

HUM

“To see us on our best day.”

Kōrerorero with Maungarongo Te Kawa

by Dávvet Bruun-Solbaak

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Zoe Black and Maungarongo Te Kawa (L-R).
Photo: Seb Charles.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space* (installation view), Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, Lillestrøm, Norway, 19 August–24 September 2023. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space* (installation view), Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, Lillestrøm, Norway, 19 August–24 September 2023. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Te Whare Pora* (detail), 2023, quilted textile, found materials, 200 × 180 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Payday and the pātaka is full* (detail), 2022, quilted textile, found materials, 325 × 217 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Waipunarangi*, 2023, quilted textile, found materials, 230 × 360 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Pātea Māori Club* (detail), 2020, quilted textile, found materials, 209 × 161 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.

After many years of collaboration between the Aotearoa, New Zealand gallery Objectspace and Oslo-based organisation Norwegian Crafts, 2023 saw the international tour of Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space, an exhibition by Ngāti Porou artist and educator Maungarongo (Ron) Te Kawa. Speaking with journalist Dávvet Bruun-Solbaak for HUM, Te Kawa discusses some of the guiding ideas of his practice; as focused on celebrating the Māori world as it is on defying the colonial attitudes still widespread in Aotearoa and Norway.

Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space is an exhibition of nine quilts made over the past three years by the artist and educator Maungarongo Te Kawa in his studio in the Manawatū region of Aotearoa, using fabric scraps, recycled clothing, sequins, and foraged thread and materials. They each hang on custom-made rails, hovering taller than most visitors, while some are as large as family dinner-tables, king-size beds, or bigger. Their scale and their stories are classical, epic, impossible to frame or contain. The textiles sewn onto each other to construct each piece depict figures of various genders, species and metaphysical states. When read alongside their titles they illustrate narratives of Māori ancestors, popular music, stars

and other inspirations for the artist. Perhaps the works are a kind of *whaikōrero*; an interwoven oratory of poetic conviction and unbounded imagination that Te Kawa has practised as an artist for over thirty years and shares again in the *kōrerorero* (conversations) below. Charting a path through the gallery are archways, which, alongside the hanging rails were designed by artist Turumeke Harrington (Kāi Tahu, Rangitāne, Ngāti Toa Rangatira), evoke *waharoa*; gateways that, in *te ao Māori* (the Māori world), mark our passage between metaphysical states. Similarly, the exhibition's title, *Te Whare Pora*, refers to the physical space where weaving was practised under the eyes of the supernatural ancestor Hineteiwaiwa. However, curator of the exhibition, Zoe Black (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine, Pākehā) writes in the exhibition catalogue that it also refers to an intangible environment of creative intentions where making, pain, joy, learning and failure might occur together in *hononga* (a joining place) with *tīpuna* (ancestors), and without judgement.^[01]

The exhibition's tour to Norway follows Black's visits in 2020 and 2021, and connections made co-editing the *Embodied Knowledge* issue of Norwegian Craft's online journal *The Vessel*.^[02] These collaborations led to the opportunity to exhibit *Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space* at Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art in Lillestrøm and Sámi Dáiddaguovddáš, the Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art in Kárášjohka, Karasjok between mid-2023 and early 2024. Te Kawa saw the tour as an opportunity for exchange and connection, facilitating multiple workshops at galleries and schools and undertaking a two-month residency at Søndre Green farm in Noresund in between the exhibitions.

Only days after Te Kawa returned from his four months away, he spoke with the Sámi journalist and activist Dávvet Bruun-Solbakk.^[03] Edited for online reading, the *kōrerorero* below launches from the exhibition into the complexities, confusions and solidarities they both experienced when objects and ideas from Te Ao Māori found themselves deep within Sámi territories.

DÁVVET BRUUN-SOLBAKK When I moderated your artist talk at Nitja with Zoe, it left a big impression on me. The main thing I took away from it was that your art and your spirit has so

much joy in it. I found that very, very profound. I wonder, where does that joy come from in your life, specifically?

