scope
Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 31

November 2026

Article

https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1031003

CULTURE, PLACE AND TIME: WEAVING THE EMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE OF PLANTS INTO AN ARTS PRACTICE

Kari Morseth

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors.
© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

Article https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1031003

CULTURE, PLACE AND TIME: WEAVING THE EMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE OF PLANTS INTO AN ARTS PRACTICE

Kari Morseth

As an artist I have always been concerned with sustainability. During the research and development of the body of work for my MFA, I more fully embraced eco-art by assigning as much significance to the materials being engaged with as to the aesthetic and conceptual basis of the final pieces.[1] The works discussed in this article are selected from the MFA exhibition, the installation *Sea Cry: A Lament*, which spoke to a concern about the ecological crisis in our oceans. While each piece can be viewed individually, ultimately they were included in a group of works intended to be seen as a whole. The works used Indigenous plant material speaking to place and culture, situating the work in Aotearoa and encompassing our human history and colonial impact. They embrace the biology of time, growing rates and rhythms that also inform such practices as harvest times and methods. Working with plants is generally labour intensive and requires patience due to the durational elements of waiting to collect enough materials, and at the right time. These elements of place and duration contributed a further expression of ideas, meaning and message.

The key to recognising the embedded knowledge of plants is acknowledging differing world views. Western culture historically positions itself as separate from and therefore looking to control ecosystems, whereas Indigenous perspectives are holistic, integrating cultural, spiritual and ecological knowledge, treating nature and people as inseparable.[2]

This article includes discussion of both the embedded knowledge of plants and their inherent material properties, in relation to a body of work that draws on techniques from traditional European weaving, raranga (Māori weaving) and universal methods of weaving, twining, plaiting, binding and knotting. The plants' material qualities influence and inform artistic practice and process. Central to working with these natural materials is a practice-based research methodology that takes shape as an ongoing creative endeavour, evolving over time through making, observing and documenting. Attention has been paid to cultural and material considerations, including use, harvesting, preparation and weaving techniques. Not only do these inform tensile qualities, tone and form, but, as living organisms, plants hold and embody archives of knowledge: biological, geographic, cultural and historical. The materials are not inert and will change as time passes. Exploring the materiality of plants and methods of working with them constitutes a collaboration; reflecting the depth of meaning they contain is an essential part of the practice-based research, as both method and methodology evolve through making.[3]



Figure 1. Kari Morseth, Detail of *Ghost/Net* showing top whiri blackened by mold.



Figure 2. Kari Morseth, coloured ties used to mark rope as it was created.

HARAKEKE *(PHORMIUM TENAX)*

In Te Ao Māori, harakeke's importance can be demonstrated in its representation of whānau. On an individual fan of harakeke, the centre shoot, the rito, is the baby and the two outer leaves, the awhi rito, are the parents, protecting the new growth. These three rau are never cut, to safeguard the plant's survival. The outer leaves symbolise tūpuna and the wider family unit; while these may be harvested, only what is needed is taken, ensuring a sustainable practice and protection of the plant for future use. The process of gathering and making is underpinned by tikanga that respects and upholds the cultural values embedded within customary Māori weaving. Tikanga carries both practical and spiritual reasons for how things are done.[4]

I was fortunate to learn raranga in a kaupapa Māori environment, which laid the foundation for respect and adherence to tikanga. My research, working with Indigenous weaving materials, grounds, informs and deepens the meaning of my work, such that it carries symbolic weight and speaks to identity and place and draws on history and customary practices that are connected to and sit alongside contemporary environmental concerns. I endeavour to work with plants—primarily but not exclusively harakeke—by way of thoughtful research and care; they are co-creators in my work. In the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, harakeke absorbs interwoven influences pertaining to historical uses, pre and post, colonial impact: weaving a kete, clothing, shelter, transport and medicine, regeneration through durational and environmental protection and knowledge. Contemporary weaving practices draw on techniques that extend beyond the individual maker to generations of shared knowledge of practices, materials and techniques. The plants become a means of cultural transmission; learning how to work with them means passing on principles, values, customs and language.

