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## CREATIVE PRACTICE, WHENUA, AND THE SHAPE OF HOME

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# CREATIVE PRACTICE, WHENUA, AND THE SHAPE OF HOME

Nikita Rewha

## INTRODUCTION

This article outlines a creative research project that culminated in two works: *Huri* (2025), a whatū kākahu woven from sisal and jute, and *Take Off Your Shoes*, a site-based installation. Developed over a year, the project, my contribution to the kaupapa, was undertaken in response to the Migratory Patterns curatorial proposal, in which I was fortunate to have participated as one of eleven artists, ringatoi or haututū.

The reflections that follow give form to a creative practice attempting to re-centre mātauranga Māori, where materials, traditional techniques, and decisions carry layered significance. Meanings emerge through ongoing negotiation within the works and their cultural and historical contexts. In this way, the process is not subordinate to the outcome, but rather it is the space where kaupapa and creative works are enacted in a cyclical, spiralled, and non-linear temporal practice. As such, the cadence and form of the writing itself reflects and synthesizes this mode of inquiry informing the woven logic that underpins the writing that follows.

The first section locates this approach within kaupapa Māori, outlining challenges and tensions as affirmations within creative practice. The second section focuses on *Huri* (2025) and *Take Off Your Shoes* (2025), outlining their construction and exploring how the kākahu reflects the ongoing influence of whakapapa, ecological impact, kaitiakitanga, and the role of weaving in examining relationships between people and place. The third introduces the concepts re-search and weaving with-in-tention, intersecting conceptualisations that guide the creative direction in an attempt to re-centre mātauranga Māori. The final sections discuss material experimentation, drawing on studies into muka (prepared fibre from harakeke, NZ flax) and sisal, and considers how a whakapapa lens offers a framework for understanding material substitution and the entwined histories of fibre economies in Aotearoa New Zealand. Reflections on whānau, whenua, and place are woven throughout.

## CENTRING MĀTAURANGA MĀORI IN CREATIVE PRACTICE

He kōkonga whare ka kitea, he kōkonga ngākau e kore e kitea.

The corners of a house can be seen, but the corners of the heart cannot.

The project was guided by kaupapa Māori, in addition to employing a multi-modal, site-based approach. As Smith and Dean (2009) note, practice-led research emerges from within the act of making, where the materials, processes, and contexts of practice shape questions and insights. This multi-modal approach integrates site-specific inquiries and material engagement to weave knowledge through place and memory (p. 5). My creative practice engages place, people and whakapapa, having guided the creation of *Huri* (2025), a woven whatū kākahu, and *Take Off Your Shoes*, a site-based installation.

The interplay between mātauranga Māori and contemporary creative practice is dynamic and evolving, inviting continued exploration within a cyclical creative research framework. However, as Smith (2012) argues, research is never neutral; it is shaped by and entangled in relations of power. Creative work, even when framed as critical or decolonial, can remain susceptible to institutional structures, thus obscuring or diluting intent. Tuck and Yang (2012) note that academic institutions frequently absorb Indigenous knowledge without undergoing substantive transformation. In doing so, it is therefore possible to reinforce dominant Eurocentric epistemologies that fragment, contain, and ultimately diminish the status of marginalised knowledges.

Tension, as both material condition and conceptual metaphor, found form in the act of weaving tāniko, where coloured aho (horizontal threads) twist around the whenu (vertical warps). Holding the whenu in one hand and manipulating the aho with the other felt awkward at first. The initial pattern lacked cohesion because of uneven tension. The whenu became visible in places, interrupting the overall design. Over time, I came to understand that tension is not something to overcome but something essential. It holds the weave together, giving it form and strength. Too much tension can make the work rigid and unyielding. Too little causes the structure to collapse. The right balance, not easily measured then must be observed, sensed and intuited through practice.

Weaving reasoned a sameness in this regard – and remained true throughout the project – where tension carried its own logic. The presence of it, be it literal, figurative or otherwise, one might argue, did not compromise the integrity of the overall kaupapa.

