



SOMETHING BIGGER

The meaning of **Ngataiharuru Taepa's** work is hard to translate in certain terms; they speak from within Māori knowledge systems to tell stories greater than the cosmos itself.

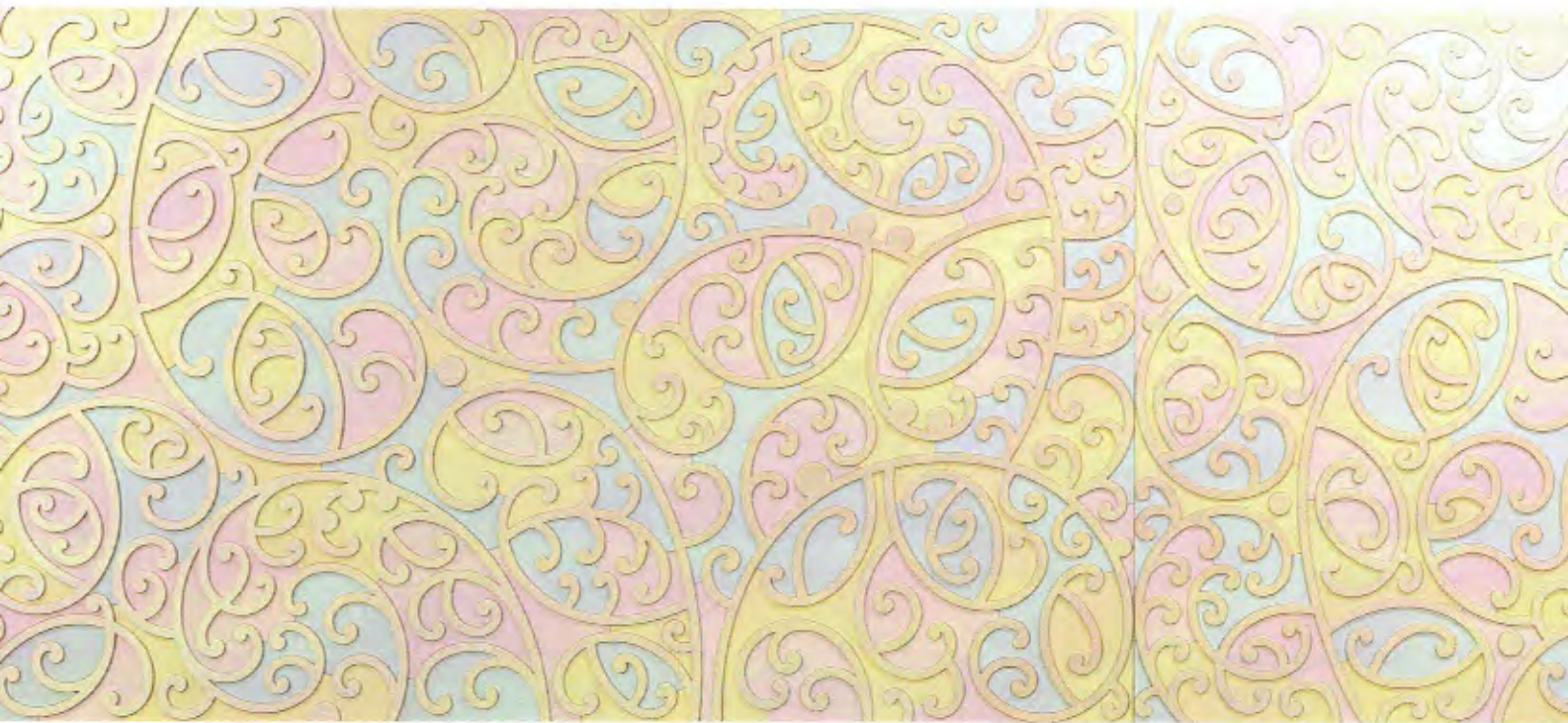
WORDS | KIRSTEN GARNER LYTTLE
PHOTOGRAPHY | RUSSELL KLEYN

I had a Zoom conversation with **Ngataiharuru Taepa** (Te Arawa, Te Āti Awa) on a Sunday morning. A digital and virtual face-to-face first meeting across the ditch. We discussed *whānau* (family), *whakapapa* (genealogy), coronavirus and lockdowns, Masters of contemporary Māori art such as **Sandy Adsett** and **Robert (Bob) Jahnke**, some of the (arguably academic) distinctions between customary and contemporary Māori art, artistic collaboration, the dawn, the *marae* (the courtyard or the open area in front of the *wharenui*, or meeting house), lollies, materiality, active and passive spaces, trauma, academia, his recent exhibitions, and *kōwhiriwhiri* (Māori abstract, yet still referential paintings, found within *wharenui* or meeting houses, with customary patterns that represent the natural world and relationships in the environment), among other things. Taepa was generous with his time and his abundant positivity. An intentional positivity and intellectual