As a Tangata Tiriti artist, Indigenous plants provide my work with a clear reference to colonisation. Research into local and national histories of the flax milling and rope making industries led to the project *Rope/Walk* (2024 ongoing). Though the research remained an important part of my Master's work, it developed into a standalone participatory art project. A universal two, ply twining technique was used to create a harakeke rope the length of the exterior of the historic rope walk building at Bathgate Park in South Dunedin. This building is thought to be the only surviving rope walk in New Zealand. It was first constructed in 1878 and then replaced in 1920, manufacturing rope, twine and cordage for both the New Zealand and export markets. Historically and architecturally significant, the building is approximately 300 metres on its exterior length but only four metres wide.

Harakeke brings with it the history of colonial trade narratives and commodification of this culturally important plant. At the time of Cook's arrival, a single ship required 30 to 50 kilometres of rope, which needed to be replaced every two years. The recognition of harakeke as a fibre for rope making led to the swift rise of an industry, with little regard to tikanga; it simply became a commercial product. At the height of production in the early twentieth century, 240 flax mills were established across the country. The rise of the flax milling industry in Aotearoa was swift and significant, becoming one of the largest export earners at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.[5]

Rope/Walk involved workshops with community groups and the public, in collaboration with the Dunedin Dream Brokerage. Dunedin Dream Brokerage works with property owners, artists and community groups to facilitate the temporary occupation of vacant space in Dunedin city for creative projects, supporting art and public engagement projects that focus on the urban community.



Figure 3. Kari Morseth, rope and kete for carryng materials as exhibited.



Figure 3A (Detail). Kari Morseth, kete for carryng materials as exhibited.



Figure 4 (Above). Kari Morseth, rope (detail) as exhibited.

Figure 5 (Below). Rope Walk Building Bathgate Park. Photograph: Kim Thomas.





Figure 7. Pīkao plant.

The *Rope/Walk* sessions occurred on site, outside the rope walk building in Bathgate Park, as well as during a five-day occupation of a central city shopfront. Participants were invited to assist in creating the rope, and alongside the making process, stories, questions and discoveries were shared. Making the rope was a slow, deliberate process, which became tied to the meaning of the work; taking time to be with one another, sharing skills and anecdotes and conversations about sustainability and ecology all contributed to the layers of meaning bound up in the final work as a manifestation of time, duration and co-creation.[6] While physical participation gave people an active role in the creative process, the making became a catalyst for histories and memories that formed 'critical dialogues,' connecting participants to the material they were working with.[7] My Master's dissertation adopted an autoethnographic research methodology to capture my recollections of and reflections on the various workshops, recorded either during breaks or shortly after each session. I recorded the place, time and length of rope alongside stories shared: *Bathgate Park—4 hours, 18 metres*. The rope created during the *Rope/Walk* project is itself marked with the time it took to make it. At the end of every session, a white muka tie was secured and the amount of rope was measured. At 30 metres, a coil was created and marked with a red tie. Duration and time become readable in the work.



