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WHAKAPAPA, ANCESTRY AND
CONTEMPORARY FASHION PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

Expressing a great diversity of creative practice, the exhibition “Whakapapa, Ancestry and Contemporary Fashion Practice” was presented in The Conservatory of the HD Skinner Annex at the Otago Museum between 1 and 6 April 2023.

Held in conjunction with the International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes (IFFTI) conference hosted by Otago Polytechnic, the exhibition was curated by School of Design, Otago Polytechnic / Te Pūkenga Principle Lecturers Tracy Kennedy and Tania Allan Ross. The curators’ call for work responded to the theme of the conference, “Ara Honohono / Connecting Pathways,” seeking practice-led responses from staff and recent graduates of the School of Design.

Each exhibitor was asked to respond to the article “Whakapapa Back: Mixed Indigenous and Pākehā Genealogy and Heritage in *Āotearoa*/New Zealand” by Helene Diana Conner (2019). This request brought a strong narrative focus to the exhibition, while still allowing for a great range of personal narratives, experiences and modes of expression. While some participants seemed to respond with greater specificity to the text than others, the concept of whakapapa was the clear thread throughout.

Although small in scale, the tight curation of work enabled all pieces to be seen together. Each exhibitor had a single piece of work displayed, typically on a mannequin or a plinth, with one work on an easel. Displayed in a single row, these works presented well to the audience, viewable through the long glass wall of The Conservatory space even when the gallery was closed. While each piece held its autonomy, being displayed in a row meant that the exhibition could also be seen as a unified whole. Within a long and narrow space, the work was presented in a single line at relatively consistent height. This presentation style offered a flattened hierarchy, one where the voices of tangata whenua and tangata tiriti, ākonga and kaimahi, could kōrero together through objects of fashion and material culture.

THE WORK

Exhibitors Libby Callahan and Sofia Heke are recent fashion graduates of Otago Polytechnic, and each explored their Māori–Pākehā bicultural identities through the exhibition. Raised in a predominantly Pākehā environment, embracing their Māori whakapapa has been transformative and rewarding for both. Callahan fuses both heritages in her exploration of kākahu (clothing) as a way of connecting to her tūpuna, specifically her great-grandmother who was herself bicultural. Callahan draws upon both genealogies in her work, a kākahu as much informed by Victorian dress as by traditional Māori garments, in her consideration of colonisation. For Heke, her kākahu represents her immersion into kaupapa Māori and indigenous making practices, expressing her navigation of identity through a combination of raranga (traditional weaving) and loom weaving. Furthermore, Heke’s kākahu presents as a way to decentre a Western concept of fashion and the fashion system.



Figure 1. Sofia Heke and Fiona Clements work embraces their whakapapa, their Māoritanga.



Figure 2. Tania Allan Ross, work illustrates a whakapapa back to lacemakers and weavers.

Fiona Clements likewise fuses her Pākehā and Māori ancestry, her work here reflecting both her Christian upbringing and a more recent embrace of her Māoritanga. Clements uses a plaque salvaged from her former church, presenting this overlaid with her own moko kauae. The effect is an uneasy one; the Victorian script is seemingly innocuous, but for its colonial connotations, and the viewer is left to question whether this pairing represents the promise of a bicultural Aotearoa or of two cultures in perpetual conflict. A staunch critic of the cost of fashion on the environment, Clements has been a constant advocate for Papatūānuku as the provider of all we consume. On this occasion, Clements reminds us to question Western notions of fashion, the moko further complicating Western fashion notions and constructs of adornment.

For the other contributors, their work reaffirms their identity as settlers in Aotearoa New Zealand, with historical narratives communicating their own ancestry.