playfulness – deeply embedded in *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge) and *kaupapa Māori* (Māori framework and principals). A positivity that can be experienced within his artwork and one that responds to a time of pandemic, anxiety, renewal, and a return to some kind of normality. In other words, the now.

As with all *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge), the starting place is the *whakapapa* (the genealogy). The map of the relationships between all beings and all things. More than simply a family tree, *whakapapa* is a line of descent from ancestors (and deities) down to the present day, linking all people and things back to the origins of creation. From a Māori perspective, it is this unbroken line that gives *mana* (authority, spiritual power) and value. For Taepa, *whakapapa* is a key aspect of his practice. Artmaking seems less a conscious choice, and more a reflection of the creative environment he grew up in; one that he considers a way of living and being.

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Ngataiharuru Taepa

Taepa is a third-generation artist. On his maternal side, his grandmother **Mavis Newland** is a well-respected painter, while his paternal grandfather's brother was a carver from Ohinemutu. His father, **Wi Te Tau Pirika Taepa** (Te Arawa, Ngati Whakaue, Te Āti Awa) is a renowned Māori artist who has recently been named an officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to Māori art, particularly ceramics. Ngatai's brother is **Kereama Taepa**, a multidisciplinary artist who combines Māori customary art with digital technologies. While Ngatai's partner is artist **Saffronn Te Ratana** (Ngāi Tūhoe), who also comes from a family of artists. The couple has worked collaboratively with their friend **Hemi Macgregor** on their installation *Ka Kata Te Po*, 2013 in response to the unlawful and violent Urewera police raids of 2007 on the people of Tūhoe (including Te Ratana's relatives).

Using the visual language of *kōwhaiwhai*, Taepa's work draws upon cosmological

and genealogical narratives to respond to contemporary issues facing Māori people. As Taepa explains, “You know another word for *kōwhaiwhai* is *tuhituhi*, which is the word we now use for writing. *Kōwhaiwhai* was the writing of our ancestors. That's the way they decided to describe what they saw in the world through the written language of *tuhituhi* or *kōwhaiwhai*. I'm quite conscious that this art form pre-dates, in our culture, the written word and part of my Master's was the impact of the written word on our visual culture and on *kōwhaiwhai*.”

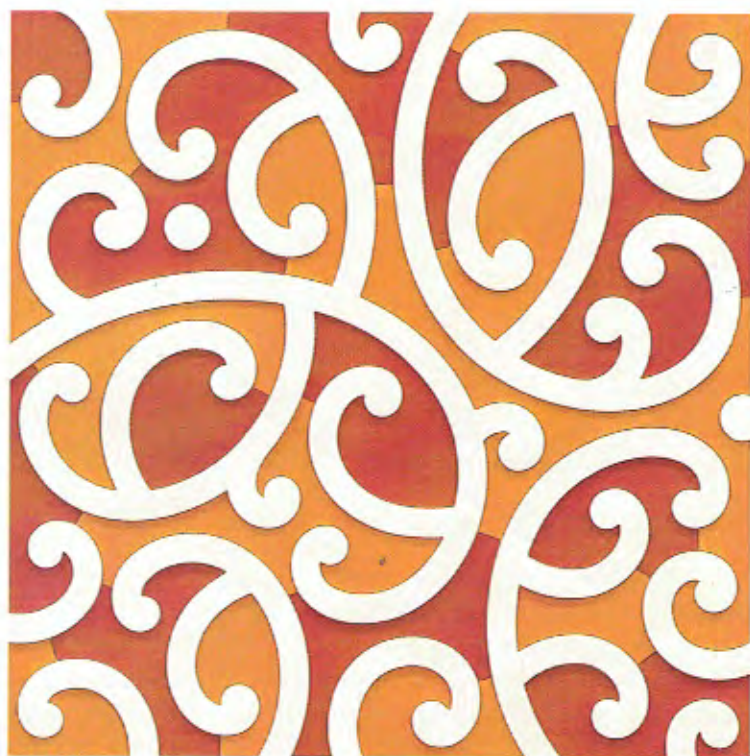
During our conversation, Taepa's Zoom virtual background displayed what appeared to be a detail of *He ata ki runga, he ata ki raro*, 2020. This three-panelled *kōwhaiwhai* piece was commissioned for *Toi Tū Toi Ora: Contemporary Māori Art: 2020 – 2021*, the largest exhibition of contemporary Māori art shown at Auckland Art Gallery. Or, is this virtual background *Ata hāpara*, (*The dawn*),



