

# THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

## Orissa Keane

### ***A response to Martin Awa Clarke Langdon's *Return home Tūi. Let your song remind us of histories unseen* and *Room to breathe: Ka tau hā te mauri****

In the North Quad of Te Matatiki Toi Ora, on one of the raised grass beds, sits the work *Return home Tūi. Let your song remind us of histories unseen* by Martin Awa Clarke Langdon. The work is made in response to an historical event, and yet, the word history feels reductive in the sense that it does not always leave room to consider the multiplicity of meaning held in such a site. *Return home Tūi* is part of SCAPE Public Art's 2020 season titled *Secrets and Lies*. This installation sits in conversation with the exhibition *Room to breathe: Ka tau hā te mauri*, also by Langdon, at The Physics Room. These projects stem from the same conceptual base: Remembering the multiple narrative threads of Te Araiteuru. Langdon calls for these projects to be engaged with in the same spirit they were created; using a “whakapapa model of layering of histories, people and events, linked through time” rather than turning to linear and individuated thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Te Araiteuru is the name of the staged pā created for the 1906-7 New Zealand International Exhibition, located in what is now part of Hagley Park.<sup>2</sup> The name is shared with one of the main waka which carried Ngāi Tahu tūpuna to Te Waipounamu. Despite the pā's name, and its being situated on Ngāi Tahu land, the iwi were barely involved in its construction, or in wider consultation. The pā was staged for the spectacle and entertainment of tauiwi and pākehā—not as a space for the people it feigned to represent. To add to the problematic context of the New Zealand International Exhibition, Ngāi Tahu were at the time petitioning the Crown for redress to breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and purchase deeds.<sup>3</sup> In 1906 the South Island Landless Natives Act (SILNA) was passed after thirteen years surveying for the poorest quality and most isolated pockets of land. These lands were then granted to members of Ngāi Tahu as reserves in an attempt by

the Crown to address the already inadequate provision of reserves in recognition of Te Tiriti. SILNA is infamously known for its fruitless resolution after a series of commissions and reports which tested the hope and trust of wronged individuals and communities over a period spanning decades.<sup>4</sup>

Demarcating an area and offering it as a space for contemplation, Langdon suggests an alternative approach to generic historicisation. Rather, this gesture—employed in both *Return home Tūi* and *Room to breathe*—seems to say that in remembering, we can learn to consciously create spaces with clear intentions in the present. Each work in *Room to breathe: Ka tau hā te mauri* is collaborative. Langdon's style of collaboration accommodates each participant in a way that maintains their creative and personal agency. The same autonomy is afforded to the audience with the way that Langdon evidences processes and research, aiding the viewer to draw informed conclusions from the works. The absence of an apparent collaborator in *Return home Tūi* could suggest a different form of collaborative engagement; perhaps Langdon extends an offer for collaboration to his audience as an invitation to consider this history in relation to mana whenua, through stories both written and unwritten. Collaboration is supposed to be a negotiation with credit given to each party for the outcome. Credit is due to an audience who enters into that negotiation, working with the strands Langdon offers to consider Te Araiteuru.<sup>5</sup>

Langdon's research in collaboration with Te Matatiki Toi Ora for the work *Kōhatu* within *Room to Breathe: Ka tau hā te mauri* has uncovered a tangle of symbolism and poetry. *Kōhatu* is one word for stone. The work consists of six large stones, formerly foundation blocks of the old chemistry building of Te Matatiki Toi Ora. Relocated to the grass verge outside The Physics Room, the *kōhatu* create an outline. A boundary not for keeping out or in, but for welcoming; a threshold to acknowledge *Room to breathe* and the space you are entering before even reaching the doors. The stonemasons who collaborated with Langdon for *Kōhatu* explained how, because of their mineral make up, they could determine that the *kōhatu* were not from Ōtautahi. It's likely that they came from overseas in the form of ships' ballasts. Ballasts provide stability to ships just as foundations do to buildings. Langdon, in his artist talk, draws a parallel with a Māori navigation custom of "leaving stone and taking stone to other places to ground your history, or bind your histories together."<sup>6</sup> These selected *kōhatu* travelled from another land to ground a history in a building's foundation. That building was the chemistry building of Canterbury College (now the University of Canterbury). In the 1960s these science classrooms became art studios and gallery spaces and it was from these classrooms which, in the '90s, The Physics Room took its name after years roaming