MAUNGARONGO TE KAWA I would say the main emotion would be pain. I think the joy comes from the bright colours. It comes from the energy of nature and it comes from pulling the energy of nature into yourself. My people didn't have hospitals or doctors, they just had vitality. So I'm trying to get as much life force into the work using sparkles and colours and texture.

I think it's a privilege to be an artist, especially when you're working with public funds and a public gallery. I think you've got a responsibility to uplift people and make them feel good. I mean, most people go to an art gallery on the weekend. They just want to have an experience. So I try not to project my own trauma onto other people.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Pātea Māori Club*, 2020, quilted textile, found materials, 209 × 161 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Payday and the pātaka is full*, 2022, quilted textile, found materials, 325 × 217 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space* (installation view), Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, Lillestrøm, Norway, 19 August–24 September 2023. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Payday and the pātaka is full* (detail), 2022, quilted textile, found materials, 325 × 217 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Hineteiwaiwa*, 2023, quilted textile, found materials, 330 × 400 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Details of work shared during a workshop at Sámi Dáiddaguovddáš, the Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art in Kárášjohka, Karasjok. Photo: Ida Henriette Somby.



Details of work shared during a workshop at Sámi Dáiddaguovddáš, the Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art in Kárásjohka, Karasjok. Photo: Ida Henriette Somby.

DBS So, why? If you feel a lot of pain, why do you go to such bright places?

MTK It's not just me, it's my people. It's where they're at. I mean, we're the bottom of all the terrible statistics. We only own five percent of our own land in our own country. We've survived so much. I want to celebrate how much we've survived.

Sometimes when you do protest art, and you paint yourself as a victim, it means that the other people you're painting about have won, in a way, because they want you to be their victim, they want you to be broken and dull, with your volume turned down. But my wish for my people is that they are big and bold and bright and healthy and vital, like how we were before we got colonised. My work's almost like a vision board in that way.

DBS I find that very inspiring, because in Sápmi we have lots of wonderful and very powerful art, and not just protest art. But I do feel that the current Sámi art scene involves a lot of protest art and addresses all of these terrible things that we've gone through. It's not a joyful picture. It's not bright. It's not uplifting maybe in the same way that I felt hearing you speak at Nitja. I do relate to the responsibility you feel to uplift people.

I think I try to do that as well with Sápmi Pride, like when I held the festival in Guovdageaidnu [Kautokeino], where you've also been. It was kind of like a protest, because it was supposed to be held somewhere completely different. But then the bishop in

Guovdageaidnu refused to marry same-sex couples. So we decided to move the whole pride festival there because there was clearly a need for it. Then I felt like, yes, it is a kind of protest to just take up space somewhere where you don't necessarily feel like you belong, and it was also important for me to be uplifting, to show that, okay, we can have a dialogue even with the bishop, who is quite hateful towards Queer people in this area, and even with conservative organisations, instead of always fighting. There are Queer Sámi people who are deeply religious, also, in that area, and I wanted to show that it is possible to be both quite conservative in your religion and still have a fulfilled Queer life. They don't have to exist apart from each other. That's a link I've thought about since we met last time. I feel like you also do it in such a caring way. Where does that love for your people come from?

MTK Just seeing how their lives and their culture were destroyed, but the essence of the people is still there. That love for family, love for land, love for ancestors. To see what they've survived. And, in my lifetime, I mean, my childhood is completely unrecognisable to the kids now. When I was a teenager it was illegal to be Gay. It was illegal for women to own houses. It was illegal to be a sex worker. All the fun stuff was illegal! It's changed so much, but I remember those days, the mass homophobia, all of it.

DBS I think it's crazy to see how fast our communities are changing, both for the better and maybe sometimes for the worse. Another link I've thought about since the last time is the mythology and stories that your people have, and how important they are to your work. We also have similar stories. So I wonder, now that you've spent some time in Norway and Sápmi, have you noticed any links between our people?

