

# ***Kāpuia ngā aho* 單絲不綫**

Wai Ching Chan and Tessa Ma'auga

Curated by Michelle Wang

12 March – 24 April, 2022

## **A response by Kim Lowe**

Nō hea koe? Where are you from? This question is contentious for many Chinese who have grown up in Aotearoa New Zealand. More likely than not, the answer is Oamaru, or Dunedin, or Wellington, when the expected answer would likely have been a distant Asian nation. In tikanga Māori, it is one of the first things you'll learn about anyone, because knowing your relationship to the land, hapū, whānau, and to each other is at the heart of everything. *Kāpuia ngā aho* 單絲不綫 is an exhibition that invites artists and visitors of Chinese descent to share and celebrate identity. The artists—Tessa Ma'auga and Wai Ching Chan, with curator Michelle Wang—have presented an exhibition that draws on Chinese tradition and ancestry, crafts and space-making, alongside indigenous Chinese creation stories that often parallel the pūrākau of te ao Māori.

In Chinese creation stories (variations are as many as there are indigenous peoples of China), the world was seen as a giant turtle whose name was Ao. Nǚwā, the great goddess of the heavens, was said to have chopped Ao's legs off to prop up the world. Like Tāne-Mahuta lifting up the heavens, separating his parents Ranginui and Papatūānuku, and bringing light into the world when he grew the forests to lift the sky from the earth, the pillar legs of Ao are the ladder, link, and wedge that drove the two elements apart. Nǚwā, often depicted as having the body of a snake or dragon, was said to have created humans from mud first by hand and then by swinging rope dipped in mud, the splatters becoming human life and form. Similarly, Tāne was the first artist who formed humans and creatures from sculpting the clay earth to form Hineahuone, the first wāhine Māori. Both the trees of Tāne and the legs of Ao are referenced in the exhibition through the four pillars of hanging, knotted, or crocheted thread made from the fibres of banana bast, harakeke, silk, and mop rope.

Tangaroa, and the oceans that were traversed, are represented here in one or more of Ao's legs, as pillars with knotted ropes of shells and pearls. Wai's work reminds us that pearls, although beautiful, are a product of trauma to the oyster, first as the

animal smooths over the implanted bead with layers of silky shell, and again as the gem is extracted from the meat and shell when harvested. This uneasy renewal is reiterated throughout the show. The knots are never-ending and the knitting forms a helix, like eternal DNA that is passed down through the generations.

The gallery is darkly lit and brooding, full of the potential of Yin and Nǔwā, Te Kore and Te Pō. The dark emphasises Tessa's backlit mulberry paper cutouts referencing her recollections of tropical village life, full of chickens and livestock, plants, birds, and a turtle navigating the wave forms. The cutouts are inspired by traditional Chinese paper cutting but also echo Pacific woodblock prints bursting with form and animated with pattern and symbol.

On the opposing wall, Wai has hung three red, crocheted, korowai-like forms, referencing the body and scales of the dragon or snake scales of Nǔwā. Wai is from Hong Kong and has remained in New Zealand after graduating from Elam; the work is a kind of love letter to her mum. Tiger mums don't often tell their kids they love them. (Neither, do I suspect, did many New Zealand mums until recently. Maybe it's a 21st century thing.) They tend to cook to express their love for family and/or send money, but in Wai's case it was crochet jumpers that were sent across the oceans as the "love language" her mother used to keep Wai warm.

Tessa's whakapapa is diverse. Her father is third generation Canadian/American Chinese; her mother has US Jewish ancestry and the family were one of only two Chinese families living in an African American neighbourhood in Seattle. When she moved to Paekakariki at the age of four her father encouraged her to learn the language of the land and was enrolled in a local te reo Māori immersion class. Being schooled in mātauranga Māori has given her insight into indigenous Chinese cultures through a te ao Māori lens.