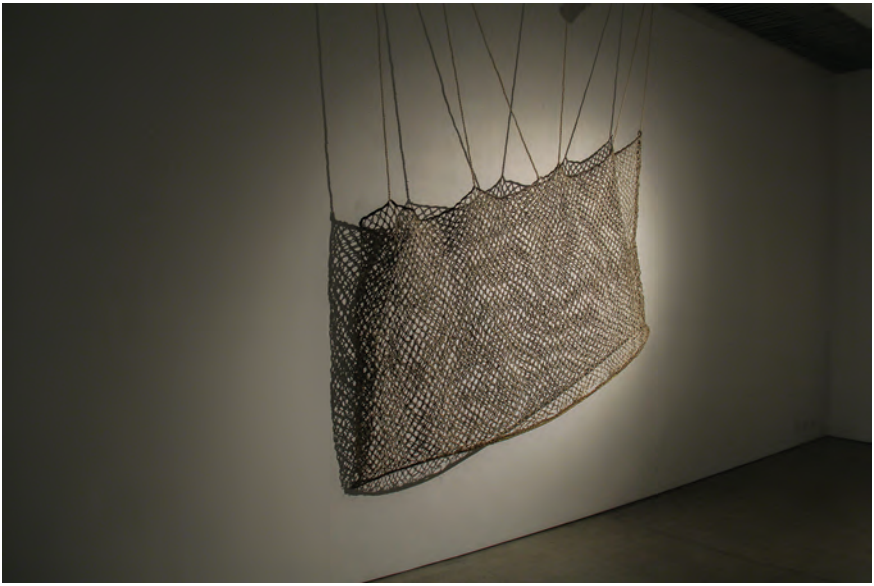


Figure 6. Kari Morseth, *Ghost/Net* as exhibited.

Ghost/Net (2023–2025) draws on cultural narratives from my Norse ancestry and Aotearoa as my place of birth to add a personal resonance to an overt socio-political commentary. The devastation of ghost fishing is a result of the rise in the use of synthetic fishing nets and ropes. Abandoned fishing gear is left to drift in the ocean and results in the ongoing 'capture' of marine life as well as being a major source of plastic pollution.

In Norse traditions, the deity Ràn captures sailors who fall overboard, usually in storms, dragging them to the depths in her net. In Māori astronomy, Taramainuku collects in his net the souls of those who have died that day, carrying them on his waka until the end of the lunar year, at which time souls are transported to the heavens.[8] Through these cultural influences, *Ghost/Net* symbolises both ruin and salvation. The 'ruin' is the rise of ghost fishing and the destruction that is caused by the synthetic fishing gear. The 'salvation' is recognising that Indigenous knowledge paired with contemporary technology might go some way to alleviating and repairing this environmental impact.

Woven with harakeke using kupenga, an open net weave, *Ghost/Net* was hung outside for two years to demonstrate the effects of weathering and the resilience of the fibre; time and the environment were my co-creators in this instance. While small areas of weakness and breakage have appeared, overall the harakeke has maintained its integrity.

The University of Auckland recently announced that harakeke is being tested in the lab as a water filter.[9] It has an extraordinary ability to remove 'forever chemicals,' outperforming other water treatment methods while being cost effective, sustainable and more environmentally friendly. Researcher Shailja Data notes the strength of the plant's fibre.[10] Given that, as discussed previously, historically ships required up to 50 kilometres of rope, while a modern tug boat may replace its synthetic rope at the two to three year mark, though sometimes as little as one to two years, it is worth considering whether a return to natural fibres is necessary, in some if not all instances.

PĪKAO *(FICINIA SPIRALIS)*

Pīkao is a highly valued weaving material that dries to a natural vibrant yellow and is often described as 'Indigenous gold.' Holding significant cultural and ancestral meaning with distinctive cultural narratives associated with it, it is critically endangered.[11] Pīkao grows in the contested space between the sea and the land.[12] Maureen Lander illustrated this with her pīkao crown, *Last Great Land Grab* (2006), in direct response to the then Labour Government's passing of the Foreshore and Seabed Act 2004.

The diptych, *The Sun Compass discards its Shadow*, uses pīkao's embedded knowledge and material properties to layer metaphor and symbolism. In the far north of the northern hemisphere, the North Star, essential for traditional celestial navigation, is not visible for many summer months. It is believed that the Vikings developed the sun compass as a way of defining direction during the 'midnight sun,' allowing for not only north, south but also east, west calculations.[13] As one half of the diptych, *Sun Compass* is a porowhita created with harakeke, pīkao and kiekie (*Freycinetia banksia*)—all traditional and highly valued weaving materials. The work also references a different kind of value associated with the historical narrative of sailors who would wear gold earrings to the value of the cost of returning their body to their home port for burial.[14] Harakeke forms the central circular foundation while the lines of kiekie, valued for its natural whiteness, reference the traditional navigational stick charts of Micronesia.