I recall an older whānau member relaying the confusion she encountered the day after the exhibition opening, when we gathered for the artists' talks, waiata, and kai. A young girl, no older than ten, had apparently and earnestly insisted on observing the tikanga of the gallery: "She told me, Auntie, you're meant to take off your shoes!"

This was in reference to the shoe installation, *Please take off your shoes* (2025), which my friend and I placed at the gallery entrance upon entering. A nod, you could say, to tikanga and observation, drawn with regard to the function of visual cues that can signal boundary setting in the environment, such as the pou. There are variations of Pou and its function in te ao Māori, including its visual depictions and its ability to demarcate boundaries between territories or significant areas (Te Ara, n.d.). It is also not unlike the tikanga and kawa one might observe upon entering another's home or marae, depending, of course, on whose marae you are standing on and whose home you are entering. A small gesture that would respond subtly to the exhibition's themes on 'home' – albeit to our minds, a slightly humorous installation.

After graduating from Art School, I stopped making art – not because I stopped creating altogether, but because the domain of art, as I experienced it, had become increasingly preoccupied with transcendental claims rather than engaged with why these claims might be so important. Though if a modicum of perspective is ever called for in that belief, then one might ask whether the same cannot therefore be untrue of other disciplines, even if it might appear less declaratively so in some instances. Such absences, though, history might have argued, are not unproductively contrived. After all, even phantoms, as Didi-Huberman (2017) says, are put to work. Still, my decision was simple: I stepped away. Over time, the pursuit and curiosity once derived from artmaking had been eroded by life, reluctance, and disconnection.

My creative practice spans painting, drawing, and now weaving, amongst other things. Painting was my initial medium of choice, but titles like "painter" or "artist" have never sat comfortably. Through participating in this project, however, I've begun to feel more at ease with for names like ringatoi (artist), or even haututū. These names suggest experimentation and mischief (hau meaning wind, tutu meaning to stir, restless) and feel more aligned with a fluid and exploratory practice, closer to what being an artist once afforded. Cooper's (2012) metaphor for navigating the epistemic wilderness laconically captures the phenomenon of navigating research in the arms of the academy, where marginal knowledges that do not conform to dominant expository forms or serve utilitarian imperatives are present but routinely challenged. I have also interpreted this as a double entendre that gestures toward the dissonance surrounding professional identity within contemporary art contexts.

Kaupapa Māori research, as Cooper (2012) argues, navigates a paradoxical “epistemic wilderness,” where Mātauranga Māori is often cast aside within Western academic traditions. Traditions that frequently position Māori as producers of culture rather than of knowledge. He articulates this paradox: “Part of the task of Kaupapa Māori research, then, is to draw and theorise from ancestral legacies, to critically engage with scientific epistemologies, and at the same time use the wilderness to critically disengage from science” (p. 71). In a similar vein, Smith (1999) observes that Western disciplines, grounded in particular cultural worldviews, are often antagonistic toward other knowledge systems and lack meaningful ways to engage with them.

These insights drawn from these texts have helped to reaffirm a mode of creative inquiry in sustained engagement with tension – as method, as material, and as cultural terrain. This was apparent in the awkwardness of learning new art forms, the uncertainty of applying kaupapa Māori in creative practice, the unfolding trajectory of the project, and the discursive frictions encountered in art spaces and acts of naming.



Figure 1. Recent watercolour and pencil on watercolour paper.

## HURI (2025)

Hine-te-iwaiwa is widely recognised in many texts as the principal atua wāhine associated with Te Whare Pora. Understandings of atua wāhine connected with the oversight of these practices may vary across iwi and hapū. *Huri* was woven from natural fibres. Jute was used for the kaupapa (body), and cotton crochet for the aho (vertical wefts). It was created, in part, with the intention to cloak the exhibition space in a layer of protection, and to offer reflection on the idea of home as both textile and tangible reminder of the artform of weaving. It was also a tribute to one of my tūpuna.

The fibres for the hukahuka (tassels), made from sisal, became an experiential inquiry into material memory. Each ara (row), though slow, an act of protection and remembering. Red, brown and black coloured aho were tactile reminders of the banks surrounding my Tūrangawaewae. The feathers, both a mixture of brown, iridescent blue and green, would sometimes shimmer a teal or deep-sea green when the light caught them at an angle.