MTK Yeah, a lot! But at different stages, I suppose. There were a lot of differences and quite a lot of confusion, as well, about what was going on around me. I don't know what to call it, but maybe it's like a magic seed that's in all Indigenous people that makes us want to explore our Indigeneity.

That was special, to sit in that shared space of exploration and just be Indigenous. I loved how the land, how nature dominated. I grew up in a culture where we were always trying to dominate nature and there was just no way she was having it out there in the Arctic Circle!



Meeting new friends at Sámi Dáiddaguovddáš, the Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art in Kárášjohka, Karasjok. Photo: Zoe Black.



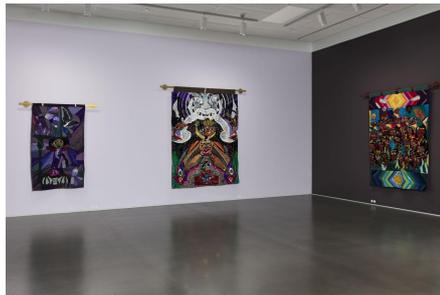
Maungarongo Te Kawa outside his exhibition *Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space* at Sámi Dáiddaguovddáš, the Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art in Kárášjohka, Karasjok. Photo: Zoe Black.



Views surrounding Kárášjohka, Karasjok. Photo: Zoe Black.



Views surrounding Kárášjohka, Karasjok. Photo: Zoe Black.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space* (installation view), Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, Lillestrøm, Norway, 19 August–24 September 2023. Photo: Kunst dok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *I am eternal creativity and the best is yet to come*, 2021, quilted textile, found materials, 205 × 190 cm. Photo: Kunst dok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Hinātore*, 2021,
quilted textile, found materials, 206 × 186
cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein /
Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.

DBS Yeah! You said there was some confusion as well.
What were some of the confusing moments when you were here?

MTK To be honest, it was the politics of skin colour in
New Zealand compared to Norway. There's such a racial divide, and
I really wouldn't feel comfortable sitting in a room full of white
men or being in their houses or being in their spaces and feeling
safe and comfortable, but I had to question all of that when I came
to Norway. You know, Sámi are fair skinned, and it was so lovely. It
was so lovely to be in a politically neutral zone, but it took me a
whole month to get my head around the realisation that I was safe.

DBS We've also talked a lot about that, because the
Norwegian government and all the governments where the Sámi
people live have tried to eradicate our culture and our language and
the whole Sámi identity for hundreds of years. So we talk a lot
about being able to put on our identity in a way that you can choose
when you want to be perceived as Sámi or not, and that kind of
makes us different to a lot of other minority groups and obviously

people of colour, that we can sometimes choose when we step into that role.

And during Sámi Pride there was a question about how we relate to people of colour, how we might see ourselves as an ethnic minority, but I didn't feel we should be claiming to understand what people of colour have been through. It's interesting how that has also shaped our society in Sápmi because—you probably recognise this too—some people do not want to be Indigenous and so they stray away from that and then they can deny where they come from. And for Sámi it's so much easier, because you can't really tell anymore who is Sámi and who isn't. But now you've been in Sápmi and Norway for a while, what have you learned during your travels here up north?

MTK I learned so much. The vibration of the land and the breath of the land, the flow of the rivers. I got to work with Sámi artists Marte Lill Somby and Laila Labba in Kárášjohka, and learn all about the Sámi Parliament. I mean, that's something that, for my people, is just a dream. So I got to see what's possible with the Sámi university and the museum.

DBS What were some of the reactions in Kárášjohka?

MTK There is a group of Māori people who live in Kárášjohka, so they saw the poster at the local supermarket and they all came along. It was good to have them there. I'd be talking about my ancestors meeting and they could see them. I felt like I wasn't on my own.

