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KO MURIHIKU TŌKU WHAEA – SOUTHERN MOTHER

Kyla Cresswell, Emma Kitson and Kim Lowe

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In 2021, Kyla Cresswell, Emma Kitson and Kim Lowe teamed up to produce *Ko Murihiku Tōku Whaea – Southern Mother*: a touring exhibition that stemmed from a friendship forged at the Dunedin School of Art (DSA) in the early 1990s. Opening at Pātaka Art + Museum in Porirua and subsequently touring through venues in Otago and Southland, the exhibition celebrated the artists' shared love of printmaking inspired by their teacher Marilyn Webb, who encouraged them to explore the depths of their rich ancestry and identities, to value a connection to place and to believe in their own voices.



Figure 1. Southern Mother logo.

The crucible for *Ko Murihiku Tōku Whaea* was the artists' connection to the southern region of Te Waipounamu – the whenua of the “Southern Mother” at the bottom of the South Island of Aotearoa: Emma Riha Kitson is a descendant of Kai Tahu ki Murihiku; Kyla Cresswell and Kim Lowe both grew up in Murihiku and are descendants of Southland settlers. This strong sense of affinity with Murihiku – the atmosphere and values of the place and its people – is eloquently articulated in their exhibition statement:

In the Murihiku region, there is a feeling of being lightly tethered to the wild land beneath. At the coast, there are vast skies, far reaching horizon lines, and expansive sea. Inland, landforms loom high, and mountain caps feed the bitterly cold awa. The rich resources of the area have attracted generations of people, however, the harsh climate has put off just as many. Among Southlanders exists a strong social fabric, and your whakapapa – along with the weather – is often the first topic of introduction.

In the interview below, Kyla, Emma and Kim reflect on their collaboration and how it influenced both their individual practices and their collective vision as well as the value of community engagement throughout the different iterations of the exhibition.

What were your expectations at the beginning of this project? How did it start?

Emma Kitson: It was early 2020 and I was working at Pātaka as Curator Community Exhibitions, when I asked Kim and Kyla if they wanted to submit a proposal to do an exhibition with me. I was curating, designing and installing exhibitions but I had only recently started printmaking again. I had long admired Kim and Kyla's work and it was really just an excuse to hang out with them (though mostly virtually) and talk about our art practices.



Figure 2. Kyla, Emma and Kim the Te Atamira opening.

I wanted to have a strong curatorial theme to connect our work, so I listed our connections: All of us graduated from the BFA course the first time it was offered at the DSA; all whakapapa to the south; all printmakers; and all mums.

I decided to shift the focus of motherhood to Murihiku (Southland) as the Mother of our ancestors, which aligned with the Māori world view on places being personified.

After the first exhibition at Pātaka in Porirua in 2021, we discussed the possibility of touring the exhibition, and we were especially interested in taking it back to Murihiku. It was a chance meeting with Louise Garrett at the opening of *Tauraka Toi* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery that led to the exhibition at Te Atamira in Queenstown in 2022. I uncharacteristically took the opportunity to pitch our *Southern Mother* exhibition to Louise. One of the great things about working in a collective is that it shifts the focus from individual ego to collective support. While I wouldn't be comfortable pitching a solo exhibition, I had no problem with enthusiastically expressing my admiration for my friends' artwork. After the Queenstown exhibition, Kyla took over the job of sending out enquiries and proposals to other galleries.

At the start, I just wanted to have an exhibition with my friends. So, it's fair to say *Southern Mother* exceeded all my expectations.

Kyla Cresswell: It was wonderful that Emma created this opportunity. I enjoyed the chance to show with friends and to re-examine my connection to the south. It was appealing to work with peers, share the load and learn from each other.

When the Pātaka show opened, I was still living in Wellington, but later that year moved to the tiny town of Athol in the northern part of Murihiku, before later coming to Ōtepoti Dunedin. Making some of the work for this show as it travelled was quite a cathartic way to process these big changes in my environment. My work became more of a response to returning south, the places, rivers, plants. I was naturally drawn to thinking of my formative years in the printmaking department at DSA and growing up in Murihiku.

Initially, I only anticipated the one show, but I enjoyed making the connections with the other southern galleries and in the touring it felt like we were weaving in some of our past, our time in the 90's at the DSA, and our whānau connections.

Kim Lowe: I love working collaboratively but, as a mum, the opportunities to do this had been quite limited for me up until this point. We were still in the middle of Covid restrictions and it felt important to make connections again. Also, I loved the focus on printmaking while hanging out with friends.

What do you think contributed to making this such a successful exhibition series?