Within the tāniko, motifs such as niho taniwha (dragon's teeth) symbolise repetition, resilience, and the steadfast nature of Kaitiakitanga collectively exercised by whānau and hapū over whenua and moana in our rohe. The triangular forms of niho taniwha, meeting at a central apex, reflect watchfulness and guardianship – evoking the idea of the taniwha said to protect the bays at home and in many cases across several narratives, to protect people and place. The pātiki (flounder) motif speaks to a time when there was once an abundance of kaimoana, gradually lessening over generations due to ecological and commercial demands. Motūkokako (Piercey Island) is one of the places that was brought to memory during its initial construction.

I use karakia before commencing weaving; it is true of any art that has personal significance in my practice, whether spoken aloud or quietly conducted. By the end of the casting on in the initial construction of the whatū kākahu, it had amounted to around 530 whenu, which measured about 1.2 meters in diameter. There were 26 lines for the tāniko patterning, which represented 13,782 “twists”. Initially, the tāniko was designed using mathematical paper to visualise the pattern, then transferred and adjusted entirely using a pixel programme.

The afternoon before the gallery opened, the kaikoranga who would later open the space for visitors moved through the gallery, slowly, taking time with each piece. When she reached the cloak, I felt nervous – not unsure of the work, just aware of every detail and flaw. She leaned in slightly to examine it, then ran her fingers gently over the feathered parts. She didn't say anything, just moved on. Suffice to say, I was relieved she didn't linger too long, fearful of the errors she might have noticed in the weave.

What lingered from that experience was the disproportionate fear of being judged quickly. Though when a piece can be perceived to have failed, little actually changes. The consequences we imagine often do not materialise, turning then to a situated truth that's easy to lose sight of amid creative pressure.

## RE-SEARCH AND WEAVING WITH-IN-TENTION: EXPLORING CONCEPTS FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE

The prefix re- appears frequently across Indigenous and decolonial literature, which speaks to ideas of repetition, relation, and continuity. In this exploration, the terms re-search and weaving with-in-tention are conceptual ideas that surfaced throughout the project, the reflective writing, and the process of making. I have taken the view of Ellis (2016), who, whilst acknowledging a slippage into an essentialist view in reaffirming a māori ontological position in art, simultaneously highlights the necessity in doing so. She further observes the dynamics upon which generations of young Māori researchers may begin to return home in search of korerorero to celebrate and record such histories.



The conceptualisations of these terms within my creative practice reflect a process of working through material, memory and place. 'Re-search' within this context indicates a returning to methods, materials, and whenua over time – persistently, above all else.

In *How We Come to Know: Indigenous Re-search Methodologies*, Absolon (2022) speaks from within Anishinaabe traditional knowledge, reframing Indigenous research as non-linear and recursive, characterised by returning and being continually reshaped through relational engagement with land, people and story. Engaging with 're-search' in this way meant revisiting traditional weaving techniques such as whatū, working with fibres, and allowing material to guide understanding. Alongside this returning to whenua and to sites connected through whakapapa, where place informed both the form and the intention of the work. The terms capture a distinctive metaphorical weight in this way, and their rhythm echoed the process of weaving, turning back, rethreading, and looping through time, people, and place. As structural tools, they helped organise reflection and shaped how ideas unfolded over time. Metaphor and method worked together: one supported understanding, the other guided decisions.

One begins to notice that there is a distinct visual resonance with the aho thread, particularly in instructional diagrams that detail the practice of whatū. The space created by the hyphen allowed for a pause, where insight surfaced through repetition and engagement with material. Foucault (1972) writes that language shapes what can be known. Thus, the hyphen, between words, acts as both a conceptual stitch in the interpretation and construction of these terms, like whatū.

In my practice, I use the hyphen as a space of relation, allowing meaning to shift and unfold over time. This approach follows the rhythm of the work itself, where forms emerge through ongoing attention to material, memory, people and place.

Hoki atu ki tō maunga kia horoia koe e ngā hau a Tāwhirimātea.

