

PĀUA DREAMING

Imagining what sort of creature would need such a luminous interior to dwell in, contemporary jeweller Roy Mason coined the term 'pāua dreams' to name one of the most influential jewellery exhibitions in Aotearoa New Zealand's history.

Mason is part of a group of makers who run Fingers, a gallery in Auckland. There, *Pāua Dreams* (1981) was the first of many exhibitions that used local, natural materials to connect with New Zealanders who, rather than looking to the commonwealth or Europe, identified with being raised in Te Moana nui a Kiwa (the Pacific). Inside these cases you can see actual works from *Pāua Dreams* by Mason, Alan Preston and Warwick Freeman alongside others from the 1980s that show how the natural form, colours and textures of pāua were highlighted in an effort to shift people's association of it as a souvenir material.

Since then, contemporary jewellers have continued to respond to the complexities of our relationship with pāua. Lisa Walker's necklaces (2010, 2006) magnify the significance of developments in the 1980s with large, almost unwearable necklaces that pitch pāua alongside newer and synthetic materials. In *Token Gesture* (2006), Ross Malcolm's bangle of photocopied pāua considers the value of authentic objects versus replicas. Drawing nostalgically on her childhood in Rotorua, Gina Matchitt's *Pāua Smash Nike* (2001) reflects on the thrill of tourist crowds in awe of Māori culture.

Together, the works in these cases draw an uncanny connection between Roy Mason's musings about the creature inhabiting the colourful shell and the cultural environment we live in.

CULTURAL ICON, OR CULTURAL CRINGE?

Despite the efforts of contemporary jewellers to shift peoples' perception of pāua in the 1980s, forty years later—for better or worse—many of us still associate this shell with tourist shops. Surprisingly, its governmental regulation has been one of the biggest influences on our changeable relationship with pāua.

Towards the end of World War II, injured soldiers were re-trained to make pāua jewellery and gifts under the government's Rehabilitation Act. Between 1946–1960, they were granted special licences to sell pāua jewellery, which showed public investment in their rehabilitation and fostered a sense of national pride. Under these licences pāua could only be set in silver or gold to uphold its status as a high-quality New Zealand product, which was galvanised by the wider ban on pāua exportation between 1943–1987.

With the rise of international travel in the 1960s and the disestablishment of the special licence, a local tourist market developed and pāua—having become such an emblem of nationality—was the natural choice for visitor keepsakes. Desperate to keep the ban on exports, commercial operators ensured the pāua market was well stocked, inevitably making it more commonplace. However, once the export ban was lifted in the late 1980s, the production of cheap pāua souvenirs flooded local and international markets, somewhat suppressing the progress of contemporary jewellers.

The manufactured idea of pāua as a 'kiwi icon' is what caused it to become an over-inflated representation of Aotearoa New Zealand, yet it is still a big part of our visual culture. When you think of pāua do you see a symbol of kiwiana, or a cultural folly?

JENNIFER LARACY: SOUVENIR OF A SOUVENIR

Growing up visiting the workshop of her late grandad, Morris Lionel Win, had a profound effect on Jennifer Laracy who made this series in recognition of the life lessons she learnt from him.

Win served as a private in World War II, where he was badly wounded in Crete and captured before being sent to a German prisoner of war (POW) camp. On his return to New Zealand in 1943, he re-trained as a pāua jeweller in the Disabled Servicemen's League. Through this scheme he established a successful career as an independent studio jeweller, which included making pieces for the Māori Queen, Dame Te Atairangikaahu over 26 years, based on her own designs.

Working through her uneasy relationship with Pākehā (European) use of pāua in the 20th century, Laracy writes:

“During the 2020 lockdown I thought a lot about making in confinement—drawing parallels to POW life. Trench art was about social connection and the importance of pastimes like having a smoke while playing dice or cards. In contrast to traditional souvenirs, which are often about place, I wanted to make a series of objects that represented another time, while also highlighting the contribution of returned servicemen to the pāua story. It was a way for me to use motifs other than kiwiana like tiki and waka designs that were popularised by the mid-20th century souvenir industry.”

Using pāua from her grandad's collection, Laracy acknowledges her own history as tauiwi (non-Māori) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her works are bold, twenty-first century re-interpretations of a new kind of souvenir, which reflect her loving relationship with her grandad—based on a sketch he made for her, stories about the POW camp and objects popularised during his time as a maker.

AN OPEN-ENDED INVITATION

Over her lifetime, Hutt Valley local Wendy Judgeford has spent many weekends trawling garage sales to find local treasures, which has informed her interest in what objects made in Aotearoa New Zealand say about us.

While drawn to the inherent beauty of pāua shell, Wendy is also fully aware of the historical, cultural and social implications of it. This sparked an idea for her—what she describes as a curiosity—to commission some of our most well-known contemporary jewellers to include pāua in a work that follows their own interests.

While Jane Dodd, Sandra Schmid and Neke Moa consider pāua from environmental perspectives, Frances Stachl and Vanessa Arthur let the visual qualities of pāua inform their designs. Moniek Schrijer re-works a commercial necklace and earring set to comment on taste and value, while in a celebration of the everyday New Zealander, Maca Bernal writes “I had a vision of a young tradie driving his work van, on his way to a rave listening to George FM, wearing a bright pink bucket hat, shield iridescent sunnies, and my ‘Techno Pāua’ necklace round his neck”.

What is so special about this situation is that Wendy places very little conditions on makers. Giving them time and space, she enables them to explore pāua within the framework of their own practice, opening up a whole new range of enquiries within a twenty-first century context.

WHAKAIRO RĀKAU

Within Māori whakairo rākau (carving), pāua shell represents the eyes of tūpuna (ancestors) and atua (gods) to reference the oral history about the origins of carving. In this story, Ruatēpupuke—the grandson of Tangaroa (God of the sea)—went looking for his son who, after offending his great-grandfather, had been turned into a carved tekoteko (roof gable) by Tangaroa for his whare (house). Setting the underwater whare alight in an act of revenge, Ruatēpupuke fled with his son and some of the other carvings. While many of the carvings of Tangaroa’s whare spoke, the ones Ruatēpupuke brought to land were silent. Since then, whakairo rākau has been a form of visual communication.

Areta Wilkinson first created her series of pāua eyes based on an experience she had in the whareniui at Onuku, where the pāua eyes of the poupou (posts) lit up in the setting sun as if floating free and watching over her. The installation here was a gift exchange with artist Natalie Robertson, a descendant of Ruatēpupuke. Its arrangement is based on the many pāua eyes that adorn the Ngāti Porou whareniui (meeting house) Ruatēpupuke, which resides in the Field Museum in Chicago.

In a related set of narratives, Neke Mōa has carved three pendants that represent the atua Ruwheoi, Kaitira and Hārorirori, who were the children of Hinenui and Tangaroa. Together, they symbolise attributes their parents bestowed on pāua shell and its role in the ocean: to protect vulnerable sea creatures, reveal their legacy through luminous interiors and echo histories through the sound they make when held up to our ears.