And I got challenged a couple of times. There was a man there. He was Sámi and he thought that some of the work looked scary and I had to say, no, they're not scary. But he was really challenged. He wasn't going to take no for an answer. If we went into the forest and saw a big, totem pole-type carving we'd go and rub its belly and say hello. We were never taught that they were scary. It's somebody's ancestor. It's not an 'oogie boogie' monster, but he was so challenged. He was asking why the woman's eyes were so big and I

just said that so often in my life women are told to put their eyes down, look at the ground, don't say anything. They never get to be the ones in the middle of the story, so I've given them the eyes that are just blatantly staring out. Because that's my little protest, we never get to look.

DBS That's so cool that you had that interaction. I remember the children's TV shows that we had in Sápmi when I was young. Now *that* was scary. There were a lot of horror stories and I remember the stories that my mom and my grandparents told: "Don't go down to the river, there's this river monster that will come and eat you up" or "Never make fun of the Northern Lights or they will come and grab you." So I feel like we have a lot of those very scary stories that I grew up with both at home and on TV.

MTK ... and also just being stared at by a woman. He just could not handle it at all. Which was the whole point.

Another thing about being in Kárášjohka was the light. For Māori, everything comes from the light and light had its own evolution. It was just the genealogy of the universe. So it was good to see a different light just as spectacular during the day as in the night!



Maungarongo Te Kawa, *Te Whare Pora* (detail), 2023, quilted textile, found materials, 200 × 180 cm. Photo: Kunstdok / Tor Simen Ulstein / Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art.



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DBS Now I really want to come and visit you, because I
want to see how the light is down there!

MTK Very stark!

DBS When you talk about your connection to nature and your ancestors, I feel like you know your culture so well, and your community and the stories, and I feel kind of jealous! And I don't mean that you haven't had any problems with government or anything like that, but it's just so beautiful to see that so much of the way of thinking and the stories have prevailed. I feel like we have lost most of that—our religion and our stories and our language—some of it has already died out. It's very uplifting to hear you talking, actually.

MTK A lot of Māori culture has been lost. But there's also been a huge resurgence in the last ten or more years. So, there's always hope. In the 90s some people still thought that Māori culture was going to die out and now it's stronger than ever. I feel so lucky to be a Māori every single day. We have our own pretty awesome people.

DBS Yeah, I also love being Sámi, and it's also something I can't really choose—it's just the way I am. First and foremost, I feel like I am Sámi and I'm so proud of my heritage and culture and my family and my ancestors and nature, and I feel that your work and what you do, it really reminds me of what we have and to not always think about my career or that the cooler parties are in the city! Your work, and talking with you, makes me appreciate what I have and where I come from.

MTK It's fantastic. It's a completely different universe, the Indigenous universe, it's one that feeds you on all levels, it fulfils you.

For example, for me, in a totally decolonised, indigenised version of my culture, it's just totally normal to be Gay. And we're a part of every family. We're an important part, you know, we're our sister's longest relationship with a male. The ones that help the nieces and nephews, and buy the school clothes, or whatever. We have responsibilities in a family.

DBS I remember when I was growing up, because Christianity has been in Sápmi for a long time, we had a lot of Christian values.

So then being Queer became very 'no-no'. And I remember people were saying being Gay or Queer, it's a Western construct, so you can't possibly be Gay or Queer or anything in the Sámi culture because it doesn't belong to our culture. I found that very ironic. Obviously that attitude is from Christianity, which is not a traditional Sámi religion.

And it's so cool to see now that we have a lot more openly Queer people in Sápmi today than just ten years ago, including Queer Sámi people in government. It's not only headless people on Grindr now, they actually have some real photos there! So, it's been very fun to be a part of it, and amazing that during my lifetime there has been so much positive change. It's been healing, both for me, but I also feel for the whole community, that we can kind of see that there is hope and love out there.