as the South Island Art Projects. In reference to this coincidence (the naming and the reconnection of The Physics Room to a piece of its namesake) Langdon says that when you look at whakapapa, “serendipitous doors open,” connections are made and the links that bind all things become more evident.<sup>7</sup>

While waiting for their incorporation into the reconstruction of local civic buildings, the kōhatu have renewed purpose. Langdon describes how these waiting stones have mauri, they have histories and stories; they once belonged to another whenua and the natural movement of the land, then they were guided here by the movement of people and empires. When the land moved suddenly with the 2011 earthquake, they were set aside and finally brought out into the open. Brought here, outside The Physics Room, “we can consider them for their other properties,” for their stories.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps one by one they will be taken as needed.<sup>9</sup>

As part of this mode of revealing connections, evidence of the research and making processes for each work are made accessible to the audience. Langdon pins notes and images from the stonemasons about the kōhatu on cork boards. A monitor shows the closed Facebook group where the artists involved in *To hold up the sky* are offered a space to continue conversations. In a ringbinder, documentation for *What's in a name?* shows the importance of the letters each student from Ararira Spring Primary School chose to represent. *What's in a name?* reflects on the way that the name Te Araiteuru was misappropriated for the staged pā. The project required each of the children to think about their own name, its importance, and the knowledge it carries. The letter that each student made, from lashed kōrari (harakeke flower stalks) represented a name that held significance for them. A space in the gallery was created by lashing together all the letters; reminiscent of a play pen by the height of its boundary and the shape of its rounded interior. Anyone was allowed in but while institutional conventions deterred adults, children seemed to know it was for them, aided by the child-sized opening of a waharoa (arched entrance-way) built into the gallery, and the knowledge that children had helped make the fenced space itself. Langdon believes that a good measure for true collaboration with kids is when they feel they were part of the end result—the students could proudly point to their contribution.<sup>10</sup> The letters have been returned to the school following the close of the exhibition.

Lashed kōrari appears in both The Physics Room and SCAPE exhibitions. Langdon says that one translation or understanding of hohou (lashing) is to settle and the same verb carries the meaning, to make peace. The concept seems capable of combining objects, histories, peoples, and memories; to settle and to rest together.

The act of lashing is hard on the hands, it abrades the edges of fingers pulling the twine tight. There is effort, pain, and something taught (and taut) through lashing, just as there is in the ongoing recognition of histories of a place.

*To hold up the sky* is a collaboration Martin initiated with five other indigenous artists, each from a different land.<sup>11</sup> The work consists of a series of six framed photographs composed and captured by the artists after carrying out a task set by Langdon. “There’s this idea of the earth, waiting, and holding things together and the rakau that’s used to hold up that space is what informed the writing that was sent to the artists.”<sup>12</sup> Langdon refers to the lesser-known narrative before the great rupture—before Tāne, god of forests, separated Ranginui and Papatūānuku—when there were only small ruptures. Pockets between land and sky, a space held by rakau, when the pair would move and the light would come in and there would be room to breathe. Each image depicts a structure resembling a shelter; something flat being stretched to a peak and held up by something long and sturdy, weighed down at the corners to create a small pocket of space. Langdon described the instructions he issued as employing emotive language and prompting attention to material significance rather than prescribing a final form for the structure to take. Each artist involved in *To hold up the sky* is part of a different indigenous group and none of the artists were aware of the form which one another’s structures were taking until each was finished. Langdon is interested in the overlaps between different indigenous peoples, knowing that certain materials, concepts, and stories can be understood, even if these are not explicitly shared. In the end, the structures in each photograph echoed the forms of its neighbours. Langdon’s structure was made from a well-loved and hand-quilted blanket, installed in Hagley Park at the location of the 1906 Te Araiteuru. The task resulted in structures made with inherent meaning and clear intention, their makers aware of who and what the space was for. Each framed photograph has been returned to their artist following the close of the exhibition.