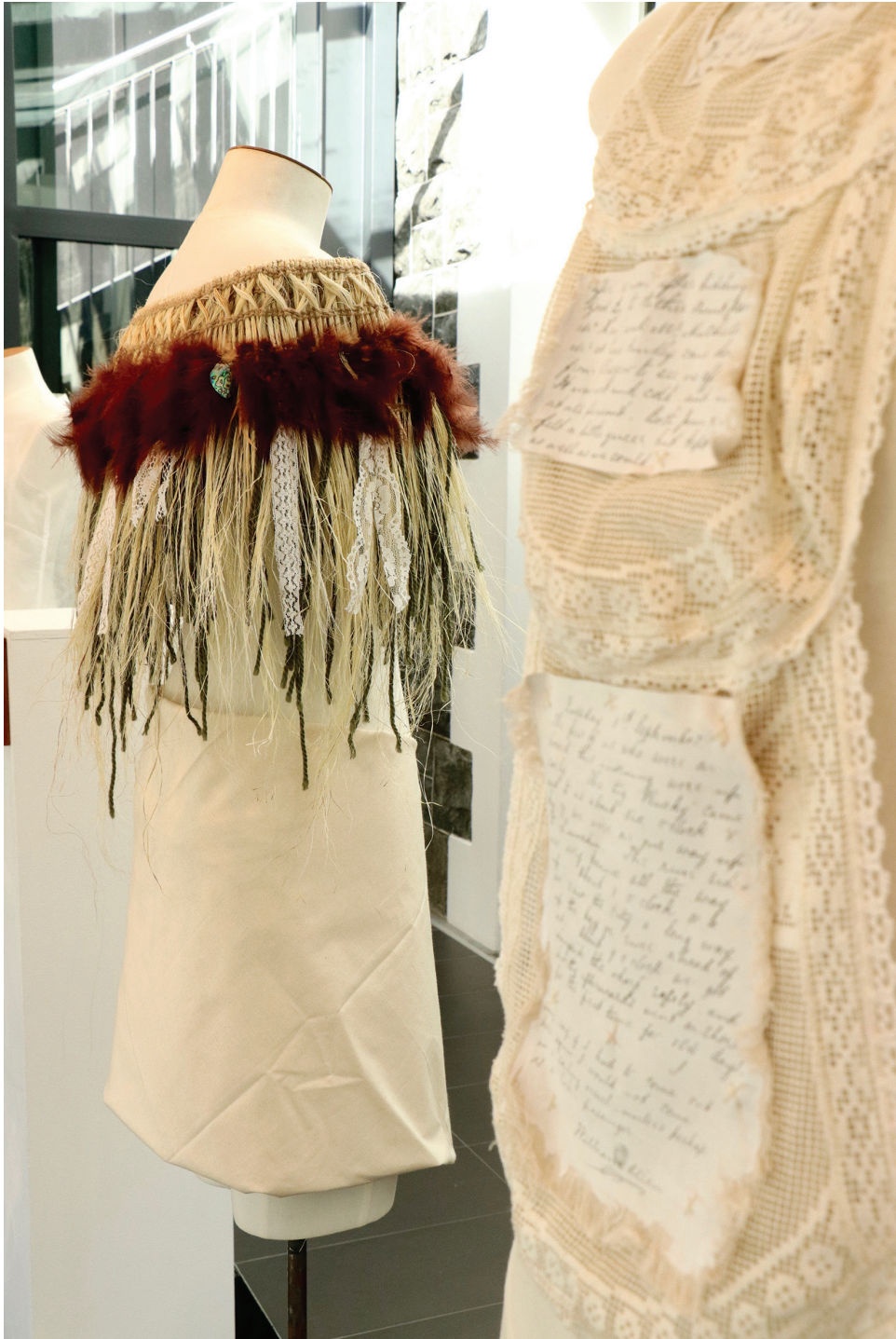
With Tania Allan Ross, this takes the form of a lace jabot tie, a piece of formal dress originating in Scotland, from where her ancestor William Allan left for New Zealand in 1885. On the tie are transfer prints replicating entries from Allan's diaries, written during his voyage. Using these objects of memory, Allan Ross mediates on the multiple linkages which literally weave through her family – the unfolding connections discovered through an aunt's genealogical tracing that includes family members who were lacemakers and weavers in the nineteenth century.

Like Allan Ross, Margo Barton also looks back to the departure and arrival of her settler ancestors and, like Allan Ross, also utilises text and printed textiles. However, where Allan Ross evokes nostalgia through the printing of handwritten letters, Barton's use of a large sans serif font communicates in an altogether different manner: Printed black on black, Barton's work confronts the audience with the woeful tale of a 15-year-old girl, convicted of theft and sent from England to Norfolk Island for seven years. Here Barton presents the text upon an apron of silk organza, a memento mori and meditation upon the object of theft by her great-great-great-great-great-grandmother over 250 years ago.



Figure 3. Fashion that speaks to individual whakapapa, Margo Barton (left), Libby Callaghan (middle), and Rekha Rana Shailaj (right).





While likewise connecting with the traditions of her settler ancestry, Stella Lange's handwoven textiles telescope these narratives through history down to memories of her own childhood and identity as tangata tiriti. For Lange, these textiles represent both permanence – a constant and easily transportable artefact for one accustomed to frequent changes of home – and whakapapa in another sense. The materials used in the creation of this shawl, this piece of square cloth, are as vital themselves as the finished objects, each having a whakapapa of its own. Presenting variously as soft, warm and comforting, in these objects Lange demonstrates the depth of connection to both her materials and her working method.



Figure 4. Stella Lange's shawl echos the domestic textiles of a nomadic home.

The concept of identities formed by diaspora also features in the work of Rekha Rana Shailaj. Born and raised in India, Rana Shailaj draws upon the sari, challenging its status as signifier of national identity to the West. Rana Shailaj reinvents the sari form, disrupting it in order to challenge colonial presumptions of fashion and identity. While still resolutely connected to her own whakapapa, in Rana Shailaj's hands the sari becomes something new, a hybridisation reflecting her own sense of identity, having moved from India to New Zealand over 25 years ago.



Figure 5. Angela Lyon's silk handsewn patchwork dress made and given to her by her grandmother.

For Natalie Smith and Angela Lyon, as with others in the exhibition, identity is an historically contingent and ever-evolving becoming. With these two exhibitors, however, history appears as fragments of memory, and Smith invokes the wisps of smoke from her grandmother's cigarettes with a print derived from a pink glass ashtray. The use of frost cloth as the base for this print, neither opaque nor transparent, itself evokes a fogginess of memory and a past recollected in a dreamlike state.

Like Smith's use of an ashtray, Lyon too draws memories and stories from an heirloom piece, here a vintage dress. Made by her grandmother, this dress is constructed of patchworked squares of vibrant colours. A gift to her own granddaughter, Lyon replicates this visual patterning in a photographic montage – a quilt of images that present as fragments of history and of memory.

In the catalogue, Lyon herself expresses the process of remembering which occurred through the making of her work. Like others in the show, there is the sense that in the making of work comes a deepening understanding of one's own self. Perhaps this is the greatest gift of this exhibition. While these works help us understand a little of the whakapapa of each exhibitor, it is the sense that we are party to the exhibitors' considering, grappling with and trying to express for themselves what whakapapa means to their own selves. Fashion practice here is a means of ongoing self-discovery.

"Whakapapa, Ancestry and Contemporary Fashion Practice" presented a diverse range of work from an eclectic mix of practitioners. It showcased the ability of fashion to express notions of identity across cultures and traditions, and how time itself can be traversed. Memory, storytelling, history and more are all bound within objects of material culture, not least in the realm of fashion. This exhibition demonstrates the universality of this truth, as well as the depth and potential of contemporary fashion practice within an art / exhibition context.

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