Return to your mountain so that you may be cleansed by the winds of Tāwhirimātea.

This whakataukī speaks to one of the foundations of this work by grounding the project in relation to whenua. Returning to Te Tai Tokerau was a purposeful reconnection with tūrangawaewae, beyond creative practice, place-based research, or practice-led reflection. It was a reflection on movement, belonging, and on home.



Figure 2. Te Araaka – Walkway to Raukaumangamanga (Cape Brett).

## WEAVING WITH-IN-TENTION

The thematic proposal for *Migratory Patterns* prompted an exploration of what “home” means, which led to an examination of how this concept was communicated in the language used within our immediate whānau.

Tūrangaewae is a site of significance for Māori identity and a cornerstone of collective wellbeing. Relationships to places such as Tūrangaewae are contingent on both individual and collective experiences. Overlooking their spiritual, physical, social, and emotional dimensions, along with the ongoing disruptions of coloniality, risks defaulting to Western individualistic rationalism. Reifying these relationships as uncomplicated becomes necessarily remit of not just the how but the why these places are important.

We did not use the kupu tūrangaewae in earlier years. Nevertheless, the warmth and familiarity lived in how it was recalled among us. It made sense, even if only partially at the time, to return to what had been remembered as another home. A place oft spoken of but seldom returned to.

Moko Mead further echoes the importance of tūrangaewae, “The phrase ‘taku tūranga waewae’ means the place where my feet are grounded and it is loaded with emotion: with love for the land and our long historical connection with it, and because it is where our ancestors are buried and the place, we call home.” (2025, pp. 156-157). The significance of this description provides a pivotal cue that highlights the intrinsic relationship between te taiao in te ao Māori, identity and belonging.

Words like “home,” “up north,” and “Te Tai Tokerau” (Metge, 2010; Williams, 2015) carried dual meanings growing up. They described our locations in Dunedin, Christchurch, and Southland. At the same time, they also stood in for Te Rāwhiti. Their meanings sat somewhere between idiom, colloquialism, and assertion, thus forming a familial vernacular shaped by collective memory.

Reflections of home and belonging were woven into the work. This meant returning to resting places of tūpuna, familiar māunga, and the moana, stories that were not spoken of all too often. They weren’t hidden, but neither were they foregrounded. For my parents’ generation, time, distance, the cost and the routine of daily life offered minuscule opportunity for these stories to be encountered regularly. So, they were not lost to time or memory but rather lay in wait to be reencountered.

## RE-SEARCHING

A return to our Tūrangaewae in 2019, prompted by whānau illness, brought new weight to the experience of returning in 2024. These are places that epitomise connections and serve as repositories as well as living embodiments of taonga. A close friend and I, whom I had met at art school some years earlier, had grown up in a bay not far from whānau I stayed with during sporadic visits. Like me, she also returned intermittently. Travelling home together made sense both practically and meaningfully, due to our shared proximity, which later revealed a familial association. We did get lost sometimes while navigating our way around Whangaroa and the surrounding areas of Ipipiri. Eventually, we parted ways during our stay.

Travelling to or returning to places of significance, such as tūrangaewae, is explored by artists such as Raukura Turei, as seen in *Te poho o Hineahuone* (2021). This art piece uses uku from her ancestral land, allowing the material to guide the work. Her surfaces reveal layers of uku application, often implicating atua wāhine. She notes that whenua in her black onepū (black iron sand) series is an active presence, one that continues to speak beyond the artist’s intention.

Mead (2025) refers to a case study undertaken by researchers Leonie Pihama and Jenny-Lee Morgan in 2022, which uncovered insights through ancestral knowledge that were applied to the weaving of wahakura with

relevance for weaving practices today. He writes, “There is value in the forgotten parts of Mātauranga. I suggest that there is a lot more of that kind of knowledge to recover, knowledge that contains information about the ‘why’ and the knowledge we need to know” (p. 318). Mead highlights the significance of mātauranga as an interrelated knowledge system that can be evidenced in a range of ways.

