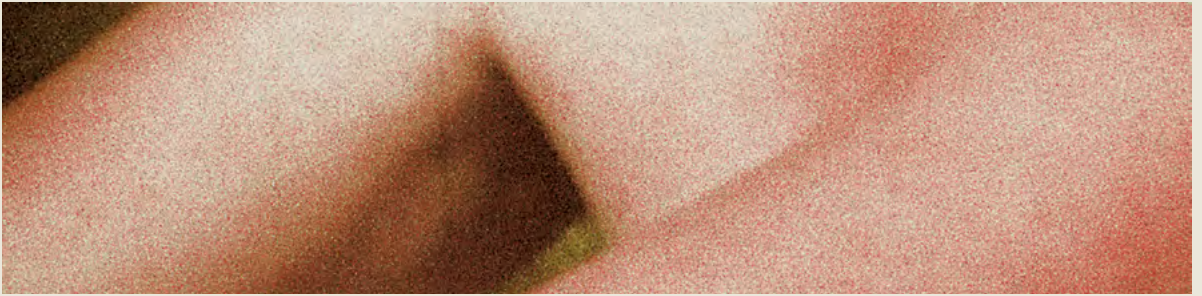


SIGHT

Kirsty Baker



Women and Art in Aotearoa



LINES

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With contributions from Chloe Cull, Ngarino Ellis,
Ioana Gordon-Smith, Rangimarie Sophie Jolley,
Lana Lopesi, Hanahiva Rose, Huhana Smith
and Megan Tamati-Quennell

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Incised, painted and perfumed skin, short hair, and ornaments in the ear and on the neck were a vision of mana wāhine. In te ao Māori, rākai and the practice of dressing the body have always held an important role within complex political, economic and cultural landscapes. This essay begins with an exploration into oral histories written by and for women which comment on rākai, and their role and significance in relation to mana wāhine. These stories are embedded in mōteatea and waiata, as well as whakataukī and land names. Practices long since set aside are revealed, shedding new light on the role of women in communities. These kaupapa – ideas – were reinforced in specific forms such as the hei tiki, and in practices including tangi haehae – incision of the skin during mourning.¹

Yet through colonisation, many of these concepts and values were forgotten or deliberately set aside and as most wāhine took on new styles of beauty: the skin was covered, hair was grown, and more time was spent conforming to incoming European ideals. Nevertheless, some practices were so value-based that wāhine continued to treat the skin, hair and body as they always had: moko kauae was retained in some areas, wāhine tohunga-tā-moko – women moko practitioners – became more prominent, and in some cases introduced forms of knowledge – writing – were transferred from paper to the skin. Rākai in this way were clear assertions of mana wāhine. The kōrero in this essay promotes art history as a crucial tool through which to interpret these ideas, in particular using the lens of mana, tapu and whakapapa, and drawing on the method of visual analysis. He toi rākai, he mana wāhine, he mana tāngata – by the arts of adornment, there is the prestige of women and all people.

Augustus Earle, *Amoko, Eana, Hepee*, 1838, from the volume *Sketches Illustrative of the Native Inhabitants and Islands of New Zealand* (published for the New Zealand Association by Robin Martin & Co., 1838), hand-coloured lithograph, 260 × 395 mm. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, PUBL-0015-010-a.



Rita Angus is undoubtedly one of New Zealand's best known and loved artists. Her paintings and drawings have been widely exhibited, collected, reproduced and written about. Her high-profile reputation began to take shape at the height of cultural nationalism, in the latter half of the twentieth century, her landscape paintings in particular drawing critical attention. Born in 1908, Angus belonged to one of the earliest generations of artists who did not need to travel overseas in the pursuit of serious artistic development. As with Hodgkins, Angus's talent for art was noted early in life and fostered by supportive parents. She secured a place at Canterbury College School of Art, moving to Ōtautahi Christchurch in 1927.¹ With the formation of The Group – with whom Angus exhibited from 1932 – the city's art scene was energised by a generation of artists with a more contemporary outlook than the academic conventionalism which had been dominant for so long. For Angus, and others of her generation, the emergence of an artistic milieu shaped by an engagement with modernity was central to her development.

Despite Angus's wide-ranging approach to subject matter, it was her landscape paintings that drew the bulk of critical attention during her life. *Central Otago*, painted in 1940, is typical of these in having a visual immediacy that belies the complexity of its composition. The painting appears at first to depict the landscape in graphically simplified forms, but its densely interlocking linearity pulls the viewer's eye onwards.

Rita Angus, *Central Otago*, 1940, oil on board, 457 × 533 mm. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 1984/57, gift of Mrs Joyce Milligan in memory of Dr R. R. D. Milligan, 1984.



'We were making art ...'

