

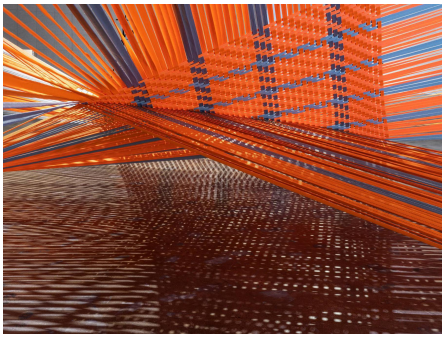


soft and weak like water

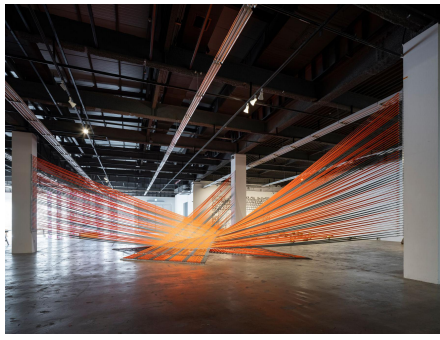
Yuki Kihara and Mataaho Collective at the
14th Gwangju Biennale

by Amy Weng

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Mataaho Collective, installation view of *Tuakirikiri* (2023). Polyester webbing. Installation dimensions variable. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale, supported by Creative New Zealand. Courtesy Mataaho Collective and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



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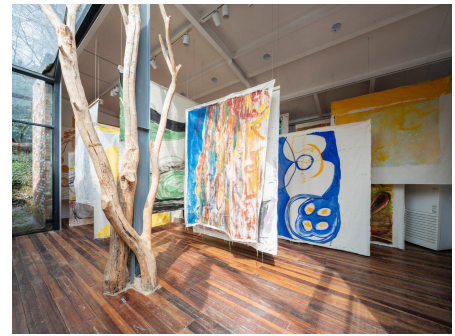
Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall. Photo: Courtesy of the Gwangju Biennale Foundation.



Mataaho Collective, installation view of *Tuakirikiri* (2023). Polyester webbing. Installation dimensions variable. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale, supported by Creative New Zealand. Courtesy Mataaho Collective and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Yuki Kihara, installation view of *A Song About Sāmoa—Moana (Pacific)* (2022). Sāmoan siapo, textiles, beads, shells and plastic. 5 pieces, 175 × 141 × 25 cm each. Supported by Creative New Zealand. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Vivian Suter, installation view of *Untitled*, undated at Horanggasy Artpolygon. Oil paint, pigment, acrylics and fish glue on canvas. 35 pieces, dimensions variable. Supported by Pro Helvetia. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Yuki Kihara, installation view of *A Song About Sāmoa—Moana (Pacific)* (2022). Sāmoan siapo, textiles, beads, shells and plastic. 5 pieces, 175 × 141 × 25 cm each. Supported by Creative New Zealand. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.

Founded in 1995 in memory of the 1980 civil uprising and repression of the Gwangju Democratisation Movement, the Gwangju Biennale, located in South Korea, is Asia's oldest and most prestigious biennial of contemporary art. The Gwangju Biennale has established itself as a highlight of the international contemporary art biennial circuit, and has elevated the city of 1.5 million to a cultural hub of East Asia. This year's Biennale runs from 7 April–9 July 2023 and includes presentations of work by Mataaho Collective and Yuki Kihara. Curator and Contemporary HUM Associate Editor Amy Weng travelled to Gwangju with the support of the Asia New Zealand Foundation.

In the middle of a downpour, the 14th Gwangju Biennale opened with a performance by Lebanese artist Tarek Atoui and South Korean artisan In-seok Seo that explored sounds inspired by traditional Korean instrument-making and water. Titled *Prelude to Rain*, the work's roiling percussion was a sonorous accompaniment to the hiss of rain on the concrete forecourt.

