

“How wonderful the colour yellow is,” Vincent van Gogh is supposed to have said. “It stands for the sun.” For Peata Larkin (b. Rotorua 1973), of Ngāti Whakaeu, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, and Ngāti Tuhourangi descent, yellow is a colour of joy and happiness associated with her childhood and is very much a prominent feature of *Māmā > < Whenua*. A graduate of the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, she completed her MFA at RMIT University, Melbourne in 2007. RMIT is an art school often associated with bright colour and colourists. Since then, Larkin has gone from success to success. She was awarded the Mazda Emerging artist awards in 2003, Norsewear special merit award in 2004, and the Molly Morpeth Canaday Award in 2006. In 2018 she won the Kaipara Wallace Arts Trust Award and its three-month residency at the Altes Spital in Solothurn, Switzerland.

In 2013, Larkin finished *Piki Ake – Rise Up*, a large-scale commission for the ANZ Tower in the Auckland CBD, and she has continued to be commissioned consistently for private and public art. These commissions include Westgate, Newmarket (2018), Park Hyatt, Wynyard Quarter (2019) and the International Conference Centre, Auckland (2019). Her work is held in the collections of Memphis Museum of Fine Arts, USA, Rotorua Museum Arts Trust, Pātaka Art + Museum, Waikato University and Massey University.

Larkin’s immediately recognisable style references both the woven narratives of traditional tukutuku and tāniko, and twenty-first century methods of encoding and decoding data in cyberspace and genome mapping. Her work is full of oppositions and grids, drawing on twentieth-century theories of abstract art, and yet is entirely anchored in te ao Māori, tikanga and Māoritanga. References range from DNA to the constellations of the heavens. These highly attractive works must be understood within the different meanings of whakapapa, both as genealogy, but also a multidimensional map of all time, space and geography, where everything is an ancestor, and identity is an act of orientation among all of these elements and a way of maintaining utu, the reciprocal cosmic balance.

Larkin’s practice is an ongoing exploration of the physical properties of paint and materials, whether a pattern of paint is forced through a mesh, applied as pixel-like points on Perspex, cuts in raw linen or as part of a light box. In *Māmā > < Whenua* the material is raw linen, with cuts carefully incised throughout. The work is always immensely tactile and sculptural – something to be approached from a distance to experience as a slow resolution of overall pattern until it is close enough to be touched, experienced in detail and visually decoded. The effect is always as some kind of matrix of digitally encoded data. They are so present and contemporary, while being timeless and rooted in the continuity of a thousand years.

In some ways this exploration of tradition and innovation touches back on the history of the painted meeting houses of the eastern part of the North Island at the end of the nineteenth century. These new traditions evolved as response to missionary criticism of Māori church decoration and the availability of European commercial paints. Unlike those figurative decorations, giving visual expression to tribal history and whakapapa with rich Ringatū symbolism, Larkin’s approach has far more in common with the ancient abstract traditions of kōwhaiwhai, but more specifically woven tukutuku (woven panels) and tāniko (the borders of fine garments). In Māori practice every geometric pattern carries within it a litany of histories and sagas translated into symbolic mnemonic visual cues.

Weaving is both a cultural allusion in Larkin's work, but also a reference to what weaving means in te ao Māori. It is a way of encoding knowledge and binding together. Hineteiwaiwa is the goddess of weaving, but she also oversees childbirth, especially of daughters. She was the first ruahine, a woman who ceremonially lifts tapu. Weaving is the carefully guarded knowledge of women, as is the knowledge of whakapapa. All of Larkin's painting has been a working back to reconnect with her own whakapapa, something she lost direct access to in childhood. From that weaving back together, the patterns in Larkin's work broadens to encompass more general evocations of whanau and whakapapa. These works are maps that guide us through a highly charged, often fraught emotional landscape.

As the title suggests, *Māmā > < Whenua* evokes convergence between the maternal (Māmā in te reo Māori means both "mother" and "lightness" – appropriately enough for silk) and a relationship with the land and tūrangawaewae, a place to stand (Whenua is the land, and also means "placenta"). The "whenua" part of the title refers to the linen *Pepeha* series of works included here, which Larkin started creating during Covid lockdown in 2020, and *The Shape of Wai and Whenua* series of works made of waxed cotton fabric, begun in the 2019 residency in Solothurn, Switzerland. A "pepeha" is how you introduce yourself, explaining your orientation to the universe, your whakapapa, to someone else. The "wai" is a stream, a river, and a collective noun. This is a logical point of access into the present work, the aka ("vine") or uho (heart fibre of a tree, umbilical cord) that connects this lineage. It works around rupture and restores continuity.

The works in *Māmā > < Whenua* represents some of Larkin's most profound and intensely personal art to date. The newest works are yellow acrylic on embroidered silk. It is an act of connecting the dots like lace curtains. It is an expression of emotional healing. The first works in the suite is a response to the death of Larkin's mother-in-law Anne Larkin shortly before the start of the Karekare residency. There is a very clear connection to the saw-edged niho taniwha pattern. This pattern originated with Te Arawa and Waikato. The pattern is found in kowhaiwhai panels at the entrance to the Te Herenga Waka meeting house, and in tukutuku panels inside. The triangular shapes arranged in vertical rows pointing up may be derived from shark or taniwha teeth. The pattern can be found woven into tukutuku and tāniko. It represents a rangatira's lineage to the divine realm. Individual triangles represent hapū within an iwi brought together in unity.

The story of the art is deeply personal to Larkin, but the language and the feeling is universally familiar. It sparks with mana wahine. That theme of unity and whānau is vitally important to understanding this fantastic body of work. All of the works orient in one way or another to the experience of the Covid era. In producing this work, Larkin is positioning herself in the world as a mother, a daughter, a daughter-in-law, a wahine Māori, and within Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, and Ngāti Tūhourangi. The work defies lazy and stereotypical binaries, operating in the pae (the diplomatic space between, where visitors are greeted on the marae) between Māoritanga and Pākehā art practice, between tradition and innovation, history and present, art and science, the materiality of medium and the mauri (life force) of taonga.

Andrew Paul Wood, 2022