

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 25:
Fashion
October 2023

Interviews

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1025008>

EXPLORING KAUPAPA MĀORI-LED DESIGN
AND FASHION PRACTICE

Tracy Kennedy

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.
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EXPLORING KAUPAPA MĀORI-LED DESIGN AND FASHION PRACTICE

Tracy Kennedy

Revealing connections and common narratives in kaupapa Māori-led fashion and design practice: reportage from the Māori Fashion & Design Forum Keynote, International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes (IFFTI) conference, April 2023.

As a non-Māori, tangata tiriti, of Pākehā and Celtic descent, I had the privilege to interview and kōrero with a panel of indigenous Māori fashion and communication designers from Aotearoa/New Zealand as part of the 25th annual IFFTI conference, "Ara Honohono: Connecting Pathways," held in Ōtepoti/Dunedin in 2023.

Discussion was sparked by a series of questions aimed to establish individual design journeys and practices, including consideration of inspiration, motivation and sustainability from a kaupapa Māori-led design perspective. Speakers varied in their experience and practice within the contemporary fashion design arena and within their personal learning journeys of tikanga Māori (customs) and mātauranga Māori (knowledge). The discussion revealed common narratives, challenges and an emerging focus on connecting with whakapapa through a deeper understanding of te ao Māori values.

The following questions and prompts were provided to guide the discussion (a glossary is provided below for those unfamiliar with te reo Māori language and concepts):

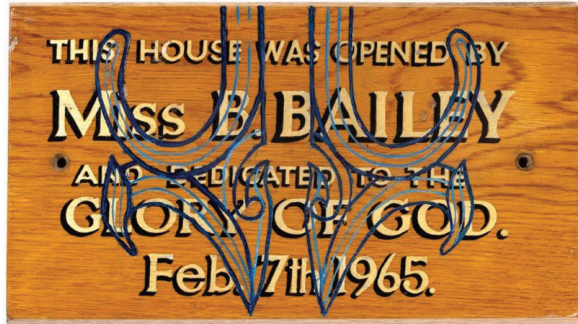
- Consider your personal design/fashion journey, your educational/life journey, and the connections to your whakapapa.
- How would you describe your design practice? Does it include tikanga Māori, kaupapa Māori-led design practices?
- Where have you come from? Have your ways of thinking changed?
- What inspires and motivates your practice within the fields of fashion, design and sustainability – is there a common narrative?

The following reportage draws on the documented transcript and discussion. The information is presented from the personal perspectives of some of the designers who attended and my own understanding of the conversation that took place within the forum.

Fi (Fiona) Clements:

Waitaha, Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, clan Gordon, craftivist, zero waste practitioner; maker of cacao + chocolate to delight the senses. Senorita AweSUMO, Kaiwhakahaara – Res.Awesome Ltd. Graduate BDes (Fashion) 2011, graduate Diploma in Sustainable Practice 2018, Otago Polytechnic/Te Pūkenga.

An experienced zero-waste systems designer; previously a zero-waste fashion practitioner and fashion activist, Clements aims to disrupt current non-sustainable thinking through collaborative and educational projects. Inspired by the need to provide reciprocity to Papatūānuku (mother earth/the land) and with the principles of zero waste as a guiding kaupapa, Clements promotes a practice-led philosophy aimed at inspiring others to consider designing waste out of the supply chain. Facing up to the challenges of reclaiming whakapapa through embracing the right to wear moko kauae (chin tattoo), and adopting te reo Māori language, Clements is making connections between mātauranga Māori and contemporary sustainable zero waste practices.



Dr Bobby Luke:

Ngāti Ruanui, Taranaki; lecturer, School of Design & Innovation, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington

Exploration of “indigenous passive resistance” and familial generational trauma from colonisation is the ‘why’ of Dr Luke’s kaupapa Māori-led design research. Through the language of matriarchal influence, nostalgia and manaaki, this “passive resistance” is “forged into a creative practice.” A discovery of personal histories and the cementing of new understanding and knowledge has led to a reclaiming of authenticity and the assimilation of mātauranga Māori within a European educational construct – an “exchange of knowledge.” Luke speaks of the challenges of Pākehā “paralysis” (Tolich, 2002) – the experience of not knowing where one belongs or how to assimilate te ao Māori by Pākehā and mixed-race Māori/Pākehā. When faced with a new ontology, world view and language, Pākehā paralysis often leads to exclusion of the Māori narrative. Asked about the role that current education plays within this exchange of knowledge, Luke responded that for any change to be meaningful, Māori need to build their own capacity first, then place themselves within traditional institutions to achieve equality.



Kaiora Tipene with her baby Ngawaiata Irirangi Taimania Tipene on the runway during the Campbell Luke show during New Zealand Fashion Week 23: Kahuria at Viaduct Events Centre on August 29, 2023 in Auckland, New Zealand. Photograph: Mackenzie Sweetnam/Getty Images for NZFW.