The welcome was fitting for a biennale titled *soft and weak like water*, a reference to the *Dao De Jing* and its recognition of the unassuming and pervasive strength of water. This year's event hosts work by 79 artists, including Aotearoa New Zealand artists Yuki Kihara and Mataaho Collective. Curated by Lee Sook Kyung, Senior Curator of International Art and the head of Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational at the Tate Modern, the Biennale

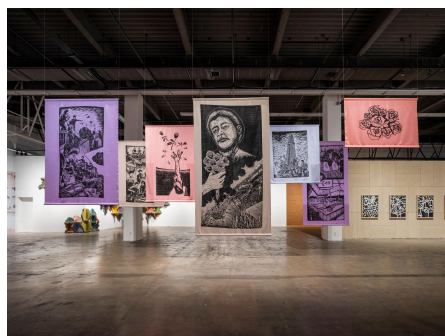
imagines “our shared planet as a site of resistance, coexistence, solidarity and care by thinking through the transformative and restorative potential of water as a metaphor, a force, and a method.”^[01] This notion of immutable tenacity in the face of historical and ongoing geopolitical divisions made itself felt over the course of the Biennale’s multiple locations.

Each of the four floors within the central site, the Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall, embodies a node or sub-theme, giving the Biennale a simple logic that allows for complex conversations between nodes to unfold. This porousness is also reflected in the exhibition design, where incomplete partitions of fibreboard create gentle divisions with apertures allowing for sightlines to extend across the cavernous length of each hall. Before reaching the second floor, which houses Mataaho’s work, the first floor—sub-theme title “Luminous Halo”—greet visitors with a series of large-scale, expressive woodcut prints on banners by Malaysian collective Pangrok Sulap. These are hung alongside works by the celebrated late printmaker Oh Yoon, a proponent of the *Minjung* socio-political art movement.

Minjung (the people) is an expressive, figurative style developed in South Korea during the 1970s–80s and accelerated by the Gwangju Uprising, that aspired to reflect the everyday lives of workers and be a means of political mobilisation. The Gwangju Uprising occurred on 18 May 1980, when student activists gathered to protest the *coup d’état* and martial-law government of General Chun Doo-hwan. The security forces responded with unmitigated violence; arresting, torturing and murdering hundreds of students, activists and citizens over the course of ten days. The event would shape over a decade of resistance to South Korea’s repressive regime, paving the way for the country’s democratisation in the 1990s, to which the Gwangju Biennale was established as a living monument. The collective Pangrok Sulap worked with printmakers in Gwangju, reinterpreting archival imagery from the Uprising using *Minjung* techniques to ask how past and present struggles intersect.

These connections between the Biennale and Gwangju’s turbulent history situate the struggle for justice and equality within a transnational context. *soft and weak like water* is an exposition on

Lee's transnational thinking, one that never loses sight of the political specificity of Gwangju. In a curatorial statement, she also poses the question: "What does it mean to think of Gwangju not only as geography or locality but as a paradigm, a manual, an epistemological framework?"^[02] One method is to nod to the city's legacy as *Yehyang* 藝鄉 (a region of art and culture), demonstrated in its sophisticated art and craft heritage, and its practised philosophical teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, which surface in connection to traditional or Indigenous teaching from other parts of the globe. Under Lee's helm, the curatorial team looks towards peripheral artistic narratives around the world to deeply consider expressions of diaspora, Indigeneity, decoloniality and climate justice.



Pangrok Sulap, installation view of *Gwangju Blooming* (2023). Woodcut print on blackout cotton. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale. Courtesy Pangrok Sulap and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Oh Yoon, installation view at the 14th Gwangju Biennale. Courtesy the Estate of Oh Yoon and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Installation View (L-R): Charwei Tsai, installation view of *Spiral Incense Mantra – Heart Sutra* (2023) at the 14th Gwangju Biennale; Mataaho Collective, installation view of *Tuakirikiri* (2023). Polyester webbing. Installation dimensions variable. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale, supported by Creative New Zealand. All works courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Oum Jeongsoon, installation view at the 14th Gwangju Biennale. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Angélica Serech, installation view of *Sowing Words on my Second Skin* (Sembrando palabras en mi segunda piel), 2023. Pedal loom, vertical loom and wooden needle embroidery. 250 × 700 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.

