

CONVERSATION WITH HURIANA KOPEKE-TE AHO



Huriana Kopeke-Te Aho (Tuhoe, Ngati Porou, Rongowhaata, Te Ati Haunui-a-Paparangi, Ngati Kahungunu, Fale'ula) is a self-taught artist and illustrator whose work is deeply rooted in their Maori whakapapa, takatapui identity, and political beliefs. Through their art, Huriana explores themes of cultural heritage, identity, and the intersection of personal and collective narratives. Their practice seeks to challenge and decolonize conventional artistic expressions while celebrating Maori and Pacific cultural traditions. With a strong focus on visual storytelling, Huriana's work aims to amplify indigenous voices, reclaim space, and highlight the resilience of their communities. Their art is a powerful expression of whakapapa, blending contemporary techniques with traditional Maori motifs to create works that are both visually striking and deeply meaningful.

On personal education, and creative education viewed locally and globally



The only formal arts education I received was in high school. I didn't study further than that, but I had a practical arts education from my dad. Other than that, I am mostly self-taught, though I do have to acknowledge that I've been very lucky to have many mentors who have been instrumental in developing my skills and, subsequently, my career.

I think arts education is deeply important and leads to better outcomes for other subjects as well as allows self-expression and creative solutions outside of the arts. However, it is still deeply undervalued within education spaces in Aotearoa, and that's an issue. I know many people who studied arts at a tertiary level and whose love for creativity dwindled afterwards, but I also know plenty of those who went in the opposite direction. I like to believe that it's ultimately a personal experience.

On their journey to arts



My journey to art started early. My dad was a painter and carver, and he loved singing and playing taonga pūoro (traditional Māori instruments). We used to draw and sing together frequently when I was younger, so I've always loved drawing and expressing myself creatively. After my dad passed away, creativity became a way to stay connected with him.

I took a lot of art subjects in high school as well, but even then I didn't necessarily think that a career in the arts was a viable option for me. Still, I continued drawing as a hobby. In my early twenties, I decided that I wanted to pursue a career in the arts. It's been a long road, but I'm so happy that I can make a career and a living from something I love.

There's a lot to draw from in terms of cultural expression and toi Māori (Māori arts), and learning more about the artistic traditions within my whakapapa (genealogy) has also helped immensely with staying inspired.

Messaging with art

I like to use my work to advocate for marginalised communities both here in Aotearoa and internationally. A lot of my work focuses on decolonisation, Māoritanga, and takatāpuitanga / queer Māori identity. My art is often an extension of my various identities and comes from a place of fierce aroha/aloha for my communities and my people. The messages I hope to convey through my art are those of support, advocacy, and political autonomy—for us, by us.

On Art as a representation of reality or escape from it

Art can be a powerful tool for communicating current social issues and contemporary political realities. It can also be an unconfined form of expression that takes us out of reality and allows us to feel seen and heard across generations, especially in the context of intergenerational arts practice. It can, and does, exist in both spaces.

Online galleries and marketing artwork online



I don't have much experience with online galleries, although I do sell some of my work through Moana Fresh, an artist-run retail space with both a physical and online presence. Aside from that, I don't really sell my work online, but I have used social media throughout my career to build a fanbase and promote my work.

I don't necessarily think this approach works for everyone, but it means that my work—which has often been considered “outsider art”—has an audience and a platform outside of traditional gallery settings. In that way, it has been a great equaliser for me and for others who speak about political or social issues, or who work in mediums that traditional art spaces may not typically engage with.