Katherine Inder:

Kai Tahu, graduate BDes (Fashion) 2021 and currently a BDes Honours candidate at Otago Polytechnic/Te Pūkenga.

Embracing her new journey of “I’m Māori – what does that mean?,” Inder is gaining knowledge and confidence regarding her whakapapa through community engagement, whānau (family) and marae visits. Inder is making connections to Papatūānuku through sustainable practice and discovering her whakapapa, after many years of familial ‘generational blindness’ to her Māori heritage. An understanding of the key Māori values of whanaungatanga (connection) and kaitiakitanga (guardianship and protection, usually of the land) has helped Inder focus her fashion practice and connect to her target market in more meaningful ways. Inder is currently enrolled in an Honours program where sartorial inclusivity through plus-size design and integration is foremost in her practice and study.



Sofia Heke:

Ngāti Ranginui, graduate BDes (Honours) 2022, Otago Polytechnic/Te Pūkenga

Feeling a disconnection from Māori identity, Heke has committed to “living through te ao Māori” practice. Heke embraces her Māori whakapapa alongside her Pākehā heritage, exploring the in-between space of a “hybrid identity.” Valuing the wairuatanga (spiritual) journey, Heke considers ongoing learning as her duty in order to reconnect to cultural identity. Experiencing an education dominated by Western paradigms, Heke has immersed herself in kaupapa Māori theory and traditional textile craft-based study. The learning environment offered by Te Wānanga o Aotearoa provides a space where kaupapa Māori ontology provides a different lens through which to view the world – community based, non-linear, inclusive and collaborative. This way of engaging with her cultural heritage has given Heke the confidence to pursue a more authentic educational journey.



Eva Meeuws:

Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Whare, graduate BDes (Communication) 2022, Otago Polytechnic/Te Pūkenga and professional model – ICAN Models and Talent

As a student within a supportive educational environment, reconnecting to culture and identity through storytelling, collaborative project work and encouragement to engage with kaupapa Māori practice has allowed Meeuws to gain confidence in pursuing her journey and to feel less "out of place." Exploration of visual culture through a kaupapa Māori lens has allowed Meeuws to embody a personal identity and to find her own story. Further immersion in tikanga Māori art and learning is enabling Meeuws to discover her whakapapa through creative practice – identity through exploration of visual culture. Collaboration and a developing personal cultural narrative are allowing Meeuws to find her place in Aotearoa/New Zealand as a Māori communication design practitioner and artist, with the confidence to express cultural values in a visual context.

Despite my own limited understanding of kaupapa Māori-led practice prior to this panel discussion, my impressions are that while panel members expressed a range of experiences, both personal and educational, embracing te ao Māori as a common thread has enriched their collective journeys. Integration of kaupapa Māori-led design practice beyond mere aesthetics has enabled each of these designers to develop an authentic voice and feel more confident to express and present themselves from a te ao Māori perspective. While early familial and often negative educational experiences have often led to a feeling of disconnection from identity, through exploring and embracing more meaningful exchanges, and by developing a deeper understanding of cultural responsibility, these Māori designers are building personal capability while enriching their design practices.

Tracy Kennedy (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5263-7607>) is a principal lecturer in the School of Design (Fashion & Textiles) at Otago Polytechnic/Te Pūkenga.

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GLOSSARY

Kaupapa Māori: research and evaluation done by Māori, with Māori and for Māori. It is informed by tikanga Māori, or Māori ways of doing things. "Kaupapa Māori theory is drawn from Māori ways of knowing and being and assumes the normalcy of Māori knowledge, language, and culture. It gives voice to Māori aspirations and expresses the ways in which Māori aspirations, ideas and learning practices can be framed and organised." <https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz/en/key-documents/te-whariki-2017/underpinning-theories-and-approaches/>

Kaitiakitanga:	managing and conserving the environment, a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world.
Kōrero:	to speak, tell, discuss – a conversation.
Māori:	an indigenous person of Aotearoa/New Zealand.
Manaaki:	to cherish, conserve and sustain.
Mātauranga Māori:	Māori knowledge and understanding. https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/understanding-matauranga-maori/
Moko kauae:	a traditional Māori woman's chin tattoo representing whakapapa/ancestry.
Pākehā:	name given to any non-Māori person in Aotearoa/New Zealand.
Papatūānuku:	mother earth/the land, where all life originates from.
Te ao Māori:	universal Māori guiding values.
Te Wānanga o Aotearoa:	an indigenous tertiary education provider; a Māori-led organisation grounded in Māori values.
Tikanga Māori:	Māori customs. "Māori ways of doing things as they were done in the past, as they are done in the present" (Mead, 2016).
Wairuatanga:	the spiritual connection between people and the environment.
Whakapapa:	identity, ancestry, genealogy.
Whānau:	extended family; can include friends with ties to the family group.
Whanaungatanga:	a relationship of shared experiences, collaboration, a sense of belonging.