On the second floor, “Ancestral Voices” explores Indigenous traditions, collectivity and healing as vantages from which to critique Western paradigms of modernity and coloniality. This is also the space where visitors can encounter Mataaho’s *Tuakirikiri* (2023). *Tuakirikiri* consists of three intersecting planes woven from fluorescent orange and silver tie-downs. Anchored by three columns arranged in an ‘L’ shape and corresponding lines of anchors in the floor, the tie-downs are tensioned using ratchets so that the structure feels pliant, like the surface of a trampoline, twisting and straining with potential energy. The work dominates the far end of the second hall like a radiant star held taut between pillars or the dynamic convergence of oppositional flows, radiating outwards and converging towards a centre, producing a form that splays and strikes. Like previous works such as *He Toka Tū Moana* | *She’s a Rock* (2022), presented at the Sydney Biennial, and *Takapa u* (2022), commissioned by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *Tuakirikiri* stems from an investigation of kawē, a strap used to carry heavy loads over a distance, making use of tie-downs and ratchets to expand understandings of rāranga (weaving) and atua wāhine (female deities).

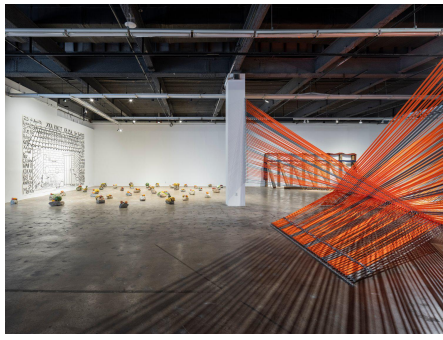
Tuakirikiri is a warning about the beguiling power of water, and responds to the proposition of “Ancestral Voices” through the collective’s wānanga (meeting and discussion) centring the relationship between water and its environment. Here, Mataaho acknowledge Hine-Tuakirikiri, the influential ancestor of gravel and small rocks, and draw inspiration from the whakataukī (proverb) “He ope ā Hine-Tuakirikiri e kore taea te tatau” (“A company of the Gravel Maid that cannot be counted”), which speaks to the latent power of community and strength in numbers.^[1]

^[3] In other whakataukī, Hine-Tuakirikiri is evoked as a shingle or stony beach that withstands the relentless assault of Hine-Moana, inferring that stones and their “younger relatives” hold fast the boundaries of sea and land, limiting the sea’s advance.^[4] By invoking atua wāhine, Mataaho address the erasure or diminishment of female narratives by retelling stories of female protagonists in positions of agency. This subverts more well-known accounts where atua wāhine are subjects who are acted upon by their male counterparts. Further, *Tuakirikiri* signals how collective resistance and solidarity might be envisioned as a force

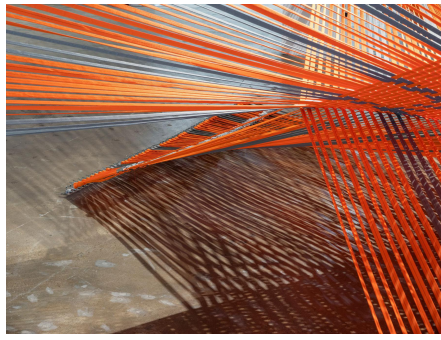
that is dispersed and foundational, powerful in its abiding reserve rather than through action. The word *kawe*, or *kawenga*, also refers to an obligation or responsibility, and the metal ratchets in the work introduce tension as a physical expression of the social environment created by the tensile strength of relying on one another or the sustained pressure associated with carrying a burden. In the context of “Ancestral Voices,” this burden might be interpreted as the struggle against colonialism’s attendant disempowerment through the upholding of *mātauranga* (knowledge) vested within *atua wāhine*.

The use of orange- and silver-coloured tie-downs, used to secure cargo for transport, can signal a warning or call for safety and caution. By using these, Mataaho are acknowledging the people in their communities who work with these materials daily. The colour orange is also a conceptual reference to the iron-rich Parawhenuamea, the embodiment of fresh water.^[05]

Parawhenuamea is the daughter of Tāne, the ancestor of the forests and birds, and Hine-tū-pari-maunga, the female ancestor of Mountains and cliffs; hence, her body descends from the mountains as streams, shifting and changing colour as they move towards the ocean, carrying with them ancient life in the form of iron oxide that enriches the soil, and therefore plants and humans. This relationship between water and rocks is further exemplified in the whakataukī “E kore a Parawhenuamea e haere ki te kore a Rakahore” (“The deity of fresh water does not exist without a relationship with rocks”), a reminder of the relationality and interconnectedness of all things, not just within nature. *Tuakirikiri* responds directly to the Biennale’s notion of an enduring, aqueous model of power, but situates it within an understanding of the environment as interconnected, with responsibilities not just towards one another but to the environment in which we live.



