

Te puku o te taniwha

curated by AJ Fata and including works by
Kahurangiariki Smith, Tyrone Te Waa and Fata
04 August – 03 September, 2023

Puku Problems (or: how taniwha teach us to go with our gut)

A response by Kirsty Dunn and Conor Lorigan

The following is written in response to the exhibition Te puku o te taniwha, curated by AJ Fata and including works by Kahurangiariki Smith, Tyrone Te Waa and Fata, at The Physics Room. For images of the exhibition, the works referred to in this kōrero, and more detail about the artists, you can visit the exhibition webpage: physicsroom.org.nz/exhibitions/te-puku-o-te-taniwha.

K I've been thinking a lot about how that feeling you get in your puku when you're attracted to someone is similar to the onset of dread. That quick sinking stomach thing that happens when you get heart-eyes feels a lot like the sudden suspicion that you might have left the oven on at home when you're on the other side of the city, eh. To dread or be apprehensive of—“whakarika”—also means interest, enthusiasm, motivation. Clever tūpuna.

That sinking is what I feel in the lead-up to art openings and gatherings where all the cool people hang and know how to talk to each other. But when I finally get to *Te Puku o te Taniwha* (I go on the second-to-last day having missed the opening and the wānanga) [Slack] I realise that time within the puku—and the reaching out, drawing in, boundary obliteration, and mystery within each of the artist's works (so much given, so much withheld, but gently)—has me wondering whether there's more to all those sinking, churning, rere and riri feels inside. Rongo ā-puku: instinct. Maybe they are my intestinal taniwha, trying to get my attention.

C We come to these things with people and the first time I had a look at the exhibition, there were so many people I didn't even look at it really, I looked at us. The second time I saw it was at an artist talk. I was a bit late and everyone was sitting in a circle on the floor. Floor sitting seems to be a growing trend that I am against unless it's in a wharenuī. Otherwise bust out the chairs please. My millennial slouch needs to be able to lean back. [Millennial Slouch. Good band name.] So we sat around and quickly the discussion turned to the puku as a guide to our interaction with people(art).

Honey Brown made us all welcome and asked generous questions so the talk was easy. Everyone had something to say on puku. AJ Fata (ajhoneysuckle) said a massage and deep breaths down that way can help heaps. Oh God, haemorrhoids. [Woah you went there; good for you]. These things that appear on anuses. Everyone has puku problems and some of us have haemorrhoids too. Mine sometimes talk to an autoimmune thing—a confused state of not knowing where to focus—aro—aroaro. [Oooh aro, ara, anā! Haha]. This autoimmune thing can link to tubes in the liver that move bile around and the nurse said the blood test the other day was for liver function so we'll see. And then I've been wanting to find ways to think of my uncle Damien who died earlier this year. He had heaps of liver problems among many other things. Moe mai rā matua. [Ka aroha x]. And none of this is really an overshare if you were there but if you're cold reading this and didn't have a chance to sit around with us maybe it sounds off but I can say that even in a short time our puku brought us together, we became one puku, haha. [Kotahi tummy tātou lol].

K There's been a fair amount of chat about gut health recently [Watch out wellness]. I write this with my own puku problems; swelling and soreness and sadness even. Always the sinking. Auē; what if those swirling internal taniwha are prompting us to sort our shit out?! Like, literally—haha. (“Look after your pukes, babes”). I play Kahurangiariki Smith's game and Conor sends me a photo of the moment later—my head tilted to the side like I do when I'm thinking about how to answer a question that will keep me up at night for months to come. *What if my best friend was a taniwha*, though? And if there's one alive at every intestinal bend (he piko he taniwha) then maybe I should think more carefully about what I'm feeding them; pay more attention to where we are going.

Speaking of, *Hina* glows at me from across the room—like “hey; did someone say navigate?” and while you'll often hear me curse my exponential grey hair count, that loving pink-purple aunty-tanga hahana emanating from Kahurangiariki's portrait

reminds me of the shine and wisdom in the hina/grey areas; those layers of story and memory and feeling. I look up and Tyrone Te Waa's multi-limbed (awhi-asking?) *Fleapit* beckons me to the pito of the puku.

C Gilles Deleuze was French so folding on folding on folding of rhizome was really just him thinking through croissant as buttery conduit. [Hau ora / ara hou—ngā pata o te pata!]. One way I joined the three artists is with sediment like a lolly cake. Tyrone Te Waa talked about the bits and pieces that collect in the stockings of his hanging piece, as those things that accumulate. [Oooh sentiment sediment...] I want to hear AJ, Kahurangiariki and Tyrone talk to the Martinique poet Edouard Glissant. In *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Glissant writes that “We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments.” [I love this]. Glissant is a taniwha of the Black Atlantic.

