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UKU ARTIST IN RESIDENCE 2021: WI TAEPA

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During 2021 we were blessed with the presence of Wi Taepa (Wi Te Tau Pirika Taepa of Ngāti Whakaue, Te Arawa and Te Ati Awa) as our artist in residence at the ceramics department in the Otago Polytechnic School of Art.

Wi is a spiritual man, a kaumātua – his light shines long and bright wherever he goes. As a new acquaintance, I was constantly captivated by the cross-section of humanity that Wi attracted for a chat.

Wi joined the ceramics school in late April and stayed till July 2021; his door was always open. Many students and fellow tutors visited to sit and talk with him about art, life, techniques and ideas. His openness to conversation, his joy in meeting new people, his understanding of art theory and feminism provided fuel for many of the stimulating conversations shared. Wi's ability to relate to people and help them realise their own potential through connection, understanding and spirituality was witnessed often. He asked some important questions about "what is held in the space between the rims," in an artistic or spiritual sense, rather than relating to the physical presence of the pot.



Figure 1. Day one in Wi's studio.

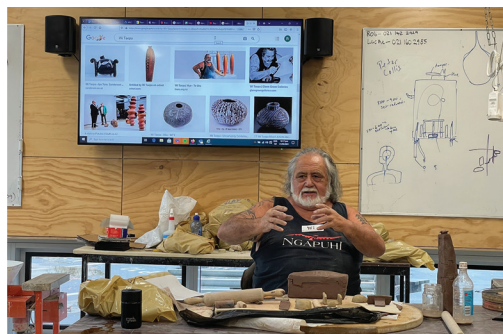


Figure 2. Wi during his tutorial on coiling and slab building.

Wi's ceramics, as with his other disciplines within his art practice, follow his philosophy built around Papatūānukū (earth mother), Ranginui (father sky), te marama (the light), te pōuri (the darkness), te rā (the day), te mutunga (the end). For him, everything is connected through the gods, especially the earth mother and the light and dark side of all that exists.

Wi utilises a hand-building approach, employing coil and slab techniques. His tools are many and varied, mostly hand-built, with some made from the organic materials to hand – for example, a tree branch could become the imprint on his clay surface. His skills at forming hand-built circular objects were imparted to us during a shared lesson showing us how the pinch and coil depth need to be precise, how this would then define the outcomes. He challenged us to make 30 circular balls using the pinch method, then cut each one with a wire to examine thickness and form on both inside and outside surfaces. This was intended to give us an understanding of form, 'seeing it' through our fingers and thumbs. In essence, to make, to break down, to study, to reform and therefore to learn.

Wi enjoys firing with naturally occurring glaze elements like black iron oxide or terra sigillata ("sealed earth"), clay suspended in water at specific gravity, a technique used in Roman times. This process requires a lot of burnishing, polishing with a stone, after dipping the pot in terra sigillata, so as to achieve a gloss-like sealed surface. We also experimented with a technique using a 44-gallon drum and gas to achieve black carbon glazing.



Figure 3. Making terra sigillata.



Figure 4. Black carbon firing drum.

While students studying for the ceramics diploma from other parts of the country were in Dunedin, we held a pit-firing session. Pit firing is an ancient and widely used technique used to fire pots. Figures 6-11 offer a photo study from the day.

The next morning when the pit was opened, it looked like something from an eruption. Where the carbon had been trapped, we saw black; where the fire was hottest, we saw white; and where copper wire, nutrients and other organic materials had been added, we saw flashes of various colours. The pieces were removed, then scrubbed several times to enable us to admire the results.

In addition to teaching, Wi was also working on a body of work for a show with Dunedin artist Simon Kaan near the end of his stay; some examples of that collaboration are shown in Figure 5. Each piece was hand-crafted and, as students, we got to watch them take form from beginning to end. The pace Wi sets reflects his slow, thoughtful work routine, juggling many pieces at once.



Figure 5. Pieces created for a joint exhibition with Simon Kaan.



Figure 6. All materials and bricks assembled ready to make a pit fire. We had gathered pallets for burning, a nutrient block from farmlands, some copper wire, sawdust and other organic materials, along with our bisque pots to place in the fire pit.



Figure 7. The students are ready to build an above-ground pit fire with the bricks. In the foreground is the in-ground pit.



Figure 8. Within the loosely made pit fire we placed our work, intertwined with wood and fine wood sawdust, and then lit the fire from the top so that it burned downwards. This technique heats the work slowly and avoids subjecting it to heat shock.



Figure 9. We kept stoking the fire; by the end of the day every piece of pallet had been burned.



Figure 10. The pits were covered late in the day to protect them against the weather and left to fully burn down and cool overnight.



Figure 11. Pit fire the next day.

Wi never stops thinking. He is alert to the world and art ideas flow freely to him, with little restriction on creativity. He is open to experience and always experimenting; his creative voice is heard within each object he forms. Wi spent time working on one piece, *Waka Huia*, from the beginning of his time with the Otago Polytechnic School of Art to the end of his stay. I asked Wi what it meant to him, and my interpretation of his answer is as follows: "*Waka Huia* holds within itself all the memories of my time at Otago Polytechnic School of Art in 2021 – all of myself, all the people, students and tutors I met, all the new friends I made. It holds inside itself all that I did from the beginning to the end of my stay."

Wi never had time to glaze-fire *Waka Huia* – it sits in a bisque state in the collection awaiting Wi's return.



Figure 12. *Waka Huia* by Wi Taepa.

Tracey-lee McNamara was born in Auckland, but now lives in Otago. Her interest in clay was first aroused by night-school classes at Otago Polytechnic. She is a mature student, now in her third year of part-time ceramics study. She finds clay a fantastic medium, acting as a catalyst for other practices such as screen printing and ceramic pencil drawing. She uses wheel and hand-building techniques. Tracey-lee is also working towards building a Japanese-inspired Minigama kiln to ash-fire some pots.

Wi Taepa was born in 1946 and grew up within a Anglican family as his father was a minister who led several congregations over the years, including the Rangiatea church in Otaki. He is a veteran of Vietnam and has worked within the prison system and with at risk youth and given back much to his community. Wi currently resides in the Porirua area. His exhibition at the "Auckland Art Gallery 'Retrospective'" was the first Auckland Gallery presentation of a major survey of a senior Māori artist". (Wi Taepa Retrospective Auckland art gallery publication). In 2022 Wi was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to Māori art, particularly ceramics.

All photographs by Tracey-lee McNamara unless otherwise stated.