shown in his 2020 exhibition *Kia Aio Te Whenua* at Page Galleries, Wellington? (Taepa also had a solo show at Page Galleries, which has represented Taepa for more than 20 years, in May 2022). These recent works are inspired by *karakia* (prayers, chants, and incantations). *Karakia*, as Taepa refers to it, can be different to prayer – rather than words of worship, *karakia* can be describing a sequence that happens in our environment. It can be an acknowledgement of things around us. It can be the sequence seen in the beginning of a calm day. The soft pastel tones of pink, yellow and blue seen in these works appear comforting to my eyes; reminding me of ice cream or baby clothes, or perhaps the dawn referred to in the title.

ABOVE: Ngataiharuru Taepa, *He ata ki runga, he ata ki raro*, 2020. Various timbers and acrylic, 110 x 540 x 3.6cm. PHOTO: MICHAEL MAHINE LAMB

RIGHT: Ngataiharuru Taepa, *Kura tawhito*, 2020. Acrylic and earth oxides on wood, 50 x 50cm. PHOTO: RYAN MCCAULEY
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND PAGE GALLERIES, WELLINGTON





Ngataiharuru: Taepa's solo exhibition at Tim Melville Gallery, Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau shows from 30 August to 24 September 2022.

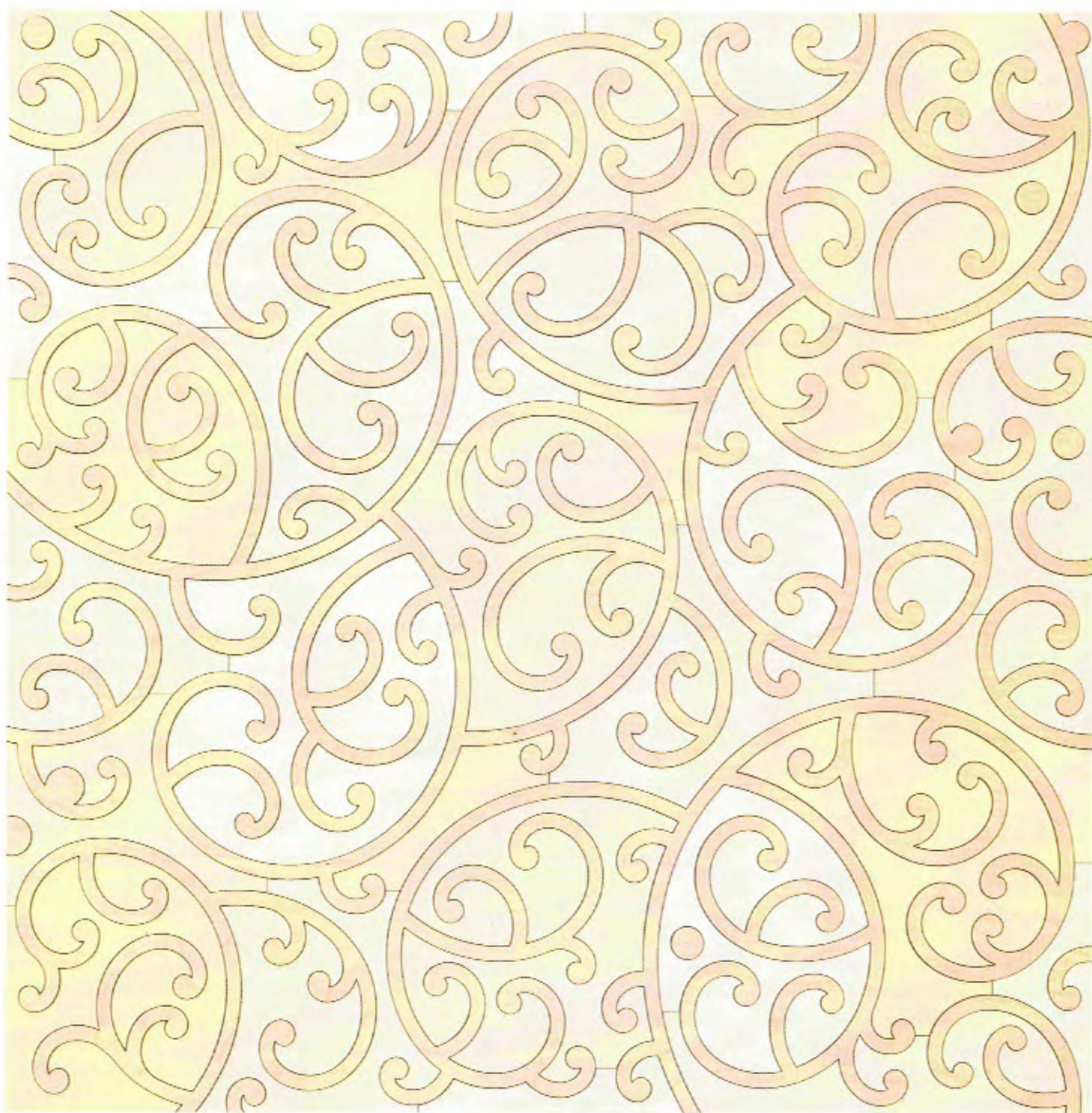
patterning (Taepa rejects the terms “positive and negative space”), express an interconnectivity of Māori knowledge systems within the natural world. A duality and equilibrium that demonstrate that these active and passive spaces are interchangeable. Taepa's work is a continuous activation of spaces and rendering using a range of mediums, materials, and technologies; from oxide pigments gathered from the earth, to vinyls, routing, enamel, and acrylic paints.