In her audio work for the show, AJ played with Detroit-based electronic music duo (active 1992-2002) Drexciya. Drexciya is also the submerged underwater country populated by the unborn children of slaves who were thrown overboard during the middle passage. The Otolith Group's *Hydra Capita* (2010) video installation thinks about this imagined country to “explore notions of globalisation, capitalism and climate change, with particular attention to the relationships between finance, death, abstraction and language”. [Bit of a punch to the puku there, e hoa]. From Drexciya and Glissant, with AJ, Kahurangiariki and Tyrone we get toward what Kodwo Eshun calls sonic futurism.

K Tyrone's mahi, a soft sculpture suspended from the ceiling snaking through space, in its reaching toward (and I mean by all those modes of taniwha-being in the puku, the felt(!) works resting on the pakitara and those climbing elsewhere) asks us to reach back; to touch. Which gets me thinking about how we sometimes say “touchy feely” or “so and so is touchy” and how feelings are intangible and I think about how kupu behave like all those gesturing limbs. Those (are they severed?) endings that are beginnings, tiny blood-red threads of potential asking for acknowledgement; aho, pito, aho. This sedimentary sentiment idea is one I'll keep returning to I think; that we carry with us this genetic, emotional, experiential, intergenerational, transoceanic, cosmic build-up. And all of this brings me into Aj Fata's mahi; *The Puku Playlist* we get to swim in for a while, and *Wairepo*—which for me represents the vibrancy and layers—the dynamism—within things we might perceive to be still, maybe even stagnant. There's so much going on under there

that we can't see. And then there's *Hīnaki Taniwha Hikuroa* too (or two even), AJ's wire sculpture, which prompts me to consider what gets trapped and stays and gets used and transformed and what gets to travel elsewhere and be deposited—to accumulate—somewhere else. No wonder our taniwha get a wriggle on every now and then.

C And I was thinking of this sonic futurism when ajhoneysuckle and Infordin played at the Queer Horizons night later that week. [Oh geez another cool thing I had to miss]. Honey made us welcome there too. I went to this dance in the hope of contributing to, as Eshun says, induce “a perceptual daze rendering today's sonic discontinuum immediately audible.” [Lol—what?] And then Kahurangiariki's glowing Hina seems to play a role alongside the sonic as something of ngā rongo a puku. Filling the room with fluoro pink offers a soft haptic tension shared by Tyrone's felted works. And Kahurangiariki said about filling up hauora with things like dance and soju as well as those things like rest and kai and so maybe it was good for me to dance, [it was!] (if not for anyone else who witnessed that awkward one-sided friendship I have with rhythm as a practicing sensationalist). So I'm thinking of sonic daze through the kind chances I was offered to be around, listen and dance with AJ, Kahurangiariki, Tyrone, Honey, and the rest of te puku.

K One thing I've been a bit pukuriri about lately is how the word 'taniwha' is sometimes used to refer to a terrible thing that's happened or happening; some kind of yuckiness in our midst. COVID-19 was called a taniwha and I've heard climate change referred to as a taniwha too. I'm reminded of Garrick Cooper's kōrero regarding the consideration of taniwha as “divine interlocutors”, “harbingers or message bearers of impending change” and the notion that they are drawn from their dens in response to some kind of threat or challenge; I like this idea that the movement of the taniwha notifies us of that thing, calls us to action, rather than the taniwha itself being the “bad thing”—it's the intensifier (a bit like the kupu “puku” too).

For me, these works remind us that taniwha are responsive—to our action (or lack thereof), to our ideas, emotions; these works are moving (in the puku-feely sense), and there's movement within them, but *Te Puku o te Taniwha* also gets us to *move* too. To look closer, not so much as a naval gazing exercise (coz eww), but more in terms of turning our attention to the layers of our ideas, and descriptions and the stories we tell (and haven't yet told) about taniwha, in order to appreciate their

fluidity, their shape-shiftery awesomeness, and their role in our imagined futures. But at the same time, they remind us of our relationships with each other (human and more-than-human) as well as with our bodies and the goings on inside of them; they, like us, are never just one thing, but accumulations, amalgamations, sediments and sentiments together, having their own little kanikani in the dark.

Kirsty Dunn (Te Aupōuri, Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi) is a lecturer at Aotahi: the School of Māori and Indigenous Studies at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha University of Canterbury. Her writing has been published in *Bulletin*, *Correspondence*, *Tupuranga*, *Te Whē ki Tukorehe* and other publications in Aotearoa and overseas. She is currently working on a Marsden-funded project about taniwha with Aotahi colleague Madi Williams.

Conor Lorigan (Pākehā) is a writer, tutor and PhD student at Aotahi: School of Māori and Indigenous Studies at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha University of Canterbury. His research interests are in poetics and studies in sonic and visual cultures.

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