

# Telling Tales

Maureen Lander,  
Jo Torr &  
Christine Hellyar  
at the Turnbull



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The latest exhibition at the National Library in Wellington suggests a fresh new direction in its gallery programme. *Tell Tails* features a trio of contemporary artists—Maureen Lander, Jo Torr and Christine Hellyar—responding to items from the Alexander Turnbull Library collection. Colourful and exuberant, their work spills out of the Turnbull Gallery, trailing feathers, ribbon and cord, and enlivening the hushed reading room outside. *Tell Tails* conveys that magical sense of intimacy and engagement that contemporary artists can bring to historical collections, and creates a real sense of a conversation between past and present.

The exhibition takes its name from the trailing feathered wind indicators known to Maori as puhi (on canoes) or puhuhi (on kites). For the artists, the 'tell tail' symbolises the winds of change that swept



Oceania in the first 50 years of contact between Europe and Polynesia. It is also a symbol of journeys, both physical and spiritual—between Europe and the Pacific, Maori spirituality and Christianity—and the complexities and contradictions they entail.

Physically, the humble tell tail—a small strip of fabric—is an apt starting point for Lander, Torr and Hellyar. All three are collectors and recyclers with a highly-attuned sensitivity to materials, and a keen interest in the history of textiles, especially the adaptation of new fabrics and techniques in the early contact period.<sup>1</sup> As Torr observes, 'Each culture considered the cloth of the other as fascinating.'<sup>2</sup> While Mrs James Cook was designing a waistcoat made from tapa cloth for her famous husband,<sup>3</sup> Maori weavers were adding colourful woollen pompoms and tags to traditional cloaks.

Maureen Lander is an authority on Maori cloaks, and she brings a unique perspective to this exhibition.<sup>4</sup> At the opening, she spoke about her fascination with Joseph Jenner Merrett's watercolour, *The warrior*

*Tell Tails: Artists respond to the Turnbull collections*  
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*chieftains of New Zealand* (1946)—a group portrait of Hone Heke, Kawiti, and Hariata Rongo. What was the garment worn by the elegant Hariata, daughter of Hongi Hika and wife of Hone Heke—described on the Library database as ‘a Maori cloak worn as a stole’? To Lander, that description seemed incorrect: it was obviously a hybrid, marrying local materials with European fashion.

Lander’s interest in Hariata did not end there. Was she included in Merrett’s portrait simply because she was Heke’s wife, or was she too regarded as a ‘warrior chieftain’? Reading old family manuscripts, Lander found her answer. Her great-great grandfather, James Johnstone Fergusson, described the first time he saw ‘Mrs Heke’ in the 1840s: ‘young, tall and rather good-looking . . . she wore a tartan dress with a red sash around her shoulders like a shepherd’s plaid.’ Eighteen years later he wrote about her again: ‘The lady was in command of 700 men and they were marching along to meet and fight the Rarawa tribe on the banks of the Hokianga river. She had on a chequered tartan skirt, with red jacket and blue bonnet with a number of red feathers attached, it being her war dress.’<sup>5</sup> This stylish ‘war dress’ is the impetus for Lander’s exquisite tribute, *Hariata’s war garb*, an interpretation of the muka and wool garment in the Merrett watercolour—not a cloak but a sash, cinched with what appears to be the rim of a conch shell—and a trio of pert flax bonnets.

A companion work, *Rongo’s samplers*, alludes to the dual influences of Maoritanga and Christianity

that shaped Hariata’s life. On the night of her birth in 1815, the newly-arrived missionary Samuel Marsden visited her father’s pa at Okuratope, and she was named Matenga in his honour. Later she learned to read and write at the Kerikeri mission school, and became proficient in needlework as well as the traditional skill of flax weaving. She was given new names symbolising the aspirations of her people—Rongo, meaning peace, and the Christian name Hariata (Harriet).<sup>6</sup>

To make *Rongo’s samplers*—which incorporate muka, wool and cotton—Lander drew on her own experience learning to weave under the guidance of Diggeress Te Kanawa in 1984. Her first task was to make a taura (sampler), and she notes that this practice of teaching weaving continues today, some 200 years after missionary wives tutored the young Hariata. *Rongo’s samplers* reinforce a key theme in the exhibition: the cross-fertilisation between Maori and Pakeha artforms, and a long history of creative and resourceful makers, adapting their skills to take advantage of new materials and techniques.