I ask about his upcoming show at Tim Melville Gallery, Auckland. This, as yet untitled exhibition, will continue his intention to think through *karakia* for this time, to ease the anxiety and assist with people feeling *haumarū* or safe. It will be his first show with the Auckland gallery, which is an exciting venture for gallerist **Tim Melville**. “When I first met Ngatai about ten years ago I was still finding my feet as a Māori gallerist,” he says. “I loved his work but didn't feel ready to represent him. Over time my confidence has grown though, and I think I might now have something to offer.”

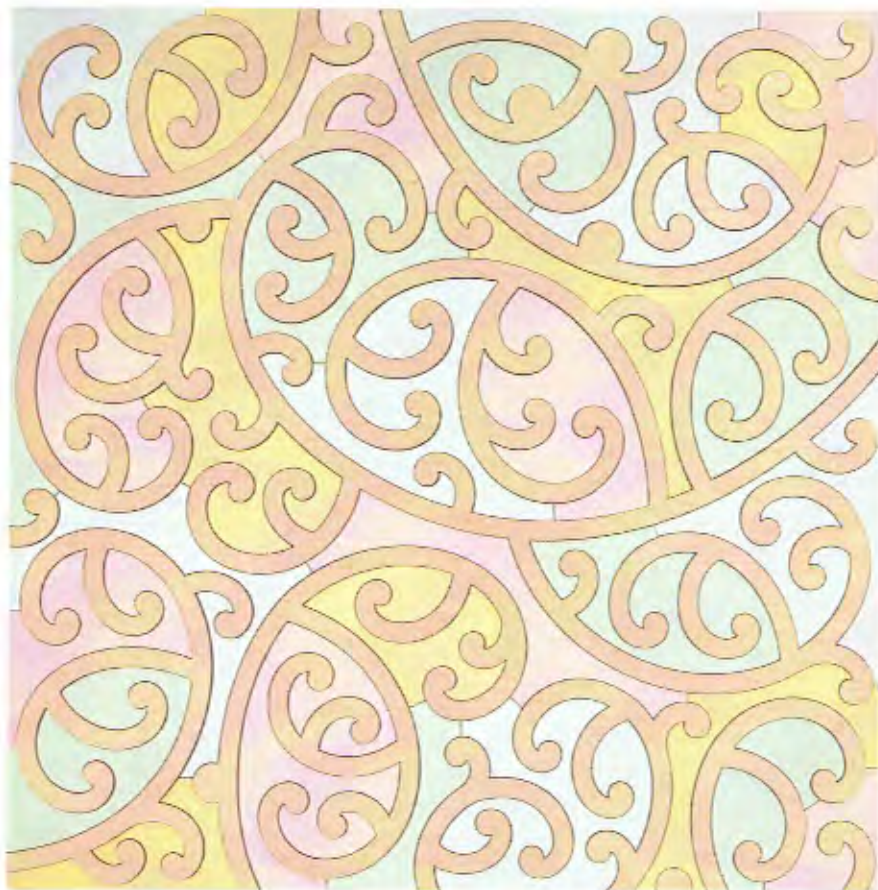
There is no quick, simple, easy, or pre-packaged shorthand to the meanings of Taepa's paintings. They speak from within *mātauranga Māori*, customary practice, and culture. They are made to be experienced. In Taepa words, “This work is about assisting and supporting our *tohunga* or *kaumatua* or leaders in providing stability, providing comfort. I guess reminding ourselves that we are a part of a bigger cosmos and that we are ok.”