MTK Yeah, we've got to remember those rights were fought for. And in Aotearoa, we had a treaty with the English colonists that meant our culture was equal to English culture, we were equal, but they had a completely different interpretation. So overnight, women lost all their rights to their land after signing this treaty, and Gay people became criminalised. It took 150 years of fighting to change the law. And right now, it's the most right-wing government we've probably ever had. They want to review this treaty and start a constitutional debate. It's going to be really interesting. The artists now have to step up.

We stopped being organised and we stopped, as artists, protesting and having protest exhibitions or poetry nights within the last twenty years. And I think it's time to step back up to the plate, because a lot of the protests that are happening on the street, they're just not safe. They're throwing bottles, they're throwing bricks, they're attacking the police, so it's not actually safe for people to get out there and protest on the streets because that's not the kind of protest we want to have. Largely, Māori protests

have historically been really, really peaceful, and children and old people come first.

DBS How do you and your art fit into that climate?

MTK I think I fit in really well. Just existing is a political statement. Just getting out of bed, saying, I'm Gay, I'm Indigenous, and I'm an artist with my own opinions, that is quite subversive for society. So on that level—to work, and work, and work, and work as much as you can, and be an artist, fill out the forms, do the talk, walk the walk—that's the most political statement you can make. I have my own freedom, I have my own sovereignty, I have my own opinion, I make my own way.

So I could just put a scribble on a piece of paper and hang it up and it's already political. But I make my quilts as beautiful and colourful and powerful as possible. I look at a pile of fabric before I make the quilt and think, what's the biggest "Fuck you" I can make with these clothes?

Even on the news in New Zealand, if the newsreader greets people, opens the news in the Māori language, there'll be so many complaints and attacks and just hate for my culture, so I do the biggest, most beautiful, brightest "Fuck off" as my political statement, because that's what would really hurt them, to see us on our best day ever.

DBS I love that. And thank you so much for all that you do. You have really inspired me to both continue what I already do, and also take on some new perspectives, and I find so much hope in what you do.

MTK Cheers!

Footnotes

01. Zoe Black, *Te Whare Pora: A Sacred Space* (Lillestrøm: Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, 2023), 1.

02. Zoe Black, Jasmine Te Hira and Carola Grahn, “Embodied Knowledge; Exploring the Influence of Whakapapa and Maadtoe jah Maahtoe,” *The Vessel* 3, May 2022, <https://vessel-magazine.no/issues/3/embodiedknowledge/editorial-third-issue>.

03. Different spellings denoting the Sámi people occur in English, including Sami, Sámi and Saami. The ancestral land of the Sámi peoples—stretching across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia—is known by many different names stemming from different Sámi languages, including Sápmi (in Northern Sámi), Sábme (in Lule Sámi), Saepmie (in Southern Sámi), Sábmie (in Ume Sámi).

Biographies



Maungarongo Te Kawa (Ngāti Porou, b. 1969) has been working prolifically in fashion, art, community and education in Aotearoa New Zealand for the past three decades. Using sewing as a conduit to connect with people, he expertly guides workshop participants to confidently create with fabric and express their genealogy through sewing. Te Kawa has exhibited throughout Aotearoa, including solo exhibitions in 2021 at Centre of Contemporary Art Toi Moroki and Objectspace, and in 2020 at Te Kōputu a te Whanga a Toi, Whakatāne. He was awarded Best Futuristic Design at the 2006 Canterbury Fashion Awards, has been nominated for a Benson & Hedges Fashion Design Award, and in 2019 he was named the Adult Community and Education Aotearoa Māori Educator of the Year.



Dávvet Bruun-Solbakk (Karášjohka/Deatnu, b. 1995) is a journalist and activist, and has a long organisational background in the Sámi youth organisation Noereh and the Queer Sámi organisation Garmeres. Bruun-Solbakk has previously led Sápmi Pride in both Kautokeino and Trondheim, and in recent years has also collaborated with festivals and art institutions on a number of projects. Dávvet also hosts the podcast Sameting, together with teacher and stand-up comedian Isalill Kolpus.