The popular, vision-oriented metaphor for remembering, to look back, doesn’t allow for the sound of a tūī’s call or the feel of a place. The phrase, Return home Tūī, refers to a number of Māori proverbs which relate the appearance of kōwhai flowers to the arrival of spring—with the new season, the tūī and seasonal kai such as whitebait return. *Return home Tūī. Let your song remind us of histories unseen* asks for the return of birds to our cityscapes.

In *Return home Tūī*, particularly, time and history are treated by Langdon like a cumulative substance; layering and merging—sticky—inextricable and ongoing.

The raised grass bed in the North Quad with scaffolding at its boundary nods to a pā. Letter forms made from kōrari are lashed to the scaffold, drawing shadows of a tangled alphabet. Within the border is a 3D-printed replica of a tī kōuka trunk, with a section of the original tree at its top supporting a wharemanu (birdhouse). At its base is a large concrete foundation block, reminiscent of those found assisting the ongoing reconstruction of Te Matatiki Toi Ora. All in one place are new technologies, old technologies, the tūi song, and memories of the earthquake, a staged pā, a mahinga kai.

Langdon's works for SCAPE and The Physics Room foreground the artist's conscious but seemingly innate capacity for knowledge-sharing and openness. These values extend to the audience in a way that is not always common in contemporary art. Histories, stories, and whakapapa are present through a focus on material significance, process, and collaboration. The difficult memories of a place—the memories of Te Araiteuru—are held by children, by indigenous artists, by stonemasons, and by the audience. There is room to breathe and a place to continue on from.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Email correspondence from Martin Awa Clarke Langdon with the author, October 7, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Christchurch City Libraries, “Te Araiteuru: The Māori Pā,” <https://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/Exhibitions/1906/Exhibits/TeAraiteuruPa/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Artist Talk with Martin Awa Clarke Langdon at The Physics Room, August 30, 2020, 5:19.
- <sup>4</sup> See: Te Rūnganga o Ngāi Tahu, “SILNA”, October 5, 2017, [https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/our\\_stories/silna-tk75/](https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/our_stories/silna-tk75/); Mackay, A 1891, Middle Island Natives Claims, *AJHR* 1891 II G-07, pp. 45-59.
- <sup>5</sup> Martin elaborates on this in his artist talk, “Rather than trying to create work about the pā itself, it’s finding tangential ways of exploring those ideas and then folding them back in on themselves in this exhibition with three strands, you, as the audience, can reapply some of those ideas to that moment.” Artist talk with Martin Awa Clarke Langdon at The Physics Room, August 30, 2020, 6:00.
- <sup>6</sup> Artist Talk with Martin Awa Clarke Langdon at The Physics Room, August 30, 2020, 21:25.
- <sup>7</sup> Artist Talk with Martin Awa Clarke Langdon at The Physics Room, August 30, 2020, 23:50.
- <sup>8</sup> Artist Talk with Martin Awa Clarke Langdon at The Physics Room, August 30, 2020, 20:22.
- <sup>9</sup> Indeed, one was removed long before the rest in January 2021, although the others followed soon enough. They stayed in front of The Physics Room, waiting, for months.
- <sup>10</sup> Artist Talk with Martin Awa Clarke Langdon at The Physics Room, August 30, 2020, 18:20.
- <sup>11</sup> Cora-Allan Wickliffe (Niue: Alofi / Liku), Daniel Twiss (Lakota Rosebud Reservation), Dean Cross (Raised on Ngunnawal / Ngambri Country, of Worimi descent), Tsēmā Igharas (Tahltan First Nation), Richelle Bear Hat (Blackfoot, Cree—Siksika First Nation, Blueberry First Nation).
- <sup>12</sup> Artist Talk with Martin Awa Clarke Langdon at The Physics Room, August 30, 2020, 8:20.