

EMILY KARAKA

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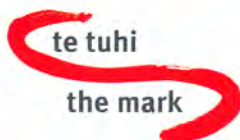
CLAIMS WAI 423 AND 357



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Mixed media, triptych 1820 x 3630mm

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The issues that I'm always discussing are economic, social, and environmental. Land rights tie back to the basis of justice in our country, the covenant of the country, the korowai of the country. Emily Karaka

As a member of the Ngāi Tai and Waiohūa Confederation of Tribes, Emily Karaka's whakapapa extends back to the Tainui canoe, and in terms of traditional narratives, even before. Described by Witi Ihimaera as 'Earth Goddess', this artist is regarded in the art world as a Maori matriarch and a *wahine toa*, a strong woman, one in the line of many strong women in her family. Her great grandmother was trained in the martial arts and accompanied Te Puea to Parliament to discuss matters of *raupatu* – land confiscations. Her great grandfather was secretary to Te Rata, the fourth Maori King.

As a young woman in her twenties Emily Karaka found she could express with paintbrush and paint the pain and struggles which were hers and those of her people.

'I have always had a deep sense of loss and loneliness, through having my soul voice suppressed: a cry, quietened so that I fit into a dominant culture's shoes. All my life I have communicated this pain through pencil, paint, wood and clay. Now I find through this constant expression my world is revealed.'

Although largely self-taught she was encouraged and inspired by artists including Greer Twiss, Colin McCahon, Philip Clairmont, Allen Maddox, Ralph Hotere and Tony Fomison. International artists whose work she has found inspirational include Jackson Pollock and Frida Kahlo both of whom worked with intensity and passion to express the deeply personal self or the pain of suffering.

A dominant theme of her many solo and group exhibitions has been protest, often hard-hitting; at times, confrontational. Yet there is simultaneously offered a celebration of survival, a hope for understanding and tolerance. Her subject matter chiefly derives from the oppression and displacement of Maori people. It deals with the Treaty of Waitangi and its broken contracts, with issues of loss of land, loss of language, loss of empowerment. In her own words:

'My work is centred around the Treaty of Waitangi. It's to do with rangatiratanga; our atua, our taonga, and rights, living rights, arts, and cultural rights.'

In 'Claims Wai 423 and 357' consisting of seven large, dynamic works, Emily Karaka's subject matter becomes further focused on her deep involvement with recent and current claims made to the Waitangi Tribunal. The works voice a plea that the history of Maori peoples in Auckland, in particular that of her own iwi, Ngai Tai, not be forgotten. They speak of our obligations to protect our city environment and the waters of the Hauraki Gulf from the clutches of commercial interests. Crucially, they remind us that if the Treaty of Waitangi is to be honoured then it is, at the moment, by claims brought by iwi to the Waitangi Tribunal that compensation for loss of land, loss of waterways, loss of livelihood, can be sought and negotiated.

Interwoven through the works are references to actual claims brought to the Waitangi Tribunal, by Emily Karaka and Te Warena Taua, on behalf of the Ngai Tai Ki Tamaki Trust. Wai 357 deals with the requirements of consultation and negotiation to avoid the sale of Railway lands, once tribal lands, to State Owned Enterprises. Such sales would mean land available for Treaty settlements could be lost for ever. Wai 423 focuses on concerns relating to lands and waterways across Auckland, compensation for confiscations, preservation of sites of significance, breaches of clauses in sales deeds and the restoration of empowerment in relation to the uses and disposals of these lands.



Roimata Toro (Tears of the Albatross), 2001. Mixed media, diptych 1820 x 2420mm

As a basis for this exhibition the claims works provide a framework for commenting on commercial interests in downtown Auckland, the consequent compromising of historic places, and augmented levels of pollution caused by waterfront developments and unprecedented numbers of boats cruising in the Hauraki Gulf during the America's Cup yachting event.

The artist sees these works as forming a progression from earlier works, in particular two installations (not in this exhibition). The first, *Mau Mau Tangata, Mau Mau Whenua* (Waste Man, Waste Land), is located in the Maori Studies Department of the University of Auckland. It is a large scale mural partly framed by a waka form carved by Karaka's friend Norman Te Whata. Emerging from the waka are a variety of faces, eyes, fauna, flora and fishes. In bold tones the words 'holes in the ground/for the purpose of making gold' refer to a salutation by Mita Karaka to the Governor during the opening of Government House in Auckland. This slogan makes clear the differing and often opposing values evident in our society. Throughout the exhibition, dollar signs and golden tones refer to money-making goals, for example, in *Viaduct Stakeholders* and *After Submission 111 – Wai 357 and 423*. Inclusion of the phrase 'submission 111' laced almost imperceptibly into *Patiki* refers to a submission made to the Casino Control Authority during the planning of the Casino.

The second earlier related installation is located in the Study Centre foyer at Massey University, Albany. The six works framed in carved three-sided frames depict

the story of Auckland from a tangata whenua perspective. Together titled *Te Ipu Kura a Maki* (The Sacred Bowl/Calabash of Maki), these works remind us of all the iwi and hapu who belong to the ancient and current history of Tamakimakarau – Auckland and the Hauraki Gulf. The iwi whose stories Karaka is telling there through paint and symbol, include many which are referenced in this exhibition – not only Ngai Tai, but also Waiohau, Ngati Paoa, Ngati Whatua and Te Kawerau a Maki, as seen for example, in *Viaduct Stakeholders*. In *Niho o Te Taniwha* (Teeth of the Taniwha) Karaka proclaims her heritage and identification with Tamakimakarau with the words 'Rangitoto te maunga (Rangitoto the mountain), Taikehu te tangata (Taikehu the chief), Ngai Tai te iwi' (Ngai Tai the tribe) which derive from a Ngai Tai proverb.

