

Two Rooms

Peata Larkin

You Are Here

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The art of Peata Larkin (Te Arawa, Tūhourangi, Ngāti Whakauae and Ngāti Tūwharetoa) is often described in terms of weaving, whether that be the fabric through which paint is squeezed in her immediately recognisable technique, the resemblance to woven tukutuku panels, or the allusions to digitised data, genetic electrophoresis, and whakapapa. And indeed, tukutuku encode whakapapa in an analogous process, and Larkin's paintings are a postmodern addition to te whare pora (the house of weaving) presided over by the goddess Hineteiwaiwa. Much of this developed out of Larkin's reconnecting with tikanga, Māoritanga and whakapapa, having been raised by her English father.

The spider weaves its web to greatly expand its awareness and reach. Larkin's works similarly expand to encompass the viewer in the large space of the gallery. The genesis of this extraordinary body of work came about when her first cousin, writer Whiti Hereaka (Te Arawa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Whakauae, Tūhourangi, Ngāti Tumatawera, and Tainui) approached Larkin about collaborating on the sixth book of Massey University Press' *Kōrero* series. The result was the book *YOU ARE HERE*. That project sparked a synergy of creative mana wāhine, the inherent strength, power, and authority of Māori women, weaving together words and art.

"I'm so grateful we took the plunge," says Larkin, "because it has been a therapeutic and emotional experience, processing Whiti's words, our whānau, our lives, our connections and how to describe that visually. This new series of silk paintings embody that. They celebrate and commemorate it all. I was so blown away how simple yet how powerful Whiti's writing was. How it felt like she was me and I her, even though I grew up in Rotorua and Whiti in Taupō. It is an experience I get to physically hold now in the form of a book, and that is pretty special. It is also a reminder that I'm not alone and never have been."

That experience empowered Larkin and brought forth the present works, connecting deeply to her whakapapa and hauora wairua (spiritual health). Larkin's art has always been about building those connections and exploring her identity, but now it comes with an even greater confidence, depth and richness. The artworks form a kind of third space between the different contradictory aspects of her identity, where they can align and harmonise outside of other interfering social contexts. They are, in essence, a loom for the dialectic of the warp of practice and the weft of perception, for thinking and feeling.

"Creating these paintings is quite a spiritual process for me," says the artist. "I go into another state and just start painting, layer by layer until the drops of paint sit where I want them to. I never plan a painting; I just paint and see where they take me. I love that these works hover between strength and fragility where I talk to both my tīpuna on my mother's side and my English ancestors on the other, I think about my nana (my dad's mum) a lot. She died when I was very young and was the only grandparent alive when I was born."

On the left wall are twelve silk paintings hung like tukutuku, representing the lunar months and seasons of the Māori year, beginning with Pipiri (June), the start of the year. These are the only works in

the exhibition that do not take their titles from Hereaka's texts in the book, though they relate to its themes of the cycles of time and nature, the artist's tīpuna (ancestors) – where she is from; where she is in the present, and where she is going. The silk fabric carries with it echoes of Larkin's grandmother with its traditional lacey femininity.

"This is the first time that I've titled the works beforehand... well Whiti named them in a roundabout way," says Larkin. "It still feels peculiar but it feels right."

The use of colour in all the works in the installation is symbolic, and meanings personal to Larkin are encoded in the variations of palette in the different groups of work in the exhibition. The complete palette consists of white, which the artist calls the “bones” of the painting; light ultramarine blue, representing the atmosphere; and dark cadmium yellow or diarylide yellow; and hansa yellow or cadmium yellow medium, which represent blood or the rays of wairua (spirit). The shadowing in the works represent the whakawairua (shadowy nature) of the spirits of the tīpuna. That complex language of colour provides so much of the power and mana of this work.

On the back wall is a large single silk painting in white, Dark Cadmium Yellow/Juane Diarylide Yellow, and Hansa Yellow, titled *they have watched your line grow* (2024). On the right wall are two paintings in the four-colour palette of white, Dark Cadmium Yellow/ Juane Diarylide Yellow, and Hansa Yellow/Cadmium Yellow Medium: *it shapes your thoughts and language* (2024) and *You recognise the shape of this* (2024). The next two, *their names and stories are here* (2025) and *the place you have returned to* (2025) incorporate the ultramarine blue.

On the next wall is a selection of the drawings that feature in the book. These continue the weaving theme where Larkin fills in one square at a time with an ink pen on graph paper-like grids to generate the image in the manner of a knitting pattern or cross-stitch or abstract geometric patterns recalling tukutuku, the painted meeting houses of the east coast of the North Island, and the symbology of Ratana and the whole rich legacy of Māori visual culture. The final work and completing the circuit, *You Are Here* (2025), is the counterpart of *they have watched your line grow* (2024), the same size and on the opposite wall except in the five-colour palette.

Andrew Paul Wood, February, 2025