Fellow artists, friends, and whānau with Chinese whakapapa were invited to participate through a series of hui and collaborate by contributing an item representative of their identity. The taonga were bound with lucky knots made of harakeke and silk and hung in one corner of the gallery. Many of the objects relate to food: a Peking duck fridge magnet, a tiny inscribed wok, chopsticks, recipes, and a cookbook.

Simon Kaan's contribution was a pencilled recipe for "Bows" (bau) by his Aunty Violet. It includes 16 cups of flour:

In regards to the Bow piece, it is from one of my Aunty Violet's recipe

books that I am now the kaitiaki of. She passed away in 2020 aged 93. I think the recipe was written in the late 80's, I know because it is written on the back of some form of legal contract (dated) which is a classic form of Chinese recycling. When I was growing up our houses backed onto each other (she didn't marry and had no kids). She was the whānau baker and I used to spend a lot of time down there with her baking when I was a kid. When I was older, as a teenager, she use to ask me to go to the supermarket to get the pigs' heads for the bao, that she had pre-ordered (cheap), and I still had to take them through the checkout and get shamed by the horror look on the poor checkout girls' faces.

Xin Cheng's taonga was a calligraphy pen hand-made from bamboo collected in Lower Hutt. Her item referenced the village of her grandparents' who live in a bamboo forest near Shanghai. In the hui, Xin explained that it wasn't until she was studying at a German university that she was made aware of the nuances in the transliterations of her language.

On the wall of my old typography professor, the Dutch designer Wigger Bierma's office was this calligraphy (危機). He used to say this is 危 danger + 機 opportunity = 危機 crisis. So in every crisis there is opportunity. Even though I knew this word from growing up in China. It was only outside of China that I started seeing aspects of 'my' culture with such delight and appreciation. I feel that this kind of delightful appreciation is what we could practice more of as we evolve into communities of co-existing diversity.

Chinese whakapapa comes in many forms. Hui participants had links to early gold mining sojourners who came to escape poverty and make their fortunes; to later 20th century migrants leaving first wives and children in the homeland looking for better prospects in market gardens, fruit shops, and laundries; self-described Kiwi kids and 1.5 generationers who came with parents and have been schooled and educated in New Zealand; graduates of New Zealand universities and tertiary providers; those with a Chinese grandparent or two. Some of us are full Chinese, some are stealth Asian with a whole mix of diverse ancestry. Regardless of how much or little connection to China we have, we have whakapapa, and were invited to share and celebrate this.

This exhibition expands on the kaupapa of relationship building that formed during the Aotearoa Asian Artists Hui. The first in 2017 at Te Tuhi (after its preceding

Aotearoa Chinese Artists hui at Corban Estate Art Centre in 2013), then the AAAHUI 2018 in Wellington, where Tessa and Wai met. *Kāpuia ngā aho* 單絲不綫 and the hui that ran alongside it provided an intimate and personal approach to this ongoing conversation with kaupapa Māori at its core. Tessa and Wai have transposed the love language of knots and crochet; binding and weaving together ancestry with threads of storytelling from the many different experiences of Chinese culture in a generous and loving way to nurture and grow a stronger community. It was a return to village ideals with slow burning connections being made through mihimihi and sharing of whakapapa, knowledge, and experiences.

**Kotahi te aho, ka whati; ki te kāpuia, e kore e whati.**

When a reed stands alone it is vulnerable, but a group of reeds together is unbreakable.

**單絲不綫**

A single thread can't make a cord.

**單絲不成線，獨木不成林**

One thread does not make a yarn, one tree does not make a forest, one person alone cannot accomplish much.

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**Kim Lowe** is an artist, printmaker, and educator based in Ōtautahi. Originally from Murihiku Southland, she has mixed-race Chinese and Pākehā ancestry [Seyip, China and Havana, Cuba (paternal grandmother); Junsing, China (paternal grandfather); Ireland and England (maternal grandmother); and Aberdeen, Scotland (maternal grandfather)]. She is also a tiger mum with partner Niels, to their three children who whakapapa to Ngāi Tahu.

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