Gregory Riethmaier, New Elam School of Fine Arts, 58 Wynyard Street, Auckland. Art students at work [image of Miss Elizabeth Mountain], 1963. Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, National Publicity Studios Archive, R26329883.

Now, with a heightened awareness of societal discrimination, inequality, racism and sexism, we can only look back from a contemporary perspective shaped by these priorities and concerns. However, the voices and stories of these women provide access to an alternative lens through which to consider the past. In the following excerpts from my conversations with Elizabeth and Mere, we hear two women looking back with gratitude, with eyes wide open to the opportunities they enjoyed, the success they had, and the people who supported them.

Elizabeth Ellis (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou) was born Elizabeth Mountain in Kawakawa in 1945. Her parents were Emere Kaa and Walter Mountain. *'I think if I had a mentor it would be my mother, actually, and my father, but mainly my mother because of her background in education and the good of the community. They were my role models and the people I looked up to.'* When discussing her role models within the arts, she highlights the significance of Arnold Manaaki Wilson and Selwyn Wilson, both founding figures within Māori modernism and Elam graduates themselves:

Elizabeth

The idea of going to art school really came from Arnold because he was an [alumnus of Elam]. It was a close small community in Kawakawa – my mother knew Arnold and Selwyn. Arnold was teaching at Bay of Islands College in Kawakawa. He raised the subject of some of us going to Elam. He talked to my parents and they agreed that would be good. My mother contacted Selwyn, who lived close by Kawakawa in Taumarere, and he came after school or the weekends and he tutored me in painting. I was getting day-to-day teaching from Arnold and tutoring after school from Selwyn.

Mere Lodge (Ngāti Porou) was born Mere Harrison in 1944 in Ruatōria to Raniera Harrison and Erana Nika Korimete. She was one of thirteen children born to the couple.

Mere

It was a domestic farm, and we had everything. My father and his friends built our house, room by room, and Mum and Dad both grew fruit trees and paddocks of vegetables and we had a couple of cows to milk every morning and we had fowl – we had hens and ducks. You name it, we had it. My father was quite interested in agriculture. He grew wonderful produce. Even grapes – grapes trailing around the house, and we weren't even allowed to touch them!

The arts were significant in Mere's life from an early age. *'Growing up in Ngāti Porou, painting pictures was the only way to write in the Māori language. At my primary school – Manutahi – the teachers did not allow me to speak Māori.'*

All of Mere's siblings drew and painted, but particularly influential to Mere were the paintings and illustrations of her older sister, Kāterina Mataira, in *Te Ao Hou* magazine.² For her final year of secondary school, Mere moved to Northland to live with Kāterina. There she completed her final year at Northland College under the tutelage of Selwyn Wilson, achieving the





Ngahuia Harrison, *Tauranga Waka*, 2021, archival colour print, 1180 × 1502 mm. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to picturing residential development, *Coastal Cannibals* looks at much of the heavy industry that has altered the Whangārei harbour, including Marsden Point Oil Refinery, Golden Bay Cement, and the ruins of the Reotahi Freezing Works. In the *First Cinema Camera* series Harrison shifts to a mobile mode of image-making, travelling on the water to picture industrial sites that have become a part of the harbour landscape. This perspectival shift is significant. Acting in tandem with the work's title, it serves as a direct engagement with Barclay's theories around Fourth Cinema.

Barclay's work has exerted a strong influence on film-makers (among them Merata Mita and Lisa Reihana), and also on artists, including Harrison, who work with still photography. The format of the *First Cinema Camera* titles refer directly to First Cinema – the dominant perspective of Hollywood, or Western film-making. As Mita has written of early film-making in Aotearoa, 'it became obvious that the camera was an instrument held by alien hands – a Pakeha instrument, and in the light of past and present history another reason for mistrust'.⁸ Positioned at sea, surveying the land through the frame of her camera's lens, Harrison occupies the position of the First Cinema camera, but she claims it as her own. Harrison is not an outsider to the land she pictures, nor the water her camera hovers above, though she is excluded from economic ownership of the industry that it now supports. By blurring the oppositional nature of Barclay's First and Fourth Cinema, these photographs acknowledge the tension inherent in Māori engagement with both the harbour area and the employment that its industry supports.