The force of Karaka's identification with Tamakimakarau is further evident in this exhibition in another work, *Roimata Toroa* (Tears of the Albatross). It too is related to the earlier *Te Ipu Kura a Maki*, not only in its depth of blues and reds, but also in its identification with Rangitoto as a Ngai Tai landmark. Here however the mountain is in a state of eruption rather than being a dormant identity marker. The title derives from a traditional narrative and when the pattern of this name is used in tukutuku panels, it carries a sense of misfortune or disaster. The central explosion in fine rivulets and dribbles of reds, yellows and whites supports this reading. The large red 'S' shaped markings can be seen as lava flows but also relate to 'te tuhi' which

is the mark of Ngai Tai identity in Howick and Pakuranga. A Maori voyager named Manawatore, according to legend, left his tuhi, or 'S' shaped mark in red ochre on a pohutakawa as a sign that he had been there. For this reason the recently integrated Fisher Gallery and Pakuranga Community and Cultural Centre is now known as 'te tuhi – the mark'.

Always a feature of Karaka's art, language here again involves a play on words. For example, *wai* separated from Waitangi, or from Waiohua, the iwi, reminds the viewer of the importance of water, in our harbours and rivers, as the source of once abundant food supplies now increasingly threatened by pollution. 'Tangi' refers to mourning and serves as a metaphor for all loss. Proper names appear, specifically those of Emily Karaka herself and Te Warena Taua. They remind us of their fight for Ngai Tai. The two names can be read with other meanings. 'Karaka' refers not only to a tree but to a particular local event that gave its name to the tribe Uri Karaka. Alternative meanings of 'Taua' are 'ancestor' or 'war party'. Words may be subtly laced in to the compositions or elsewhere proclaimed boldly in strong lettering which acts as a kind of karanga (call or summon), chant or exhortation.

Letters and numbers 'CP 654-93' refer to Civil Proceedings that were lodged at the Auckland High Court at the time of sales on Quay Street relating to Britomart proposals and waterfront developments for the America's Cup. Cup and trophy-like forms are direct references to the America's Cup.

In *Viaduct Stakeholders* the abbreviations 'SOE' and 'SOS' intersect with each other forming a cross form within a cross.

Emily Karaka describes the claims themselves as a 'life raft' for her people. To give expression to her engagement with these issues the artist has evolved new symbolic forms and compositional approaches. Most feature two or more upright forms, sometimes columnar, sometimes shaped to suggest cups or fish, sails or life rafts. The viewer may decide. In their verticality and spacing these forms are reminiscent of pou (posts) or poupou (carved wood panels) within the whareniui. Their solidarity as background forms, both positive and negative, is a strong unifying device in the exhibition. In *Patiki* the red forms may be interpreted as trophies and the green spaces between, in their basically diamond shape, relate to the precise geometric patterns in tukutuku panels where they represent fish as a food source. The suggestion here however is that the fish may no longer be edible. Similarly in *Niho o te Taniwha* and *Claims 423 and 357* the spaces between the dominant forms themselves become positive shapes and can be interpreted as fish.

Emerging throughout the works, between, in front of and behind the brilliant patches of colour and gestural squiggles and squeezings, the viewer can find heart shapes which are capable of various interpretations. They may be a symbol of love but in their redness also suggest the bleeding heart, grief and losses



Viaduct Stakeholders, 2001. Mixed media, diptych 1820 x 2420mm

experienced by Maori people. Together with other playing card symbols they can be seen as references to Te Kooti and Rua Kenana, the Maori prophets of the 1880s who adopted these European symbols and gave them new meanings.

Homage to and respect for the history both past and present of her people is also seen in *Claims Wai 423 and 357*. References to Tainui and Kingitanga (King Movement) can be discerned in the blue crowns at the top of the composition and the fine red markings which run horizontally above the middle in the rearground. Resembling elongated koru or people sitting upright in a waka, the latter are simplifications of the carved post which is the dwelling place of

the God Uenuku. Uenuku is sacred to Tainui people as the protector of the space between the heavens and the earth.

‘When I squeeze luscious lime against burnt orange I can almost taste the fruit. When I splash vermilion next to sunburst yellow in a bed of cobalt blue I feel freedom. When I ring turquoise and purple with metallic gold, I can fly.’

In these latest works Emily Karaka again reveals herself as being passionate about colour. The joy of expression through colour pervades this exhibition. Applied in broader fields than seen previously, the colours are never flat, always modulated, always exuberant, sensuous, suggestive. Brushings



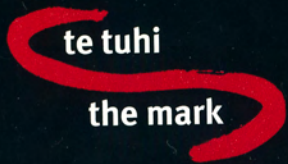
Niho o Te Taniwha (teeth of the Taniwha), 2001. Mixed media diptych 1820 x 2420mm

within these fields in monochromatic tones add texture and give a restless quality. Her characteristically vigorous application of Pollock type overlying markings remains in several of these works. However in *Rangitoto Sunrise* and *Patiki*, the squiggles and drips are minimal introducing a new emphasis. Karaka has allowed the forms and colours to speak with their own voices, whilst her own voice expressed in harmonising tones serves as an under-current.

Preparatory studies in notebooks are not part of the artist's working method. She applies her ideas straight to the canvas from her mind, from her heart and from her experiences. The visitor will appreciate

this installation on any or all of its levels of interest. To experience all of them – the impact of colour, the vitality of the paint application, the implications of the content, the passion of her commitment, is to gain an insight into the whole being of this artist, Emily Karaka.

Nanette Norris
May 2001



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