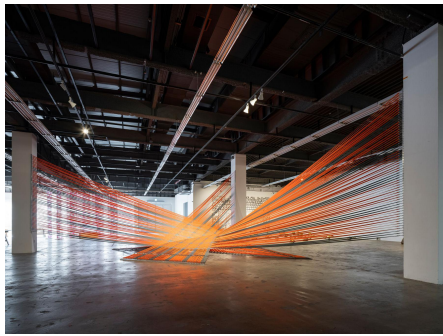
Installation View (L-R): Edgar Calel, installation view at the 14th Gwangju Biennale. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale; Seung-taek Lee, installation view of *Untitled (You Can Make Anything with It)*, 1967–9/2001/2023. Wood, rope and cloth. Dimensions variable; Mataaaho Collective, installation view of *Tuakirikiri* (2023). Polyester webbing. Installation dimensions variable. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale, supported by Creative New Zealand. All works courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Mataaaho Collective, installation view of *Tuakirikiri* (2023). Polyester webbing. Installation dimensions variable. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale, supported by Creative New Zealand. Courtesy Mataaaho Collective and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



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In the Gwangju National Museum, one of the four offsite venues, artists were invited to engage with the Museum's collections, which include artefacts from the broader Jeolla Province. Yuki Kihara's *A Song About Sāmoa–Moana (Pacific)* (2022), is found here. It's a series of five *kimono* constructed using *siapo*, a traditional Sāmoan technique of barkcloth made from the *lau u'a* (bark of a paper mulberry tree). On the backs of these *kimono* are chaotic maritime scenes rendered in a Japanese-woodblock *Ukiyo-e* style, digitally printed and hand beaded by Kihara's family in Sāmoa.

Seafaring vessels from various times and geographies list on perilous tides, while in the background the landscape and sky are set alight by flames and explosions. Galleon-like fleets, submarines and a cargo-laden barge appear alongside an *‘alia*, a double-hulled sailing vessel. American bombers soar across the left shoulder of one *kimono*, while a deep-sea mining machine trawls the seabed at its hem. Amidst this churning scene, omnipotent hands reach down from the skies to snatch at sea creatures and the *fanua* (land). This is an interpretation of an ancient story describing the genesis of the word Pālagi, meaning foreigner, whom Sāmoans believe had pierced (pā) through the sky (*lagi*) when they arrived in the Pacific. The hands that pierce the sky wield knives and forks and chopsticks, representing the successive European, Japanese and American interests in the region, and their hunger for resource extraction and geopolitical domination. The oceans are not only a space of interconnection and exchange, but often deep contestation. Kihara’s work is a sharp reproof against these multiple foreign forces that seek to carve up the Pacific.