Taepa's recent works continue his commitment to being a student of *kōwhaiwhai*, and part of its intention is to bring a sense of stability of wellbeing. The patterned shapes of *kōwhaiwhai* are culturally and tribally loaded; referring to *koru* (fern frond), *pītau*

(young shoot of a fern), *kape* (Crescent moon or eyebrows), *kowhai ngutu kaka* (a flowering native shrub with clusters of large, bright scarlet flowers) and the Mangopare or hammerhead shark, to name a few. In *kōwhaiwhai*, the active and passive spaces in the



OPPOSITE: Ngataiharuru Teepa. PHOTO: RUSSELL KLEYN.
ABOVE: Ngataiharuru Teepa, *He Ata Raukura*, 2022. Various timbers and acrylic, 110 x 110cm.
PHOTO: MICHAEL MAHNE LAMB. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND PAGE GALLERIES, WELLINGTON.



MARCIA PAGE

Director, Page Galleries, Wellington

"It has been an absolute pleasure to represent Ngataiharuru over the last 20 years or so, watching his practice shift and change but always working with and through the language of *kōwhaiwhai*. I believe it was 2003 when we first met, as part of a series of projects with Toi Māori Aotearoa and he was working with PVC pipe at the time. Having also exhibited his father **Wi Te Tau Pirika Taepa**, and worked with Ngatai's partner

Saffronn Te Ratana, I am privileged to have formed a relationship with the wider *whānau*, who have been so generous in shaping my own appreciation and understanding of *te ao Māori*.

Ngatai's latest *mahi* is remarkable and demonstrative of his longstanding approach to making, which sees him bridging the gap between past and present, while looking toward a hopeful future."

