

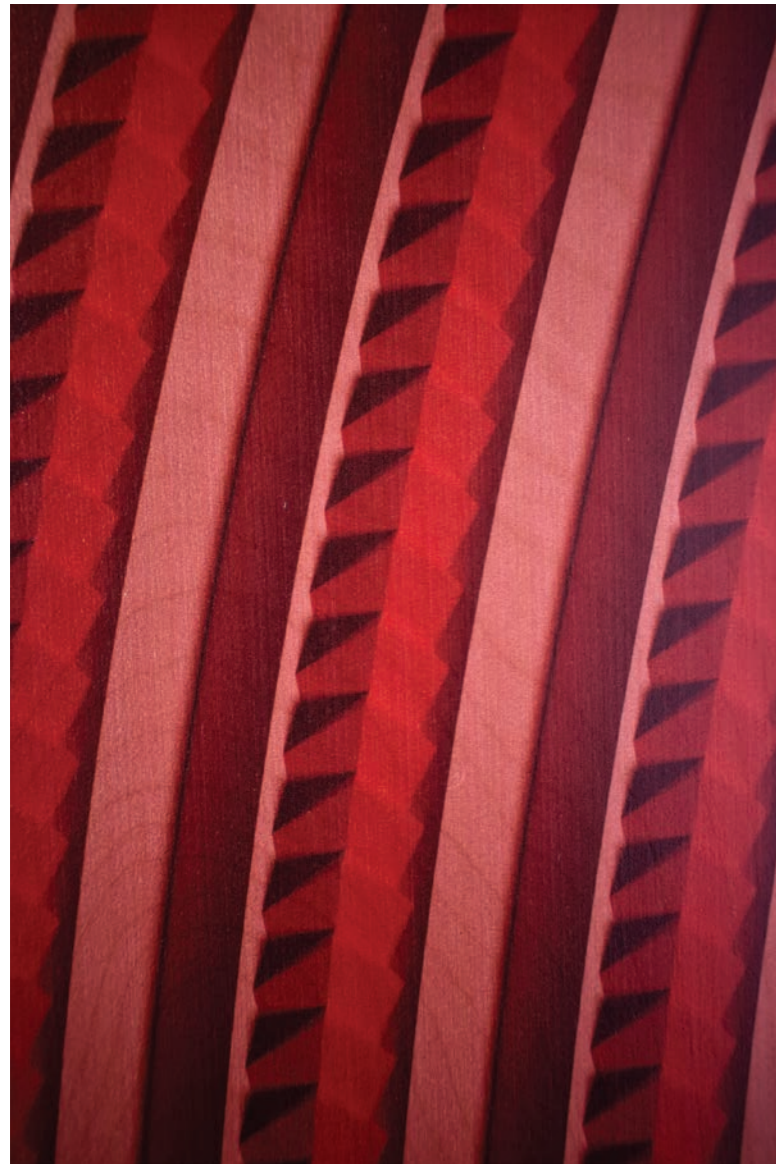
Te Ao Marikō

23 Oct–13 Nov 2020

Kereama Taepa

He Atua Hou: The new gods of Kereama Taepa

Karl Chitham



He Tiki (whero)
(detail)
Kereama Taepa
digital print on ply
2020

A pantheon of pagan atua (gods) has made its way back into popular culture in recent decades. The ritualistic worship of millennia has been replaced by a modern day mash-up of complicated characters with convenient back stories and sometimes inconvenient super powers. This constant borrowing from world mythology does on occasion show itself as necessary for reflecting on how our religious and spiritual past might have bearing in an age where

change feels like the only constant. Anchoring ourselves in the otherworld makes sense when considering how vital our tūpuna (ancestors) are in defining our place in the world. Whether it is Norse, Roman, Hindu or Māori, there does appear to be an increasing awareness of the importance of our cultural stories as part of everyday life.

I have always been fascinated by science fiction, mythology and comics as has artist Kereama Taepa (Te Arawa, Te Āti Awa). After a recent conversation with him about his work and the importance of atua to his practice, I discovered the TV series *American Gods*¹. This gritty portrayal of how atua might navigate our current time was a revelation. The plotline brings into play a gang of new age gods who draw their strength and powers from our global obsession with connectivity, technology and digital media. They eventually run into trouble while trying to outwit the old gods, but the 'mind-blown' moment for me was the idea that even godlike figures are not static; they can evolve



He Tiki (waiporoporo)
Kereama Taepa
digital print on ply
2020

He Tiki (kikorangi)
Kereama Taepa
digital print on ply
2020



and develop, and can reflect humanity's contemporary relationships to the world around them.

With this in mind, Taepa's exhibition entitled *Te Ao Mariko* seems to delve into similar territory with the added layer of his ongoing exploration of the whakapapa (lineage) of innovation. The title, which translates to 'the virtual world', is both a reflection of his experimentation with technology and his deep investment in translating the temporal space of te ao Māori (the Māori world) into the physical world.