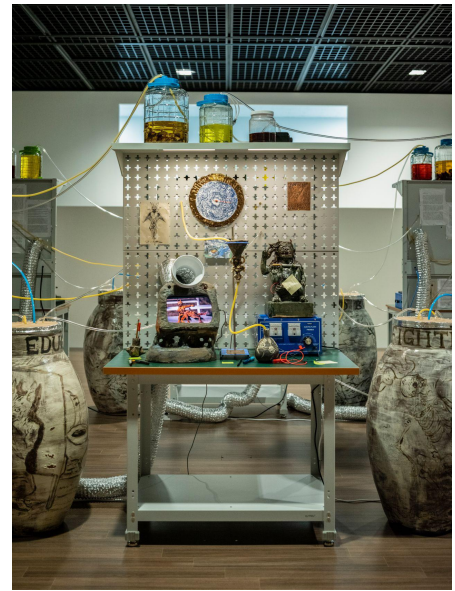
A Song About Sāmoa–Moana (Pacific) is one of a five-part series featuring 20 *kimono*, titled “サ-モアのうた (Sāmoa no uta) A Song About Sāmoa.” Kihara’s multi-disciplinary, research-driven practice often challenges singular narratives and cultural divides, and the series “A Song About Sāmoa” attempts this by exploring historical kinship and encounters between Japan and the Pacific. The starting point for these works was Kihara’s discovery of her Japanese grandmother’s brown *kimono* and noting its similarity to *siapo*. This led the artist to question how geopolitics could be expressed through the development of garment making, and towards research around depictions of the Pacific in Japanese popular culture. Printmaking, cartoons and songs were used throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries to assert Japanese dominance over the Pacific. The title of the series takes its name from a children’s song from the 1950s that describes Sāmoa as a paradise inhabited by noble savages. *Omoshirogara*, or propaganda *kimono*, were popular between 1900 and 1945, during the colonial expansion of Japan and its involvement in World War II. These *kimono* often carried images of modernity: trains, skyscrapers and ocean liners—and later, military endeavours—and provide a direct reference for “A Song About Sāmoa.”



Yuki Kihara, installation view of *A Song About Sāmoa—Moana (Pacific)* (2022). Sāmoan siapo, textiles, beads, shells and plastic. 5 pieces, 175 × 141 × 25 cm each. Supported by Creative New Zealand. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



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Candice Lin, installation view of *Lithium Sex Demons in the Factory* (2023). Manager's platform, ceramics, wood, metal work stations, laboratory stands, animation, sound, electronics, hacked stirring machines, office supplies, aluminium and plastic ducting and tubing, embossed copper sheet, magnets, drawings, printed paper, glass, plastic, various liquids, cardboard and brass fittings. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale and Canal Projects. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



Yuki Kihara, サ-モアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa - Fanua (Land)* (2021). Installation view. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Aotearoa New Zealand. Image: Glenn Frei.



Yuki Kihara, サ-モアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa - Vasa (Ocean)* (2019). Installation view. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Aotearoa New Zealand. Image: Glenn Frei.



Yuki Kihara, installation view of *A Song About Sāmoa—Moana (Pacific)* (2022). Sāmoan siapo, textiles, beads, shells and plastic. 5 pieces, 175 × 141 × 25 cm each. Supported by Creative New Zealand. Courtesy the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: glimworkers.



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In placing these *kimono* in a museum display case, Kihara asks fundamental questions about the gaze that fixes upon them: Who can look, who owns knowledge and who holds power? Japanese imperialism was built on its comparative modernity in relation to the South Pacific, and so, by reversing the gaze, Kihara brings into focus the structures that have brought ecological destruction and political instability to the Pacific. By connecting *kimono* and *siapo*, Kihara also disrupts notions of insider and outsider, allowing overlooked and intimately held stories of the Asia-Pacific region to emerge. In this ethos, making these *kimono* was a transnational effort, with artisans and designers located across Sāmoa, Japan and Aotearoa, divided by waters yet connected through a matrilineage of craftsmanship. These ideas of collectivity, craft and relational being and knowledge answer strongly to the Biennale's tenets, allowing new subjectivities and understandings of urgent global issues to arise.

For instance, Kihara's work is complemented by a deft pairing with Candice Lin's installation, *Lithium Sex Demons in the Factory* (2023), which brings together the histories of speculation on lithium extraction in California's Salton Sea and the manufacture of lithium batteries and ceramics in Korea. Lin's alchemical fermentation of lithium in *onggi*, ceramic vessels traditionally used

for fermented foods, highlights the global networks that we unknowingly rely upon, whilst speculating on the unseen and microscopic organisms that also take part in this exchange. Lin's installation responds directly to the Shinan shipwreck collection held in the Gwangju National Museum, and to its methods of display that highlight the factory-like production and trade of ceramics across Asia since the 14th century. Like Kihara's work, Lin's addresses the ongoing chains of production that connect ecologically sensitive and politically marginalised zones.