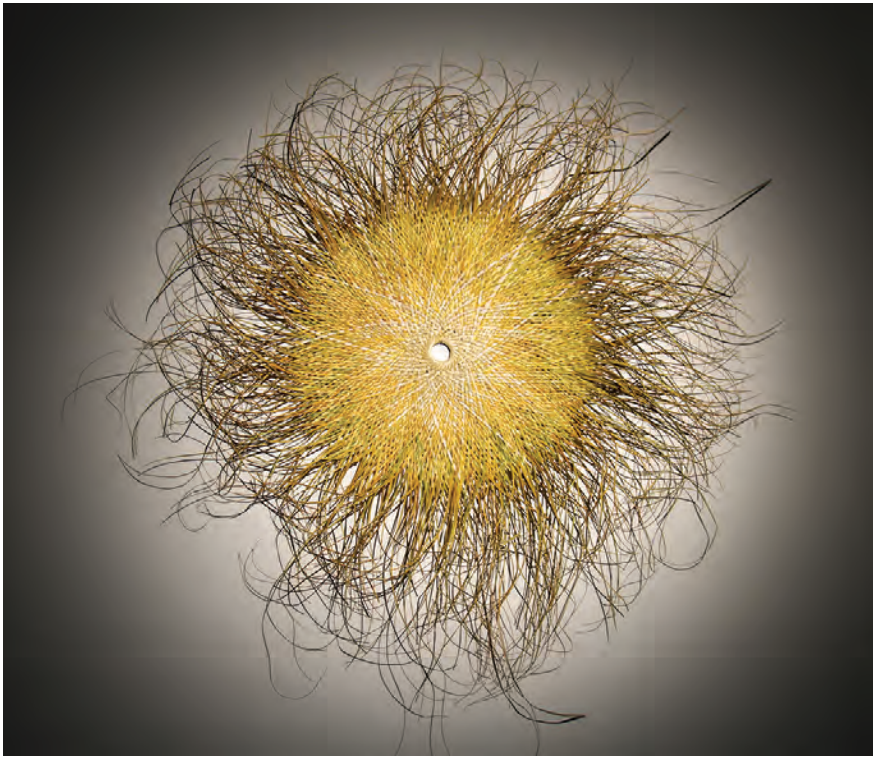


Figure 8. Kari Morseth, *Sun Compass*, as exhibited.

The golden *Sun Compass* represents hope and guidance for discarding a culture of commercial corporate greed, relearning from the past and respecting acquired knowledge. *Shadow* sits in opposition—a dark beauty—constructed with commercially dyed harakeke. The labour, intensive practice is palatable. While weaving *Shadow*, with its ever, increasing circumference, I became interested in answering the question I am often asked, "how long did that take?" Just as biological and historical knowledge is recorded in the rings of a tree, so too did it seem I could record the growth of this round.[15] A notebook sat next to me, arrival and departure times recorded; the start of a round marked and time dutifully added up when completed: *4hours 20min, increase to, 1m 20cm*. Environment, energy and the needs of the weaving changed the time each 'round' might take. Alongside engaging with the growth of this round, the staining of this valued fibre with a modern dye symbolised and become synonymous with commercialisation, capitalism, commodification and colonisation.



Figure 9. Kari Morseth, Beginning *Shadow*, starting cirle of 26 whenu (strips).

