

**TURUMEKE  
HARRINGTON**  
He pito mata, I'm  
**ENERGETIC!**

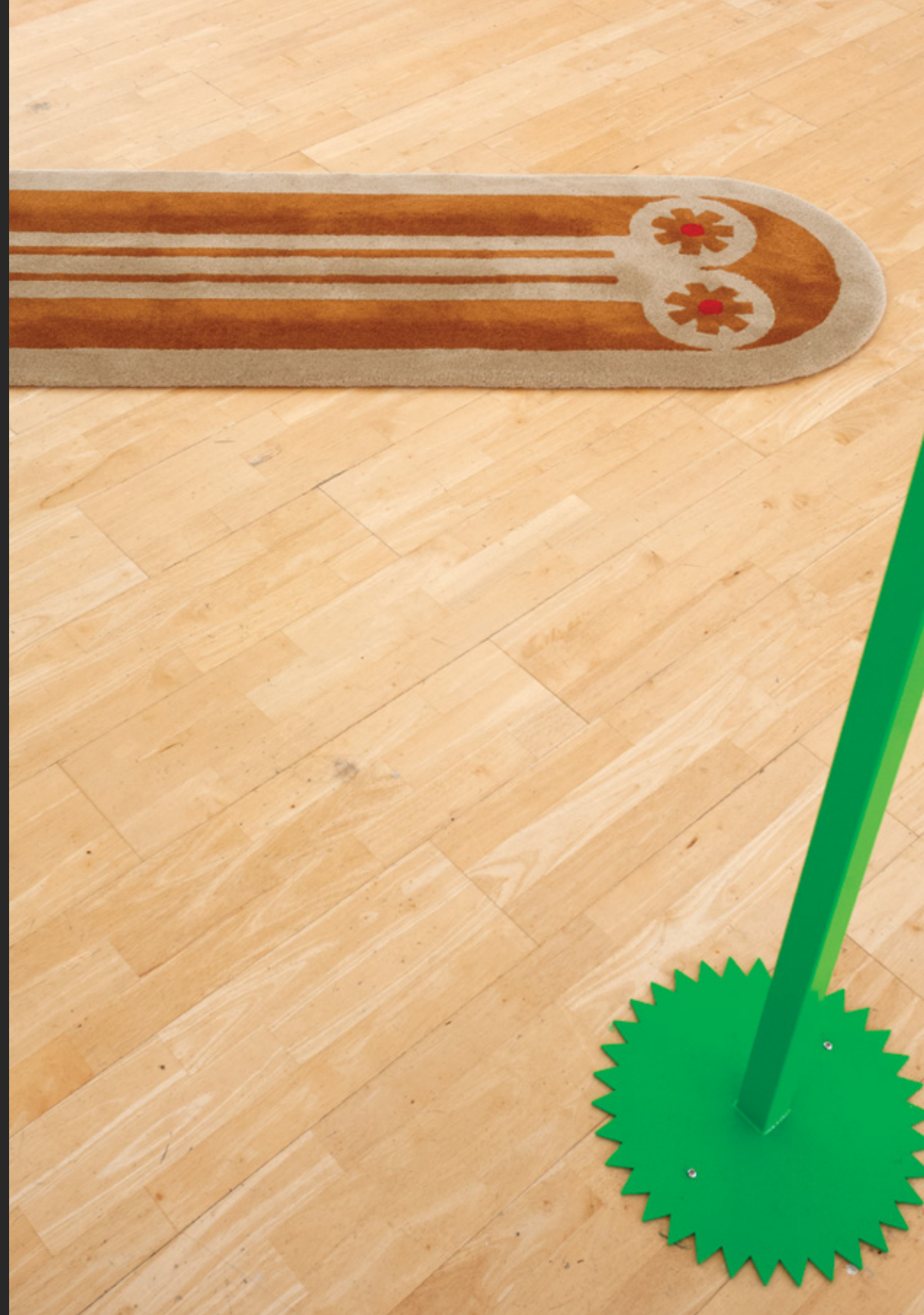


## Turumeke Harrington

(Kāi Tahu, Rangitāne, Ngāti Toa Rangatira) is a Wellington based artist who works across sculpture and installation. Her practice is characterised by bold colours and references to domestic forms and materials. Sitting somewhere between art and design she is interested in exploring how objects, material and colour can subvert, challenge and express mātauranga Māori.



Installation photography by Mark Tantrum (above), Nick Taylor (right).