Kim Lowe: The whakapapa aspect was timely and gave us an opportunity to reconnect with Murihiku Southland and Otago audiences. Having time to travel and support each other during the installations and residencies gave me a sense of connection in what is sometimes a very isolating industry. The collective has given us all more exposure and allowed each of our practices to grow. Also, it didn't matter that I was working on small etchings or large paintings, we had the space to play with scale and techniques, changing it up for each new show.

Kyla Cresswell: The public talks and events built community connections, honed thoughts on our practices, gave printmaking the stage – in particular the artists' talk at Te Atamira. Bringing works on paper to the fore felt really empowering. I agree with Kim, the whakapapa aspect and working with Kim and Emma gave a great sense of not being in it alone. The project was flexible, so works could be swapped in and out or created to respond to the site in which they were shown.

It was a privilege to work with regional institutions in terms of their infrastructure, timelines and the opportunities their audience and local support enabled. The galleries frequently had other programmes built around the show, like school holiday programmes (He Waka Tuia), music or seminar events (Eastern Southland Gallery, Te Atamira). As someone returning to live in Murihiku, then Ōtepoti, it gave me a great sense of being grounded. I loved the full circle sense of returning to the DSA for the final show.



Figure 3. Kyla's workshop at He Waka Tuia.



Figure 4. Emma talking to staff and students at DSA.



Figure 5. Kyla with DSA students.

Emma Kitson: Community engagement was a key to the success of this exhibition. By doing artists' talks and print workshops alongside the exhibitions we got to really connect with and gain insight from the local communities.

The artists' talk with Louise at Te Atamira was a huge highlight. I think all of us were overwhelmed, firstly by the amount of people who attended but also by the audience response. There were so many questions that the talk went well over an hour.

I feel the exhibitions were also balanced by our different cultural backgrounds and distinct artistic styles. With my exploration of Kāi Tahu whakapapa, Kim's Chinese heritage and Kyla's Pākehā perspective, it gave multiple ways to connect with our audience and created a well-rounded exhibition.



Figure 6. Kim's install at DSA.



Figure 7. Emma's Glowing patiki and glowing skies at Te Atamira.

What were some of the more challenging aspects of this experience for you?

What were some things that you hadn't done before?

Kyla Cresswell: Moving house and studio twice throughout the schedule was challenging! It was new for me to see the stages and work involved for a Creative New Zealand (CNZ) grant process. Even though I had taken some workshops in the past, I really valued this way of engaging with the public and it gave me confidence to continue running more with Little Prints, my portable printmaking workshop. The whole process was an education in exhibition logistics, scheduling, promotional timelines and considering how to create a different experience for each show, alongside how to reach a wider audience. Being able to discuss work, layout and next directions with each other was useful.

Emma Kitson: Applying for a CNZ grant for the Queenstown exhibition was a new challenge for me. Luckily, we had the support of Louise Garrett, who was then arts and culture coordinator at Te Atamira. It was the last funding round before CNZ changed the application process and it was incredibly stressful watching the application numbers going up each day. However, it was all worth it when we got the funding approved.

I'd had limited experience doing public workshops, therefore facilitating print workshops at the Eastern Southland Gallery was a real step up for me. The print studio and residence there are a real hidden gem that more printmakers in New Zealand should be made aware of.

Kim Lowe: I'd often been the one to drive and organise projects, so I really valued being able to sit back a bit and participate collectively. It was nice to not be in the driver's seat for a change. I'd also started teaching 0.8 in my role at Ara Institute of Canterbury, so had to juggle both commitments. I really appreciated Emma's direction and curatorial gallery knowledge and Kyla's perfectionism and technical expertise.

How has the series *Ko Murihiku Tōku Whaea – Southern Mother* influenced your artistic practice?

Emma Kitson: Exhibiting with Kim and Kyla really gave me a confidence boost and motivation to create more print works. The exhibitions in Murihiku that allowed me to travel and spend time there were invaluable to me exploring my Kāi Tahu whakapapa through my print practice.

Kyla Cresswell: I iteratively focused on the Murihiku area on my return home, with the artworks frequently responding directly to that place. The residency time at DSA made me more curious about creating and installing print-adjacent works – pieces that are multidisciplinary, grounded in print but occupying the space differently to how I currently present my work. I have learnt a lot from my co-exhibitors and enjoyed being part of a group. I've been influenced

by Emma's curiosity, which encourages a playful and experimental approach and Kim's experienced perspective, which inspires broadening horizons and seeking challenges. The series reinforced my love printmaking and the community around it, reminding me of how the world of print is relevant, exciting, vast and connected.