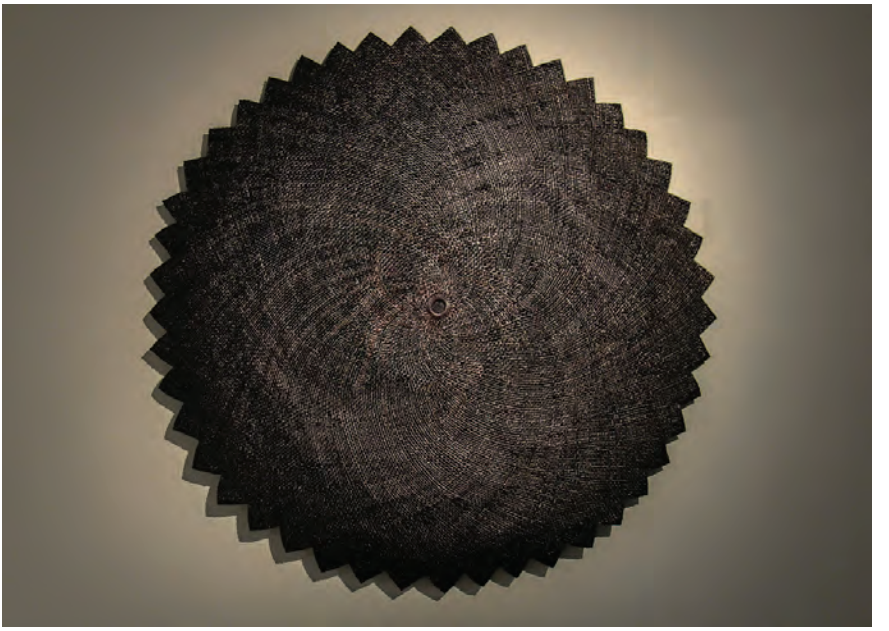


Figure 10. Kari Morseth, *Shadow*, as exhibited with finishing whenu of 1080.

NEINEI *(DRACOPHYLLUM TRAVERSII)*

Working with organic fibres offers a way of entering into a larger ecology of time. The process is slowed and informed by cycles of growing and processing, collection and preparation, which become integral to the meaning of the work. Australian artist and writer Paul Carter defines creative research as a discipline in which "thinking is done through making" and knowledge is generated through the physical manipulation of materials and artistic practice.[16] In my work, method and methodology become intertwined with the inherent qualities and meanings of plant materials. This can be seen in the process I followed while developing a piece for the 2026 Art + Science project, themed 'Time', working in collaboration with geologist Simon Cox. It was through practice-based research that I discovered and incorporated a material I had not previously worked with. My research turned to the Blood Falls, emerging from Taylor Glacier in Antarctica's McMurdo Dry Valleys. This phenomenon is iron rich water, so salty it cannot freeze, containing ancient bacteria which have learned to live without oxygen or light. They produce an iron rich by-product in the form of $Fe3^{+}$, and as this water comes into contact with the air, it rusts; the red, orange water spills into Lake Bonney.[17] Not only is this visually arresting, but the emerging rust, red water is between 1.5 and 2 million years old.

Research into materials and construction began with muka, providing the white of the glacier. Extracting this silky white fibre from harakeke links to a durational practice, a slow craft, which holds a customary history of practice and use. In the process of 'thinking through making,' I initially explored creating cotton linter beads, dyed red, playing on blood and its connection to family lineage. The work started to become an adornment, exploring the tradition of passing treasures down through generations. Through the process of making, and the challenges associated with techniques and construction, I questioned my material



Figure 11. Neinei plant.

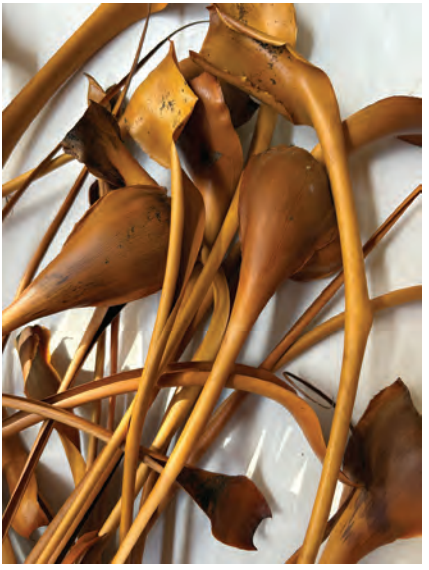


Figure 12. Neinei leaves collected for weaving.

choices and how the work was developing. Research, naturally for me, turned to plants: How this could deepen the metaphor? What plant might provide the colour and what knowledge did it hold? Southern mountain neinei revealed itself to contain a natural red brown colour and embedded knowledge, aligning perfectly with the project. It is the longest living of our Indigenous small trees, with individuals recorded at between 500 and 600 years old. Alongside researching this native plant, I further delved into weaving, harvesting and preparation of the material. In customary weaving, neinei has been primarily included in the creation of heike (rain capes). While my finished work aims to echo a visual response to Blood Falls, it is the making and materials themselves that become the critical metaphor for time.