Introducing her work at the exhibition opening, Christine Hellyar spoke of her ‘obsession’ with the ordinary sailors on Cook’s voyages. Reading accounts of the voyages and studying sketches and paintings, she focused on one particular question: What did these people exchange with those they encountered? What interested them in the local material culture—and which goods were most highly prized by the native populations?

Hellyar has selected a group of drawings by William Ellis, the assistant surgeon on Cook’s third voyage, which offer a response to these questions. Because he was not an official artist, Ellis was free

(opposite) *Tell Tails*, with Christine Hellyar *Red cloud* 2012

(above) MAUREEN LANDER *Rongo’s samplers* 2015  
Muka, wool, cotton & dye



to depict whatever interested him—birds, fish, or the intricate structure of native canoes. He also drew Tahitians wearing the European neckerchiefs that were popular items of exchange, and this is the impetus for Hellyar's *Red cloud*, a sumptuous cloak-like garment made of layers of handkerchiefs, scarves, napkins and ribbons. 'I have dyed everything red', Hellyar explains in the exhibition text, 'because it is the most valuable colour in the Pacific.' It is also,

she adds, 'the colour of spilt blood'—a reference to the often fatal illnesses that were transmitted through textiles. Cook famously gave away dirty handkerchiefs in Dusky Sound, unwittingly spreading diseases to which the native population had no resistance.

Another preoccupation for Hellyar is the flax cordage that was gathered by Cook's men. According to contemporary journals it was collected en masse



(opposite above) *Tell Tails*, with Maureen Lander *Hariata's war garb* (2015), & Joseph Jenner Merrett *The warrior chieftains of New Zealand* (1946)

(opposite below) *Tell Tails*, with Maureen Lander *Hongi's red cloak—deconstructed* (2012-15), & James Barry *The Rev Thomas Kendall and the Maori chiefs Hongi and Waikato* (1820)

(right) *Tell Tails*, with Jo Torr *Moemoea (dreaming)* 2015

partly for practical use, but little has survived in museums, because it had little status compared to other artefacts. Hellyar has created *Cordage cloud* in recognition of all that lost material—a skein of woven fibre that billows and sags under its own weight, trailing red tendrils like a deep sea creature. *Cordage* also features in *Tell tails*, a two-part installation outside the gallery. Three giant feather lei hang gracefully from the ceiling, while a trio of loosely woven kete, adorned with woollen pompoms, lie cradled in cloth on the floor below, spilling over with coils of cord. Once again, everything is red—from dazzling vermilion to deepest russet. Here, as in her work of the past, Hellyar is able to endow her humble materials with an uncanny sense of vitality.

Like Lander and Hellyar, Jo Torr reminds us that textiles are a richly rewarding and revealing microcosm, both socially and aesthetically. But while they work mainly in installation, she draws on historical costume and eye-witness accounts to make highly-crafted artworks that illuminate a moment of cross-cultural contact. Her starting point in *Tell Tails* is two of the most significant paintings in the Turnbull collection: James Barry's portraits of Tuai and Titere, the young Nga Puhī chiefs who travelled to England as protégés of the Church Missionary Society in 1817. There, more than 20 years before New Zealand became a British colony, they helped to formulate a Maori-English vocabulary and were much fêted, attending high society balls and visiting the Tower of London.

Reading the poignant letters written by the young men in England, Torr was struck by the extreme cultural dislocation they experienced, plunged into a radically different world. Her response is an immaculate tailcoat, *Moemoea (dreaming)*, similar to those the young men wear in the portraits—a highly-structured garment with a raised collar, narrow back, and long cuffed sleeves. Placed near the entrance to the gallery, *Moemoea* sets the tone for the exhibition, initially blurring the boundaries between contemporary art and historical object. Viewed from the front, it is all crisp English formality: a metaphor for the constraints upon Tuai and Titere as guests of the Church Missionary Society. Viewed from the back, a different world asserts itself. Here, Torr has used the finest muka to embroider an image from one of Titere's letters: a birdman kite, its tail meandering down the garment.

In the ancient Maori world, the kite was a tool of divination, connecting the realms of heaven and earth. For Torr, it is a powerful symbol of Titere's two worlds and his spiritual connection back to his birthplace. She has also made a full-size version of Titere's kite entitled *Whakangakau (longing)*, adorned



with iridescent red feathers. Soaring over the walkway to the gallery, it is fittingly tethered to the ground by a Bible bound in clothing fabric, like those held in the Turnbull collection.