Kim Lowe: I loved being able to focus on different aspects and techniques of working on paper, from etching to relief and brush painting. Deadlines tend to bring out the best creative moments and expanding on the previous show was both an efficient yet expansive way of working. I think we've all learned as much from each other in this way. I also especially valued the residency at the DSA and getting back into the print studios where we'd learned our trade. The gallery and exhibition provided space and freedom for me to return to a modular way of installing larger works and this has really pushed my work in a direction that I'm still really enjoying.

Do you have any other insights or reflections?

Kim Lowe: I think the collective focus on printmaking has been very timely following the post-Covid resurgence of crafting and DIY making. Printmaking, especially, has seen a resurgence during this time: Printopia Festival of Print in Auckland; Ōtautahi Prints! Print Fair in Christchurch; the establishment of the Muka Press and Marilynn Webb print studio at the Eastern Southland Arts Centre and workshops catering to the Southern region have all helped to reinvigorate printmaking as a viable and sustainable practice. It has been wonderful being a part of this.

Kyla Cresswell: I agree that there is a real interest in creating by hand. Printmaking is fantastic in terms of the community around it. The scope of techniques, means of distribution and potential for many different visual languages is always exciting. The exhibition created so many opportunities. I hadn't expected such great community-building outcomes.

Emma Kitson: I had a very limited knowledge of the different regional galleries in Murihiku, so travelling this exhibition around was a real eye opener for me. Each of the galleries had different ways of doing things; we had to adapt to each venue's ways of working. Community engagement with the galleries is strong in these areas and the feedback from workshop participants was incredibly supportive.



Figure 8. Kyla working on Ōreti from the river series, mezzotint plate and scraping tools.

Ko Murihiku Tōku Whaea – Southern Mother touring exhibition dates:

Pātaka Art + Museum, Porirua: 29 October – 5 December 2021

Te Atamira, Queenstown: 6 August – 14 September 2022

Eastern Southland Gallery, Gore: 4 February – 26 March 2023

He Waka Tuia, Invercargill: 30 March – 5 May 2024

Dunedin School of Art Gallery, Dunedin: 27 May 27 – 14 June 2024

Acknowledgements: The artists acknowledge their teacher, Marilyn Webb, who encouraged them to explore the depths of their rich ancestry and identities, to value a connection to place and to believe in their strengths and voice. E te manawa titi, e te māreikura. Moe mai rā e tō mātou kaiako ātaahua, Marilyn Webb (1937–2021). Thank you also to Louise Garrett for her assistance in writing and editing this article.

Kyla Cresswell (b. Wellington) grew up in Invercargill. She majored in Printmaking at the Dunedin School of Art, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1996. Overseas in the early 2000's, Kyla continued to study printmaking in Japan, the UK and Canada at print workshops and with individuals. In 2006 - 2010, Kyla established and directed Solander: Works on Paper Gallery in Wellington. Founding Little Prints Printmaking in the past few years, has enabled Kyla to facilitate printmaking workshops and spread her enthusiasm for print. In May of 2023 and 2024 she taught at Printopia, the New Zealand Festival of Printmaking, Auckland. Kyla was awarded the Southland Young Contemporary of the Year in 1996, the William Hodges Fellowship in 2022 and Artist in Residence at the Dunedin School of Art in 2024. Kyla has exhibited widely in New Zealand and overseas. Kyla's work is held in the Department of Conservation Collection, Eastern Southland Gallery Collection, Hocken Collections Te Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago and the Southland Museum and Art Gallery Collection, as well as private collections in Canada, Australia, Japan and the UK.

Emma Kitson (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha) is an artist, designer, educator and curator who resides in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Her whakapapa traces its roots to Whenua Hou, the first planned bicultural settlement at the southern end of Te Waipounamu. Kitson graduated from the Dunedin School of Art in 1996. She then worked at Otago Museum, which led to employment at many museums and art galleries in New Zealand and Australia. After studying Industrial Design at Massey University in the early 2000s, she focused mainly on her design work. Becoming a mother in 2012 was the catalyst for Kitson to return to making art, with printmaking her medium of choice. Joining Paemanu Ngāi Tahu Contemporary Visual Arts collective in 2014, she has contributed to their major exhibitions at CoCA, Dunedin Public Art Gallery and the Asia Pacific Triennale 11.

Kim Lowe is an artist of NZ Chinese and Pākeha descent based in Ōtautahi Christchurch. She completed a Masters in Fine Arts (Printmaking) with distinction from the University of Canterbury in 2009 and was the recipient of the Olivia Spencer Bower award in 2019. She is currently a Senior Academic at Ara Art and Design lecturing in Professional Studies, Printmaking and Creativity. Her artwork often uses forms and elements of her hybridised ancestry and from the Te Waipounamu environment.