selected for the 2019 Honolulu Biennial.

Debra Sparrow was born and raised in the Musqueam Village at the mouth of the Fraser River. A xʷməθkwəyʼəm (Musqueam) weaver, artist and knowledge keeper, she is self-taught in Salish design, weaving and jewellery making. Debra is an acclaimed weaver and a leading figure in the revival of Coast Salish weaving. Her work can be seen in various museums and institutions including Vancouver Airport, The Royal BC Museum, Victoria, Vancouver International Airport, and the Museum of Anthropology at UBC where she recently participated in the exhibition *The Fabric of Our Land: Salish Weaving*. Debra designed the logo for the Canadian Men’s Hockey Team for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver, BC. She continues to work on pieces close to her heart at her home in Musqueam. It is Debra’s hope to educate others about the beauty and integrity of her people’s history through her art. Debra is guided by her ancestors in her weaving practice: “when I stand in front of my loom and I’m working and creating, I’m with them, I’m not here anymore. I’m back in time and I’m thinking of the women and they’re whispering to me and guiding me.”

Sydney, Australia born **Shannon Te Ao** (Ngāti Tūwharetoa) is currently based in Wellington, New Zealand. Working predominantly in performance and video-based practices, his recent artistic enquiry has seen him draw from a range of existing literary material including Māori lyrical sources found in whakatauki (Māori proverb) and waiata (Māori song), using these as exploratory devices in various social and political constructs. Within his artworks, he often uses language in the form of short poetic text, prose or song to offset a given site or activity. In 2016, Shannon was awarded The Walters Prize, New Zealand’s most prestigious art prize. He is currently has a solo exhibition at The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt; *my life as a tunnel*. Recent solo exhibitions include *With the sun aglow, I have my pensive moods*, curated by Bruce E. Phillips and Sorcha Carey for The Edinburgh Art Festival; *tenei ao kawa nei*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu; *two shoots that stretch far out*, Taipei Contemporary Art Centre; and *te huka o te tai*, Artspace Auckland and a project in the 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014). He currently lectures at Whiti o Rehua School of Art, Massey University, Wellington.

Kamala Todd is a grateful guest born and raised in the beautiful lands of the hən’q’əmin’əm’ and Skwxwú7mesh-speaking people (also known as Vancouver). She is a community planner, filmmaker, writer and curator with a Master’s degree in Cultural Geography (UBC). For six years she was the City of Vancouver’s Aboriginal Social Planner. Kamala’s film credits include *Indigenous Plant Diva*, *Cedar and Bamboo*, *RELAW: Living Indigenous Laws*, *Sharing our Stories: the Vancouver Dialogues Project* and many others. In 2015 she created a video series about Indigenous law for UVic’s Indigenous Law Research Unit. Kamala writes and directs for children’s television, including the Indigenous science series *Coyote’s Crazy Smart Science Show* on APTN. She is the author of “This many-storied land” in the 2016 book, *In This Together: Fifteen Stories of Truth and Reconciliation*. She recently completed a report for the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation entitled *Truth-Telling: Indigenous Perspectives on Working with Municipal Governments*.

New Zealand curator **Paula Booker** brings her training as an artist to her practice. In 2004, she founded experimental space Canary Gallery in Auckland. She has edited and written for several art publications, and was Publications Manager at Enjoy Gallery, Wellington. At the New Zealand Film Archive, Paula curated public screenings and exhibitions. In 2015, she completed a Bachelor of Media Arts Honours (First Class) at Wintec, exploring affect theory in relation to exhibition making. Since 2016, Paula has been a grateful visitor on Coast Salish Territory, in the Critical and Curatorial Studies program at UBC, recently curating projects for AHVA Gallery and Richmond Public Art. She is Curatorial Assistant at Richmond Art Gallery and on the Board of UNIT/PITT Projects.

Paula produced the film *Woven* featuring Debra Sparrow, tracing the resurgence of Coast Salish weaving, upholding traditions and relationships with the land. “As a curator of Anglo-Saxon heritage, from the South Pacific, my narrative of settling figures into erasure of Indigenous narratives of place, both at home and in my new home. This exhibition is an opportunity to bring to the fore territorial relationships and uphold sovereignty.”

¹ Skwachàys is identified on the Squamish Atlas, a Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish) language resource developed by Kwi Awt Stelmexw: <http://squamishatlas.com>. See also the xʷməθkwəyʼəm (Musqueam) place names resource with hən’q’əmin’əm’ language: <http://www.musqueam.bc.ca/applications/map/index.html>.

² Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez and Leanne Parker, “Mapping, Knowledge, and Gender in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua,” in *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women’s Understanding of Place* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2016): 89.

³ Jeanette Armstrong, “Land Speaking,” in *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017): 146; and Emilie Cameron, *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2015), 12.

⁴ Altamirano-Jimenez and Parker, 89.