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## An exhibition for before: Turumeke Harrington's *He pito mata*

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Most know the pūrākau of te timatanga. In the beginning, Ranginui and Papatūānuku loved each other in their locked embrace. They remained interwoven in darkness, until one day their children, in particular the strong legs of Tāne Mahuta, prised them apart, ushering in the light.

But not all pūrākau are identical. Turumeke Harrington tells me that in a Kāi Tahu telling, Rakinui instructs Tāne to kill him, so that the human race may have life.<sup>1</sup> Tāne alone could not raise Raki, and so enlisted the support of Raki's other offspring. It was in this way that his children stood as columns to raise and hold Raki in the skies. In this version, it is the names of Raki's children that captured Harrington's interest: Te Koretuatahi, Te Koretuarua, Te Koretuatoru, Te Koretuawhā...

Each of the offspring are named after, or perhaps personify, Te Kore, the very first state in the Māori whakapapa of cosmology. Te Kore is often understood as the great nothingness *before*: in the time-space before, everything and anything exists in the realm of potential and possibility.



Harrington has always devised ways for art making to better serve her daily life. She has made paintings at a portable scale and commissioned bespoke chairs that can live in a lounge post-public display. The exhibition, for Harrington, has a dual function as both its own conceptual entity and a funding hack for future living/making/selling.

In *He pito mata: I'm energetic!*, each work extends beyond the time-space of the exhibition. The works both recall and extend past exhibitions, while also signaling future research threads. For the first time in Harrington's practice to date, the exhibition comprises distinct bodies of work, rather than a pre-existing, single installation of many parts. *He pito mata* allows all these works to come into being, and their co-sharing of a gallery becomes a spatial problem for the artist to resolve.



The infinite possibilities for hanging a show can be overwhelming. The gallery space, with its fixed parameters and peculiar qualities, can sometimes offer a starting point.

In *He pito mata*, fifteen curtains named *Tama karekare taipō (HOT AIR) I-XI*, hang from the ceiling in the shape of tongues/bones/phalluses. With te wehenga still

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<sup>1</sup> Rakinui (and Raki), is the Kai Tahu dialect for this atua.

in mind, the curtains reference Raki's longing to reach down to his lover. The gallery that *He pito mata* sits in is distinguished from the The Dowse's other spaces by its high ceiling and long passageway, and here, Harrington's curtains function as a spatial device, hanging in formation and drawing attention to the gallery's architecture. Though light from the gallery's window bleeds through the diaphanous green silk, *Tama karekare taipō (HOT AIR) I-XI* demarcates our view of the space. A curtain can be a visual threshold.



A waharoa is also a threshold. Placed throughout the middle of the gallery are three bright green, free-standing structures that mimic a doorframe or a large entry gateway. If the curtains reach down from the ceilings, these waharoa, collectively titled *Exit Strategy: he waka eke noa*, extend up from the floor, reaching into the middle space, but never close enough for the curtain's green appendages to slide through.

When making exhibitions, Harrington is mindful of the audience experience and designs generously: bright colours, tactile materials and familiar forms beckon warmly. With three waharoa counterintuitively placed in the middle of the open gallery, Harrington provides another mode of spatial division. Like a create-your-own-adventure, Harrington provides options for a visitor to weave in and out of the installation. Audiences can walk through the thresholds, take introverted solace in the space between curtains, or navigate our way through a floor of rugs.

Just as Harrington spatially divides the gallery space above and at eye-level, so too has she choreographed the space beneath our feet. On the floor of *He pito mata* lies a series of rugs called *Wheua ororite: Massive props I-V*, each featuring the same pattern in a different colourway. The pattern looks like a classical ionic column with filigree ends, or potentially the form of a bone. Perhaps it might even be two dicks meeting.

Harrington likes to draw dicks. Scroll through her Instagram page and you'll find a ring, a light work, fabric banners, acrylic decorations and works on canvas with the stylistic, graffiti-tag of a dick outline. Not confined to social media, Harrington has also used the form in past exhibitions. To some extent, it's a good joke about how much perceived immaturity Harrington can sneak under the auspices of art. As Harrington puts it in one of her Instagram posts, 'How many phalluses can you make before someone notices?'

But she's also genuinely interested in sex and bodies, or at least, in excavating Indigenous perspectives on bodies and sex. For her 2020 solo exhibition *Gentle Ribbing* at Toi Pōneke Gallery, Harrington produced a transcribed conversation between herself and Kommi Tamati-Elliffe. In their discussion, Harrington and Tamati-Elliffe track that show's consideration of birth in Māori cosmology to Harrington's broader desire to find a Te Ao Māori way to talk about sex, genitals, birth, life and power.

