

## Ralph Hotere: Godwit/Kuaka

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Marti Friedlander, *Ralph Hotere (Godwit/Kuaka Mural)* 1977, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.  
Reverse: Ralph Hotere *Godwit/Kuaka* 1977, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

# Ralph Hotere: Godwit/Kuaka



## About the Work

*Godwit/Kuaka* is an 18-metre-long mural made in 1977 by Ralph Hotere. Originally titled *The Flight of the Godwit*, the painting honours the bar-tailed godwit, or kuaka, a bird admired by Māori for its long-haul flights. Every year these birds leave their breeding grounds in Alaska and fly south, without stopping for food or rest, to arrive in New Zealand each September. The work was originally commissioned for the Arrivals Hall at Auckland International Airport where it welcomed travellers, the reference to the arrival of the migratory godwit a metaphor for the incoming planes and passengers.

*Godwit/Kuaka* is often connected with the notion of travelling — the flight path of the kuaka, the arrival of passengers, the journey of the spirit, or the physical journey the viewer takes walking along the many panels.

The length of *Godwit/Kuaka* is covered in bands of colour spanning the spectrum from red to violet, moving into deep black in the central panels and back out into colour. The surface is a delicate pattern of fine lines and layers of mottled textures which the artist created by flicking paint with his fingertips from an upturned housepainter's brush. The work has been described as 'looking like a fragment from a monumental loom in which carefully drawn stripes are never-ending warps that bind the darkness of night to the colour of the day.'<sup>1</sup>

Lines of text are arranged over the surface of the painting. Along the bottom of the first three panels are the words "Hau Mai, tau mai, nau mai", ('Enter here, rest here, you are welcome here'<sup>2</sup>). In the dark central panels the arrival of the godwits is celebrated with words from an ancient Te Aupōuri chant taught to Hotere by his father:

*Ruia ruia, opea opea, tahia tahia*  
*Kia hemo ake*  
*Ko te kaka koakoa*  
*Kia herea mai*  
*Te kawai korokī*  
*Kia tatata mai*  
*I roto i tana pukorokoro whaikaro*  
*He kūaka*  
*He kūaka mārangaranga*  
*Kotahi manu*  
*I tau ki te tāhuna*  
*Tau atu*  
*Tau atu*  
*Kua tau mai*

*(Scattering, gathering, forming a single unit*  
*Death/exhaustion rises up*  
*It is the rope, koakoa [the cry of the bird]*  
*Binding you here to me*  
*The cry/chattering of the flock*  
*Come close together*  
*From inside its throat – a marauding party*  
*A godwit*  
*A godwit that hovers*  
*One bird*  
*Has settled on the sand bank*  
*It has settled over there*  
*It has settled over there*  
*They have settled here)*

## Further Information

Visit the City Gallery website for exhibition information  
<http://www.citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/ralph-hotere-godwitkuaka>

Visit the City Gallery website to read more about *Fault*, one of Hotere's collaborations with Bill Culbert  
<http://www.citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/bill-culbert-and-ralph-hotere-fault>

For an overview of Hotere's work read an article by Jonathon Mane-Wheoki <http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issue98/hotere.htm>

For insight into Hotere collaborations with New Zealand poets read *Hotere: Out the Black Window*, Gregory O'Brien, Godwit Publishing 1997 ISBN 1 86962 012 7

## About the Artist

Ralph Hotere (1931-2013, Te Aupōuri and Te Rarawa) is one of New Zealand's most significant painters. He was born in Mitimiti, Northland and raised in a devout roman catholic family. Hotere worked as a secondary school arts advisor in Northland and Auckland before traveling to Europe in 1961, returning to live around Dunedin from 1969.

Hotere was a key figure in the emergence of Māori modernism. In the 1970s, he became known for his hard-edged lacquer paintings. These highly symbolic, op-art abstractions feature vertical lines, crosses, and circles drawn on black backgrounds.

Hotere's work regularly features language and text. He collaborated with New Zealand poets such as Bill Manhire and Hone Tuwhare, and incorporated traditional Māori poems into his paintings. These words are often stencilled or hand painted over a variety of surfaces such as canvas and corrugated iron.

Hotere made a number of political works reacting to social and environmental issues. The *Sangro* series is a memorial to his brother who fought in the Māori Battalion in World War II. The *Aromoana* series arose from Hotere's concerns about the environmental impact of an aluminium smelter at Aromoana in Otago, while *Black Union Jack* protested against a controversial rugby tour made by New Zealand during the apartheid era.

## Influences/ Related Artists

- Alongside artists such as **Paratene Matchitt**, **Muru Walters** and **Cliff Whiting**, Hotere worked as a school arts advisor in Northland and Auckland. He trained under **Gordon Tovey**, who encouraged his advisors to study European modernism.
- Hotere's reductive, geometric abstractions link with the work of American abstractionists **Ad Reinhardt** and **Barnett Newman** and with Russian supremacist **Kasimir Malevich**.
- Hotere made a number of works with New Zealand artist **Bill Culbert** including the light work *Fault*, which is on permanent display on the exterior of City Gallery Wellington.

## Pre/Post-Visit Activities

Arrivals/Welcomes  
*Social Science, Visual Art*

*Godwit/Kuaka* once welcomed travellers arriving to Auckland Airport.

- How do you welcome people arriving at your home or school? How are visitors welcomed onto a marae? Research the ways people from different cultures welcome their guests.
- Inspired by your research, devise a plan for an artwork for an airport arrivals lounge. What form would your artwork take? It could be a painting, film, performance or gift. Share your ideas with your class. Could any ideas be adapted to create an artwork for the place where people arrive at your school?

Colour walk  
*Visual Art*

- Go on a journey through your school making a note of some of the colours you pass by. Paint each colour on a square of paper and lay them out along a line in the sequence you saw them in. Can your classmates guess what route your journey took?

Godwits/Migration  
*Science, Social Science*

- Find out more about godwits by researching their preferred habitats, diet, and migration routes. What environmental pressures do these birds face? Why are godwits significant in Māori culture?

Research  
*Art History/Visual Art*

- Watch the 1974 New Zealand Film Unit presentation *Ralph Hotere* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTWogjH68Vg> What does it reveal about Hotere's painting process and his collaborations with poets?

<sup>1</sup> From 'Ralph Hotere's *Godwit/Kuaka* mural', Ron Bronson, <http://aucklandartgallery.blogspot.co.nz/2013/02/ralph-hotere-onz.html>, retrieved 10/09/14

<sup>2</sup> From 'He Kuaka Marangaranga A Godwit that Hovers' Kriselle Baker, in *Hotere*, Rong Sang Publishing, Auckland, 2008, p.129.