The core of this exhibition is a series of works that highlight familiar Māori atua and were previously shown as part of Taepa's *Transmission* exhibition at Objectspace, Auckland in 2020. One of these works is *Te Oro* featuring Te Uira, the atua of lightening who is represented virtually as a shining figure constructed from a silvery filigree of kōwhahai. He floats in a void punctuated by the flashes of lightning bolts. In front of him hovers a kōauau, an ancient taonga puoro

(instrument), that participants can play using combinations of three distinct notes through their virtual controller. The resulting melodies create more pronounced lightning bolts in red, green and blue. Combined, these colours make up the light spectrum, one of Taepa's many allusions to screen culture and the fascination and reliance we have on devices to navigate our daily existence. His commitment to the use of technology and the digital space in his work is Taepa's acknowledgement of Te Uira's role – not just as the atua of lightning, but also as the conveyor of fluctuation and change. He likens *Te Oro* to a virtual karakia that reaffirms the relevance and continuity of Māori

knowledge regardless of our contemporary reliance on Western notions of linear time.

Alongside Te Uira, Taepa's exhibition at Objectspace also featured the atua Tāne Auaha² (Tāne the Creator) in the form of a tower made from 3D printers. As the exhibition progressed, the tower produced a series of nameless 3D printed pou. Based on Te Āti Awa style forms, these works are Taepa's attempt to navigate the complexities of the whakapī process. Whakapī might be considered a new atua of sorts, an embodiment of the 3D printing process; it literally represents the act of a bee producing wax as a construction tool, but also continues the tradition of manifesting the natural world.



Mauri Tū
Kereama Taepa
digital print on ply
with AR overlay
2020

He Tiki (karaka)
Kereama Taepa
digital print on ply
2020



The pou created by Taepa's homage to Tāne Auaha mimicked to some degree the atua's endeavours to create the first humans. His first born, Hineahuone, was created from the resources of Papatūānuku (Earth Mother). In the same way, Taepa's pou are created from plastics made from natural oils, and more recently bio oils derived from plant based sources. This connection is not lost on the artist who is conscious of the environmental impacts of his materials, yet he also acknowledges that all things from the natural world are part of a lineage or whakapapa.

Tāne is often considered the innovator among his godly siblings. His great feat in finding a way to separate his parents Ranginui and Papatūānuku was an example of his progressive thinking and actions. While many versions of this achievement have Tāne bracing himself against his mother and pushing

his father aloft with his feet, there are also variations that have him crafting pou to hold his parents apart. This wasn't Tāne's only great exploit. He is also credited with obtaining ngā kete o te wānanga (the baskets of knowledge) for the benefit of mankind's advancement. The three baskets of knowledge are usually called kete tuauri, kete tuatea and kete aronui. Kete aronui is often associated with the toi Māori (the arts), but it is also a representation of observation and adaption. One particular work in Taepa's pou series has a significant flaw or glitch in its construction and represents random potential and the unreliability of the whakapā process. It is Tāne's acquisition of ngā kete o te wānanga that allows Taepa

to utilise the precision and scope of technology while also being able to embrace the accidental nature of innovation.

A new addition to *Te Ao Mariko* are two series of digital prints that depict hei tiki as both negative and positive forms. While the works themselves examine a variety of ideas, it is the process itself that is of particular interest. As with whakapā, Taepa was keen to explore a Māori expression of the notion of digital printing. As a response, he has termed whekehiko, which literally translates to 'electric octopus'. Whekehiko is the personification of the digital printing process, incorporating the physical attributes of the octopus' ink jet and its ability to blend into different background environments and surface patterns, with the notion of hiko (technology).

Like the new deities featured in *American Gods*, Taepa's whekehiko and whakapā signify a shifting understanding of how tradition and innovation overlap. They are fundamentally of the here and now, but for that matter so are Te Uira and Tāne Auaha. It is this constancy and adaption that allows us to embrace change.

1 *American Gods* is a United States 2017 television adaption of a book of the same name by British author Neil Gaiman released in 2001.

2 Tāne Auaha is known by many names, most notably as Tāne-mahuta, atua of the forests and forest dwellers. Refer to http://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document/Volume_32_1923/Volume_32%2C_No_126/Maori_personifications._Anthropogeny%2C_solar_myths_and_phallic_symbolism%3A_as_exemplified_in_the_demiurgic_concepts_of_Tane_and_Tiki%2C_by_Elsdon_Best%2C_p_53-69/p1

Kia Mataara
Kereama Taepa
3D printed pūkāea
(5) in PLA with nylon
2020





He Tiki (kikorangi)
(detail)
Kereama Taepa
digital print on ply
2020

Cover image:
Mauri oho
(detail)
Kereama Taepa
digital print on ply
with AR overlay
2020