These experiences of returning reflect a wider orientation in contemporary Māori art and creative research, where whenua is approached as a site of relational insight, though not an unexplored one. Contemporary artists such as Natalie Robertson, in *Tātara e maru ana: Renewing ancestral connections with the sacred rain cape of Waiapu* (2023), offer a creative research approach through photography. Her work reflects a sustained engagement with whenua, adopting a whakapapa lens that is cyclical, attentive, and grounded in return. The images trace the shifting movements of land over time and document the slow but urgent degradation of sites.

A well-known Ngāpuhi whakataukī references Rākaumangamanga as one of several pou supporting the figurative wharenui that defines territorial boundaries. Maunga are regarded as tūpuna, one of the anchoring relationships between the primordial parents Papatūānuku and Ranginui. Ngāti Kuta kaumātua describe the significance of Rākaumangamanga in the following whakataukī:

Rākaumangamanga titiro ki Rapanui – Rākaumangamanga looks to Rapanui  
Rapanui titiro ki Hawai’i – Rapanui looks to Hawai’i  
Hawai’i titiro ki Taputapuātea – Hawai’i looks to Taputapuātea  
Taputapuātea titiro ki Rākaumangamanga – Taputapuātea looks to Rākaumangamanga

A navigational whakataukī which maintains genealogical connections across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, positioning Rākaumangamanga as both a geographic and metaphysical anchor. It demarcates a pattern of movement, drawing links, not lines, in a tradition of navigational movement, and then again in an even longer link in our cultural cartography.

The loss of kaimoana was evident during this time, expressed as a form of intergenerational grief. Commercial overfishing has progressively depleted coastal waters. This is compounded by fast-track legislation that transfers marina decision-making to private interests, further eroding local expressions of kaitiakitanga. The recent spread of Caulerpa, an invasive seaweed affecting the bays around Te Rāwhiti and local areas, has intensified these pressures – not, I suspect, unlike those faced by other coastal communities and communities more widely.

Returning to our tūrangawaewae reminded me that home is not a structure, but a connection, shaped by kinship.

How might we cloak the mauri of te taiao, whānau, and whakapapa?  
How can we protect relationships with people and place?

Working with materials then became a way to reflect on these relationships through fibre, form, and experimentation. Weaving became an interlocutor, drawing memory to the surface through the traditional practice of whatū Raranga.

## SISAL

The following section outlines how sisal was introduced into the project and why its use required further consideration. Although it was not selected for its historical significance, its use brought forward associations with fibre substitution, resistance, and regulation in Aotearoa. The reflections that follow consider how whakapapa offers a way to understand these material relationships.

Although not selected with historical significance in mind, the use of sisal revealed layered associations of substitution, resistance, and material memory. Its emergence within the project shifted to a convergence that



invited further critical engagement. Fibre articulated a set of implicit questions to which whakapapa provided a framework for response. These are basic questions:

*Ko wai koe? No hea koe?*

The process involved technical engagement but also created space to reflect on the material's history, story, and relationships, and to notice how it responded in ways akin to memory. Bishop (2012) argues that much of the so-called socially engaged art evades politics by prioritising feel-good interaction over structural critique. In contrast, kaupapa Māori creative practice demands accountability to place and history – a political position enacted through material labour as much as narrative framing.

The decision not to work with harakeke in this project was deliberate because while it carries deep whakapapa, I did not feel it was appropriate to employ it for the purpose for which it was intended.

Research indicates that sisal and harakeke share similar structural and tensile properties (Feeney & Langston, 2014; Newman et al., 2007), making sisal a considered material choice for this project. Initially dry and wiry, it appeared suited to commercial-grade use. When cut, it frayed into coarse but distinctive fibres – rougher than muka, yet both resistant and responsive.

Insights drawn from the literature suggested soaking would soften the fibre to a pliability like muka, which proved partially true in my small experiment. The fibre was trimmed to arm-length segments (palm to elbow) for testing, but processing it like muka proved inconsistent, as internal cohesion often broke down due to uneven lengths of fibres after soaking and separation.



Figure 3. Work in progress on *Huri*.