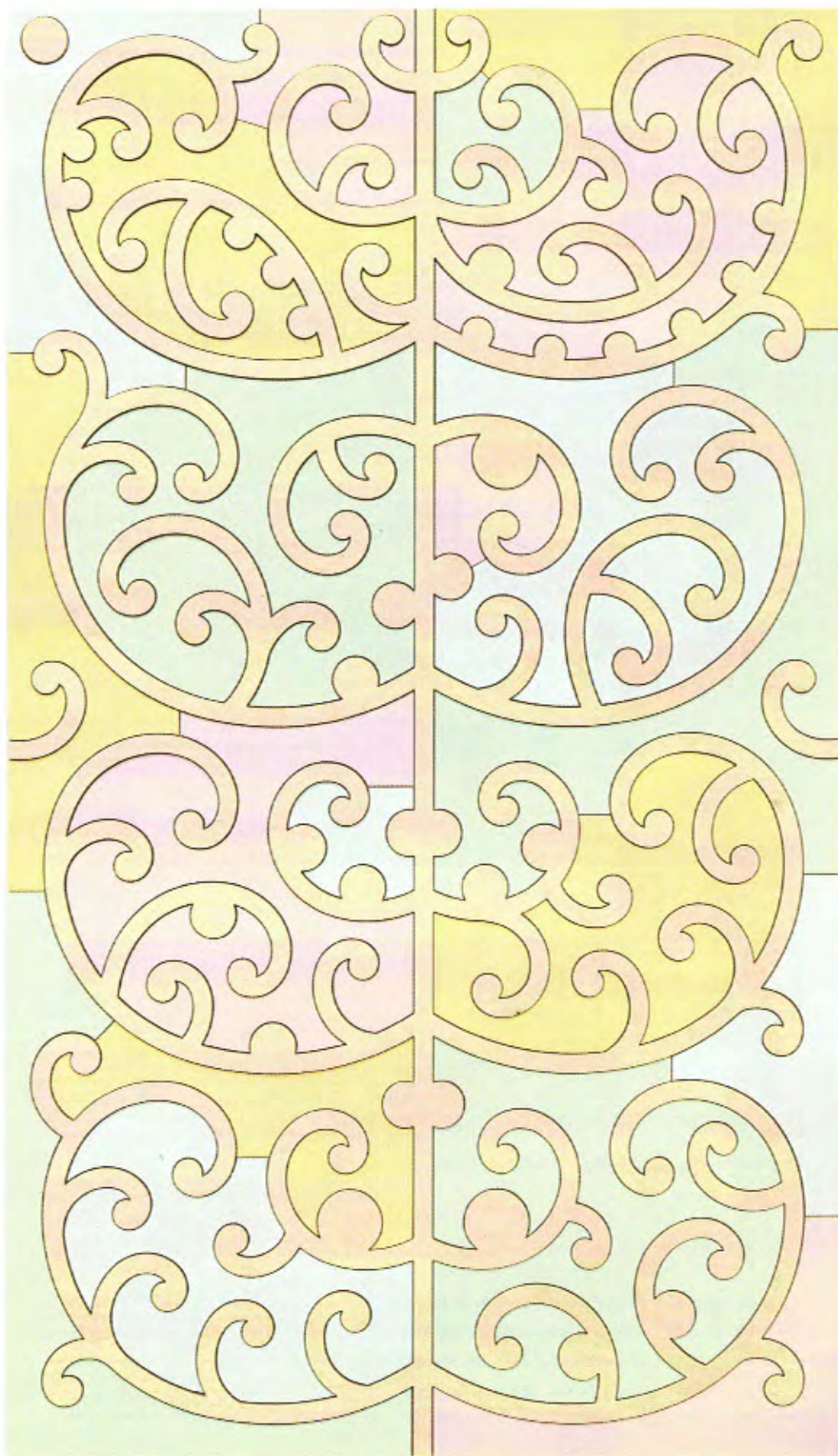
NIGEL BORELL

Curator Māori Art, Auckland Museum

"I actually first met Ngatai when we were art students studying on the same art program some 20 years ago. So, I have had the pleasure of watching and seeing his art practice grow and develop over the years. His interest in customary Māori *kōwhaiwhai* painting has been a major feature of his practice and continues to be. Ngatai's art practice is distinct in the way it has centered around a 20-year interest and exploration in *kōwhaiwhai* which is the customary Māori painting tradition found in the rafters of meetinghouses. He uses the conventions of customary *kōwhaiwhai* painting: pattern, design and arrangement, to create dynamic new expressions.

These contemporary artworks show a connection to this Māori painting tradition but also extend upon it in compelling ways. His practice is important for the way in which it reactivates conversations and explorations in the visual language of *kōwhaiwhai*. This work also makes a distinct contribution in broadening a wider understanding of contemporary Māori art and what that expression looks like at present time.

The artists own art practice has been informed by his experiences working on *wharenui* (Māori meetinghouses) from a young age and even with his most recent meetinghouse project *Te Whaioranga o Te Whaiiao*, 2021, we can see his commitment and passion for maintaining the Māori art traditions found within the meetinghouse. It is here that his ongoing contribution to Māori art and culture is most evident but also feeds his contemporary art practice."



"It is here that his ongoing contribution to Māori art and culture is most evident but also feeds his contemporary art practice." *Nigel Borell*

OPPOSITE: Ngataiharuru Taepa, *He Ata Taonga*, 2022. Various timbers and acrylic, 110 x 110cm.

LEFT: Ngataiharuru Taepa, *He Ata Whakaritonto*, 2022. Various timbers and acrylic, 109 x 63cm.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL MAHNE LAMB COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND PAGE GALLERIES, WELLINGTON.