The exhibition at the Museum takes a more direct response to the Biennale's theme, *soft and weak like water*, exploring ocean trade routes as enabling connections across geographic and political boundaries. Yet, as in Kihara's *A Song About Sāmoa–Moana (Pacific)*, legacies of migration and diaspora are traced in order to foreground wider issues, where sites of displacement and rupture provide a powerful position from which to critique the centre.

In the week before our visit to Korea, Chun Woo-won, the grandson of the late military dictator and former President of South Korea, Chun Doo-hwan, made an apology to the victims and families of the 18 May Gwangju Uprising and denounced his family's actions. This generated mixed emotions, but was largely a welcomed act of admission, at least according to English-language media. At the opening weekend of the Biennale, a small protest was staged denouncing the Park Seo-Bo Art Prize, a USD100,000 award named after the senior *Dansaekhwa* (monochrome) painter. Protesters objected to the decades-long silence of Park, who refused to speak out against the military dictatorship responsible for the massacre of its citizens, and whose affiliation with the Biennale undermined the political agency of its foundations. Instead, they urged the Biennale to rename the prize after the printmaker Oh Yoon. At the time of writing, the award has been dismantled after being given to only one recipient, Oum Jeongsoon. While it is hard to grasp the significance of the Biennale to the city and its people, these small acts of resistance must be acknowledged within a continuum of almost a century of political upheaval; occupation, civil conflict and democratic awakening followed by a slow process of reparations. Like Mataaho's *Tuakiriki ri* demonstrates, change often does not come with swift action, but through the will to endure and through the groundswell of people

working in solidarity, and through the margins, as Kihara's work does. *soft and weak like water* achieves something rare that large unwieldy biennials and festivals struggle to do: It reflects the unique political consciousness of a place whilst being responsive to the audience that it serves.

Footnotes

01. "Curatorial Statement," 14th Gwangju Biennale, accessed 6 May 2023, <https://www.gwangjubiennale.org/en/exhibition/biennale/mainexhibition.do?subPage=intro>
02. Ibid.
03. Mataaho Collective, email correspondence with the author, 9 May 2023.
04. Eldson Best, *Māori Religion and Mythology Part II* (Wellington: P. D. Hasselberg, 1929), 326.
05. Mataaho Collective, email correspondence with the author, 9 May 2023.

Biographies



Mataaho Collective is a collaboration between four Māori women who produce large-scale textile-based work, commenting on the complexity of Māori lives. Their conceptual framework is founded within the contemporary realities of *mātauranga Māori* and together they produce works with single collective authorship that are bigger than their individual capabilities. Members are Erena Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) and Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne ki Wairarapa).

Recent exhibitions include *Océanie*, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France (2019); *Oceania*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK (2018); *Signature Art Prize* Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, (2018); *documenta 14*, Kassel, Germany (2017); *Making Space*, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, NZ (2017); *Noho 16*, Whau Art Centre, Auckland NZ (2016); *Disrupting the Narrative*, Thistle Hall, Wellington NZ (2015); and *International Artist Initiated*, David Dale Gallery, Glasgow UK (2014).



Yuki Kihara is an interdisciplinary artist of Japanese and Sāmoan descent. Working across a range of media including performance, lens-based media and sculpture, Kihara's research-based approach has led to a comprehensive body of work and curatorial practice that examines gender roles, consumerism, (mis)representation, and the past, present and future societal issues from an Indigenous perspective. Kihara lives and works in Sāmoa, where she has been based over the past 11 years.

Kihara's works are in the permanent collections, among others, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, British Museum, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts and Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Her works have been presented at the Asia Pacific Triennale (2002 and 2015), Auckland Triennale; (2009), Sakahan Quinquennial (2013), Daegu Photo Biennale (2014), Honolulu Biennale (2017) Bangkok Art Biennale (2018) and Aichi Triennale (2022). Kihara has been appointed by the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa to represent New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Kihara is a research fellow at Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Kihara is represented by Milford Galleries Dunedin and Queenstown.



Amy Weng is an art writer, editor and curator based in Ōtautahi Christchurch. She is the founder of *Hainamana*, a website dedicated to Asian New Zealand contemporary art and culture, and has contributed to a number of local and international publications. She was the organiser of the inaugural Asian Aotearoa Artists Hui in 2017, and is currently the curator of The Physics Room.