Figure 13. Muka prepared with braiding and knotting beginning to be explored.

In working with plant materials through a weaving practice, I acknowledge them as active collaborators, gathering and encompassing history—geography of place, biology of time, cultural knowledge and significance. As living materials, they continue to grow and evolve; they are archives of embedded knowledge. In engaging with materials that by their nature lead to a durational and labour, intensive practice, I place value on quality over quantity and sustainability over mass production.[18] This engagement challenges the Western notion of nature as a resource to be exploited, instead embracing an Indigenous view of the interconnectedness of humans as part of the ecosystem. In weaving practices, the past is inseparable from and part of the present, preserving cultural knowledge, connection to the environment and materials and techniques passed on through time.

Kari Morseth is primarily interested in sculptural installation working with plant materials and using traditional techniques. History, cultural narratives and human impact on the environment are recurrent themes. Kari holds a Certificate in Toi Paematua – Raranga from Te Wānanga O Aotearoa and a Master of Fine Art with Distinction, from the Dunedin School of Art.



Figure 14. Kari Morseth, *Blood Falls,* 2026, as exhibited.

1 Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (University of California Press. 2012)

2 Jay F. Martin et al., "Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): Ideas, Inspiration, and Designs for Ecological Engineering," *Ecological Engineering* 36, no. 7 (July 2010): 839–849. And Herman Michell, Brian Hardlotte and Robin McLeod, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of the Woodlands Cree and Denesuline Peoples of Northern Saskatchewan, Canada: The land as Teacher and Healer," *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing: Te Mauri—Pimatisiwin* 6, no. 1 (February 2021): 26–36.

3 David Gauntlett, "What is practice-based research?" (26 March 2021), https://davidgauntlett.com/research-practice/what-is-practice-based-research/.

4 "Harakeke," accessed 20 August 2026, https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/harakeke/.

5 Lloyd Esler, *Flax and the Flax Industry in the South* (Lloyd Esler, 2012).

6 Monique Redmond and Emily O'Hara, "Crafting Time: The Relationship Between the Hand, the Tools and the Made," conference presentation, Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Art Educators, 2023, accessed 20 August 2026, https://anzaae.nz/collections/tag/conference-2023/.

7 Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004).

8 Rangi Matamua, "The Setting of Matariki," accessed 25 November 2025, matariki.twoa.ac.nz/the-setting-of-matariki.

9 "Native Plant Shows Promise for Tackling 'Forever Chemicals,'" University of Auckland, 8 March 2026, https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2026/03/09/native-plant-used-to-tackle--forever-chemicals--in-water.html.

10 Ibid.

11 Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai, "Golden Sand Sedge/Pīkao/Pīngao," accessed 25 April 2026, https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/native-plants/golden-sand-sedge-pikao-pingao/.

12 Nigel Borell, ed, *Toi Tū Toi Ora: Contemporary Māori Art* (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2020).

13 Franck Pettersen, "The Viking Sun Compass," *Planetarian* 22, no. 1 (March 1993), https://www.ips-planetarium.org/page/a_pettersen1993.

14 This is only one of many narratives attributed to sailors wearing gold earrings. One claim is that it was required by Scottish Law. Peter Benchley and Judith Gradwohl, *Ocean Planet: Writings and Images of the Sea* (Abrams, 1995).

15 Kevin Smith, "An Organismal View of Dendrochronology," *Dendrochronologia* 26, no. 3 (December 2008), 185-193.

16 Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne University Press, 2004).

17 Sarah Everts, "Blood Falls Explained," *Chemical and Engineering News*, 20 April 2009. https://cen.acs.org/articles/87/i16/Blood-Falls-Explained.html#:~:text=Ferric%20Flow&text=New%20research%20reveals%20that%20ancient,might%20support%20life%2C%20Amend%20adds.

18 Charlotte Jansen, "6 Rising Contemporary Artists Using Traditional Craft Techniques," 9 June 2021, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-6-rising-contemporary-artists-traditional-craft-techniques.