Displayed as a diptych, *First Cinema Camera 3* and *First Cinema Camera 4* (see pp. 348 and 349) depict the vast dock structure at the Marsden Point Oil Refinery where imported crude oil was unloaded before being processed (the refinery ceased operating in 2022). *First Cinema Camera 4* has been inverted in post-production, flipped horizontally so that the dock structure spans the entire breadth of the photographic pair. Concrete pillars, planted deep into the seabed, rise out of the water. A sequence of high-sided steel gangplanks connects these concrete pillars, forming massive arches. Harrison's vantage point on the water is low, the boat she travels in infinitesimally small in comparison to the tankers the dock was designed to greet. As her camera tilts upwards to capture the scene, it elongates the structure, which looms up towards the sky while spanning the horizontal stretch of the images. A strip of sand can be glimpsed through the rectangular arches, dotted with an occasional tree, marking a narrow coastal band around the point. The land behind it is dominated by a mass of oil storage tanks, a sprawling industrial landscape now deeply embedded in the harbour's geography. At once sculptural and dystopian, the diptych presents a landscape that merges sites of industrial production and customary practice. *First Cinema Camera 3* and *4* gesture towards the far-reaching economic and socio-political consequences of this entanglement. By inverting the images and stitching them together, Harrison imbues the scene with an uncanny and imperfect symmetry, picturing a site that is a source of both prosperity and degradation.



Mataaho Collective, *Tikawe* (detail), 2022, harakeke, cotton, zinc-coated metal, dimensions variable. Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 2022/165.1-80, commissioned by Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, purchased 2022 by the W. A. Sutton Trust.

Conclusion: Knowledge and care

Numerous thematic threads run through the artistic practices gathered in this book. When I began the process of writing, I held lightly to three central areas of exploration. The first was a consideration of the way that women artists have interrogated their relationship with land and place. The second, the term woman itself, considering the ways that artists in this book have pushed against gendered limitations, questioning or rejecting the narrow, socially constructed parameters that womanhood and binary understandings of gender have often implied. The third thematic thread was that of speaking back, tracing some of the ways that artists have used their practice to speak back to the exclusions and limits of art history and arts institutions. These strands emerged and receded, but they were almost ever-present. As I wrote, another thematic point of connection emerged, echoing from artist to artist to become increasingly persistent. The more I wrote, and the more that I spoke with the writers and artists who have contributed so generously to this book, the more frequently I began to consider the ways that art-making can play a role in the ways that we both care for and transmit knowledge.

The transmission of knowledge happens in multitudinous ways – we learn by watching, by reading, by listening, by being taught and, also, by questioning the things that we are taught. In straightforward terms, a remarkable number of the artists included in this book have worked directly in the field of teaching. In part, this speaks to the difficulty of forging a full-time, financially stable career as an artist, particularly as a woman. However, numerous rich pathways of learning sit outside of these formal and institutional parameters. While the direct passage of knowledge from teacher to student is important, so, too, is the transmission that occurs outside of these formal or institutional boundaries. These sites of knowledge transmission have played an integral role in building intergenerational relationships between artists, as well as expansive artistic communities.

Such relational pathways of knowledge transmission are often embedded in notions of care. This is particularly true of knowledge that is hard-won, grounded in cultural specificity or contested by dominant modes of thinking. When Rangimārie Hetet and her daughter Diggeress Te Kanawa made the difficult decision to share the tikanga of weaving with wāhine Māori outside of their iwi, it came from a deep sense of care for the survival of that knowledge. This pathway of relational care and custodianship passed from generation to generation, opening space for both continuance and innovation within weaving practices. Hetet passed the tikanga, expertise and mātauranga of weaving to numerous women, including her daughter. Te Kanawa would go on to teach Maureen Lander, who in turn would work within a tuakana-teina relationship with Mataaho, teaching them about specific techniques and materials.

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From ancient whatu kākahu to contemporary installation art, Frances Hodgkins to Merata Mita, Fiona Clark to Mataaho Collective, *Sight Lines* is a bold new account of art-making in Aotearoa told through 35 extraordinary women artists.

‘Kirsty Baker is undoubtedly a new and important voice in New Zealand art history, and *Sight Lines* is a major contribution to the discipline. This beautiful, well-illustrated book will open eyes to the richness and diversity of women’s art practice as it has evolved in this place.’

— Christina Barton, MNZM, author of *Billy Apple® Life/Work*

‘An exceptional book. Thoughtfully conceived, well written, timely and significant. It exemplifies the kind of informed and empathetic writing across cultures that art writing should be aiming for these days.’

— Peter Brunt, author of *Art in Oceania*

‘*Sight Lines* is an appealing history of our art, with its narratives of gender, culture and ethnicity. Māori and others will particularly find the Indigenous stories intriguing through the perceptive writing, concepts and images. This book is an educational taonga for students and communities.’

— Elizabeth Ellis, CNZM, Ngāti Porou, Ngāpuhi

‘*Sight Lines* is a vital contribution to how we understand the visual history of Aotearoa. It is a beautiful book, shaped by the same forces as the art contained within it – life, intelligence, political urgency and generosity.’

— Anthony Byrt, author of *The Mirror Steamed Over*



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