The visual innuendo of *Wheua ororite: Massive props I-V* layers bawdy humour over Indigenous research to refute colonial legacies of shame. Physical humour and bodily gags offer reminders that bodies have functions, functions that are funny or can be made funny to ease the embarrassment. The physical nature of bodies are usually absent in making exhibitions: audiences are often only conceived as entities with bodies when working out eye levels for hanging works or ensuring accessible passage ways between objects. *Wheua ororite: Massive props I-V*, in contrast, overtly acknowledges the viewer as a body. Made to human scale, these rugs and their bone(rs) relates to the body in its corporeality, one with a skeleton and sometimes other bits.

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Rather than positing a homogenised Te Ao Māori worldview, *He pito mata* continues Harrington's interest in pursuing narratives more specific to her own Kāi Tahu whakapapa. As the artist puts it, it's a lot easier to connect to stories when their bones are buried right beside you.

Tī kouka have become a recurrent Kāi Tahu reference across Harrington's practice. In her solo exhibition at Blue Oyster Art Project Space, *SPECIAL TIME (Ehara i te tī)*, Harrington hung a series of tī kouka-shaped acrylic disks along lines of rope that ran from ceiling to floor. In that show, Harrington recalls how tī kouka acted as wayfinding markers, and were often used to make strong rope. Harrington is still learning more about tī kouka. Some oral retellings speak of tī kouka whispering to each other in the blowing northwest winds. Others tell of tī kouka smothering a war party with caressing, sweet and loving sounds.

On the walls of *He pito mata* is the collaborative sound work *Tau-Patipati*. Five speakers play the sounds of murmuring, breathing and transcripts in te reo that recall the different actions and characters of Te Wai Pounamu's tī kouka. While their cherry-red acrylic casings add to the colourful aesthetics of the exhibition, the mutterings of *Tau-Patipati* are themselves unsettling. If the curtains, the rugs and the waharoa experiment with the choreography of a space, here, the artist considers the spatial effects of sound on the audience's movement in a gallery.

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In the artist's mind, the two daybeds at the end of the gallery called *Pūngao moe! Moe! Moe! Moe! Moe!*, have already served their use. Prior to this exhibition, Harrington used their mattresses to accommodate friends at a sleepover. Again, the artist strategically directs the resources of commissions and art making to fund items she needs around her house. In *He pito mata* the mattresses represent a promise already fulfilled.

As another of Harrington's Instagram posts puts it: sometimes art can look suspiciously like furniture.



Each object in *He pito mata* has been fixed with extreme attentiveness. The speakers are encased in red acrylic, with box joints that form the recurring bone shape, which is also found in the aluminum frame that fastens the silk curtains. Both the feet of the waharoa and washer-like fixings securing the speaker cables are stylised tī kōuka, with their distinctive spikes. No detail escapes consideration.

The ability to move works around in the exhibition is suggested, both in the wall text and simply in Harrington's choice of domestic forms, but the aesthetic treatment of the fixings suggest that they've already been placed carefully. Perhaps these works and their meanings and research may move around in the future, but for now, they have been located in, and located by, their right place.



Harrington takes the title of her exhibition from the whakataukī 'iti noa ana, he pito mata': although it is just small it is uncooked. The whakataukī views the uncooked portion of the kūmara as a prize, able to be replanted and sprout even more sweet-tasting offspring. Uncooked, it already holds value.

Over coffee, Harrington discussed treating the exhibition as a way of gathering together a visual vocabulary for future practice. The exhibition references past projects, but there are new elements for Harrington's practice, too: new rug and waharoa forms, a new colour palette and the promise of more research on bones to come. The artist is seeding future living/making/selling. In *He pito mata*, potential is not viewed as a promissory, nor is the exhibition understood as potential's fulfilment. Instead, potential and the exhibition collapse into each other in a state and space where anything and everything is still possible.

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## Ioana Gordon-Smith

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### GLOSSARY

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**Mātauranga** – knowledge

**Pūrākau** – story

**Te timatanga** – beginning

**Ranginui/Rakinui** – sky father

**Papatūānuku** – earth mother

**Tāne Mahuta** – god of forests,

son of Ranginui and Papatūānuku

**Te wehenga** – separation

**Waharoa** – gateway

**Whakapapa** – genealogy

**Te reo** – language

**Te Wai Pounamu** – South Island

**Tī kōuka** – cabbage tree

**Kūmara** – sweet potato

**Whakatauki** – proverb

**Te Ao Māori** – Māori world

# The Dowse Art Museum

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