Once softened slightly through komiri and partially dried, the overly saturated fibres regained some structure. The yellow tinge faded, revealing a pale, bone-white hue. These tactile interactions reoriented an analysis toward a framework for navigating the small observations.

Though it might be difficult to prove in every case, resistance signals meaning, a relation or force with weight that leaves its mark. It is not the opposite of flow, but the moment form can emerge through tension, revealing that something matters enough to push back, so it is probably a good idea to ask why?

## WHAKAPAPA ANALYSIS

This question prompted a need to reconsider my position within the project and how whakapapa shaped that process. Beyond a genealogical account, whakapapa has been used as an analytical approach. In my practice, it has helped to make sense of how to position self within the project. I returned to this way of thinking through this inquiry. Rather than prioritising objectivity or detachment, whakapapa engages the physical, metaphysical realms and spiritual realms (Durie, 2021; Graham, 2009). Whakapapa maintains these interdependent connections, protecting their integrity (Marsden, 2003; Hikuroa, 2017; Salmond, 2012), then encoding a set of responsibilities to be enacted in practice (Barlow, 1991; Mahuika, 2019).

Whakapapa offers a distinctive way of knowing in te ao Māori. As an organising principle, it informs how knowledge is held and passed on, especially in relation to ecology and community (Stewart, 2021).

This way of thinking informed how I approached material, allowing the fibre to be understood as relational, to mean influenced by the histories it carries and the experimental ways it is handled. Recognising fibre as carrying its own whakapapa and story meant tracing not only its lineage but also its entanglement within Aotearoa.

Carter (2004) offers a valuable account of material thinking as a dialogical and spatial process, where meaning emerges through gesture and engagement with place. While aspects of this resonate with the approach, it differs in that the work is situated within a framework in which material and related elements are understood to carry relational, cultural, and intergenerational significance that extends in multiple directions. This departs, to some extent, from Carter's primarily phenomenological and symbolic orientation.

Understanding the material required attention to the historical and regulatory contexts in which fibre has circulated. Literature on fibre industries in Aotearoa presents a history in which muka intersects with other natural fibres such as manila and jute within agricultural and export economies influenced by global supply and demand. In the early twentieth century, sisal became a cheaper alternative to muka due to limited sisal availability during the Spanish-American War, subsequently increasing demand for muka. Muka production had already declined as a result of yellow-leaf disease.

Sisal and muka differ significantly in origin but were brought into proximity through their functional properties and roles in fibre processing and trade. On 1 May 1901, the Department of Agriculture, supported by millers and merchants at the Port of Wellington, introduced a flax grading system for exported muka. A compulsory grading scheme using onsite graders came into effect in November that same year. These changes were recorded in the 1902 despatches included in the Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives (AJHR), as part of the Governor's official correspondence to the British Colonial Office. While not a primary focus, these legislative developments offer context for how fibre was regulated and valued within New Zealand's agricultural economy.

If histories, relationships and memory shape people, then natural materials can be understood in similar terms through this lens. Fibre, then, is responsive, affected through handling, distance and shared functional properties like muka, but it need not be understood only in that way. The use of sisal and manila in New Zealand's fibre economy during the early twentieth century reflects a layered history of substitution, industrial production and economic export.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The following section reflects on where the project currently sits and what remains. While the project has concluded, the kaupapa remains open-ended. I have come to understand that kaupapa Māori is a process rather than an endpoint and one that must remain responsive to the changes that arise (Smith, 2012). Re-search and weaving with-in-tention reflects an ongoing return to mātauranga Māori within my work, articulated through repetition, reconnection, and practice. *Huri* drew multiple threads into form through material and site-based inquiry and much more than that it became a vehicle for connection between movement and home.

I'd like to think that what had been perceived as warmth in our kōrero on home was from the ahi kā, a living connection to place kept alive by the haukāinga who remain on and around the whenua, breathing life into the fires that keep the hearth ablaze. Belonging rests not only in memory, but in continuity and community. Making offers a way to return to the warmth of those fires and to help stoke them in ways that are not always the same but can be creative and uniquely our own. I carry fewer doubts now about the role of creative spaces, and I choose names that better reflect how I work.

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