The mixed motives and tensions of the early nineteenth century are the subtext of James Barry's third work in the exhibition, *The Rev Thomas Kendall and the Maori chiefs Hongi and Waikato* (1820). Commissioned by the Church Missionary Society in London, it is a riveting study in power relations, the resplendent Maori chiefs commanding the scene, while Kendall eyes them warily from his perch on a grassy bank. Hongi Hika's main reason for visiting England was to acquire muskets to ensure his supremacy at home, while Kendall—on the eve of his dismissal from the Church Missionary Society because of his adultery with a native woman—sought to prove the accuracy of his study of Maori language. After Kendall's fall from grace the portrait languished at the Church Missionary Society until it was eventually gifted to the New Zealand government.

For Maureen Lander, the voluminous cloak worn by Hongi Hika in the painting is of great interest. The chief had the special red korowai made for his trip to England and his meeting with King George IV; after that its history is lost. But in 1998, visiting the *Maori* exhibition at the British Museum, Lander saw a cloak with an unknown provenance that rang a bell. Could it, she asks, 'be Hongi's cloak emerging from te ao tawhito (the ancient Maori world) into te ao hou (the new world)?'<sup>7</sup>

Lander proposes a back story for the British Museum cloak, in which it was one of the gifts exchanged between Hongi and the King. She surmises that it might have remained at Carlton House until the

(below) *Tell Tails*, with Jo Torr *Whakangakau (longing)* (2015)

building was demolished, and then been deposited in the British Museum. In response, she has created *Hongi's red cloak—deconstructed*, an installation of swathes of plied muka, dyed with tanekaha and red ochre—part of her on-going research into the history, techniques and materials in the British Museum cloak. Displayed next to Barry's painting, it is perhaps the most successful intervention in the exhibition, a powerful reminder of the importance of imagination and speculation in engaging with historical collections.

*Tell Tails* is an artist-curated exhibition, and that is one of its strengths. It has a warmth and intimacy and a sense of vivacity that is often lacking in more conventional museum projects. It is also a tribute to friendship and collaboration, with each artist contributing to the work of the others.<sup>8</sup> The three met at Elam Art School in the mid-1980s, when Lander and Torr were students and Hellyar was a lecturer. 'We have always kept up with what each of us has been doing,' Hellyar comments. 'We knew about one another's research so it seemed obvious to do a show together.'<sup>9</sup>

It is the first time in more than a decade that the National Library has worked with contemporary artists in a collection-based exhibition.<sup>10</sup> Could this be a model for the future? *Tell Tails* suggests the immense potential in such collaborations, in making the extraordinary—and still under-appreciated—collections of the Alexander Turnbull Library more accessible.

1. All three have a research-based practice, often fuelled by the study of museum collections. In 2002, for example, Lander and Hellyar collaborated on an intervention at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England, entitled *Mrs Cook's kete*. Speculating on what Mrs Cook may have gathered if she had accompanied her husband to the Pacific, they created a collection of fibre cordage, woven bags, plant specimens, botanical drawings and herbal samples. The project was part of a wider initiative at the Pitt-Rivers to bring new postcolonial sensibilities to its ethnological collections. Hellyar talks about the Pitt Rivers Museum exhibition in Edward Hanfling, 'Four Decades On: A Conversation with Christine Hellyar' *Art New Zealand* 142, Winter 2012, pp. 30-37.

2. Quoted in 'A conversation with Jo Torr, 18 and 23 February 2013' in *Islanders: Jo Torr 2001-2013 Survey*, Objectspace, Auckland, 2013, p. 2.

3. He died before she could complete it.

4. Notably, she contributed a chapter, 'Te ao tawhito/te ao hou. Entwined threads of tradition and innovation', to *Whatu Kakahu/ Maori Cloaks*, edited by Awhina Tamarapa, Te Papa Press, Wellington 2011.

5. In the 1868 account, Fergusson refers to Hariata as 'Mrs Adam Clarke'. (After Heke's death in 1850 she married Arama Karaka Pi, a chief of Waima.) The quotations are from Fergusson's papers in the Journal of the Polynesian Society collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, MS-Papers-1187-51 and 53.

6. The latter was her baptismal name.

7. Exhibition text.

8. For example, Lander showed Torr how to extract and process muka for embroidery; Lander and Torr gave Hellyar the prepared muka to make *Cordage cloud*; Hellyar provided the feathers for Torr's *Whakangakau* and the red pompoms for one of Lander's bonnets.

9. Email from Christine Hellyar, 3 June 2015.

10. In comparison the National Library Gallery, which flourished in the 1990s under the management of Peter J. Ireland, often involved contemporary artists in its programme.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Mark Beatty, Imaging Services, National Library of New Zealand

