

I must shroud myself in a stinging nettle

Ana Iti

I keep on shedding and moulting
Making new generations of myself

Developing new attributes,
new skins, and spinning silk

for part of the multiplication process
I must shroud myself in a stinging nettle

whose needle hairs are filled with histamine,
acetylcholine, and substances not yet identified

If you have touched it then you will know
sleep only in cool light bedding, bathe in lukewarm waters

I myself have never been stung, but
being part book, I have been pierced

flipped forward and back in time eaten from the inside out
I've placed my egg on a hypodermic needle

nestled into the skirt of a tī kouka
Rested between leaves and debris on the ground over winter

Ana Iti (Te Rarawa)



Spectral ecologies: the presence of things unseen

Kirsty Baker

Drawn from the threads of personal narrative, contested histories, and contemporary engagements with place, Ana Iti's artistic practice traces relational networks of connection that often go overlooked. In works such as *Treasures Left by Our Ancestors* (2016), *Does the brick recall Pukeahu?* (2018) and *Tākoto* (2020), Iti interrogates the ways that lived histories are often subsumed within the built environment, particularly in sites altered by the ongoing effects of colonisation. In *I must shroud myself in a stinging nettle*, Iti appears to veer away from these concerns, taking the life cycle of the kahukura, a butterfly species endemic to Aotearoa, as her starting point. However, the exhibition expands outwards from the kahukura, considering notions of shelter and protection, creativity and (re)production, while asking us to think through the ways that our own bodies are implicated within this relational network.

Roharoha (2022), a dual-channel video, is projected onto a book-shaped screen. Iti layers an unfolding rhythm of lush visual imagery across this book's open pages. Pulsing with movement, we trace the kahukura's plunging flight pattern, watching as it stops to rest and feed. Acid bright colour flashes across the pages, signalling moments of transformation or

evolution, marking the rhythms by which larva becomes caterpillar becomes butterfly. Close-up imagery of ongaonga leaves show an uneven pattern of holes laced across their surface where they have been eaten by caterpillars. Their stems are edged with needle-fine spines, rendering the plant toxic to mammals, but a source of both food and shelter for the kahukura. Footage of the butterfly and the ongaonga is followed by the rhythmic action of Iti's hands as she carefully binds the pages of a book with a needle and thread. Here, human creativity is bound into a consideration of non-human life cycles and the reciprocity of the natural world.

The sculptural installation *Shelters* (2022) references the process by which the kahukura shrouds itself within the leaves of the stinging nettle. Alongside this protective act of shrouding, these forms gesture towards numerous acts of shelter, both human and non-human. Forged from steel and frost cloth, these precarious hybrid forms simultaneously reference a manuscript cradle, a pup tent and a garden bed covered for winter. As these forms slip from tent to cradle to garden, *Shelters* is marked by the residual trace of absent things: the bodies, the earth and books that exist in relation to them.

Books

A needle punctures parchment, pulling the thread to bind the spine of a book. In *Roharoa* we watch as Iti's hands carefully construct the form of a book, binding its blank pages together. Iti has frequently engaged with written language in her work, using it as a mutable material that carries its own restrictions and possibilities. Her textual explorations are deeply attuned to the ambiguities of language, sensitive to the ways that it can shape both meaning and feeling. In video works such as *Howling out at a safe distance* (2020) and *A dusty handrail on the track* (2021), Iti explores historical texts written in both te reo Māori and English. Here the pre-existing writing functions as far more than source material, Iti opening an expansive artistic engagement with its writers. These works navigate the ambiguity of language, exploring the slippages that occur across lines of translation and subjectivity.

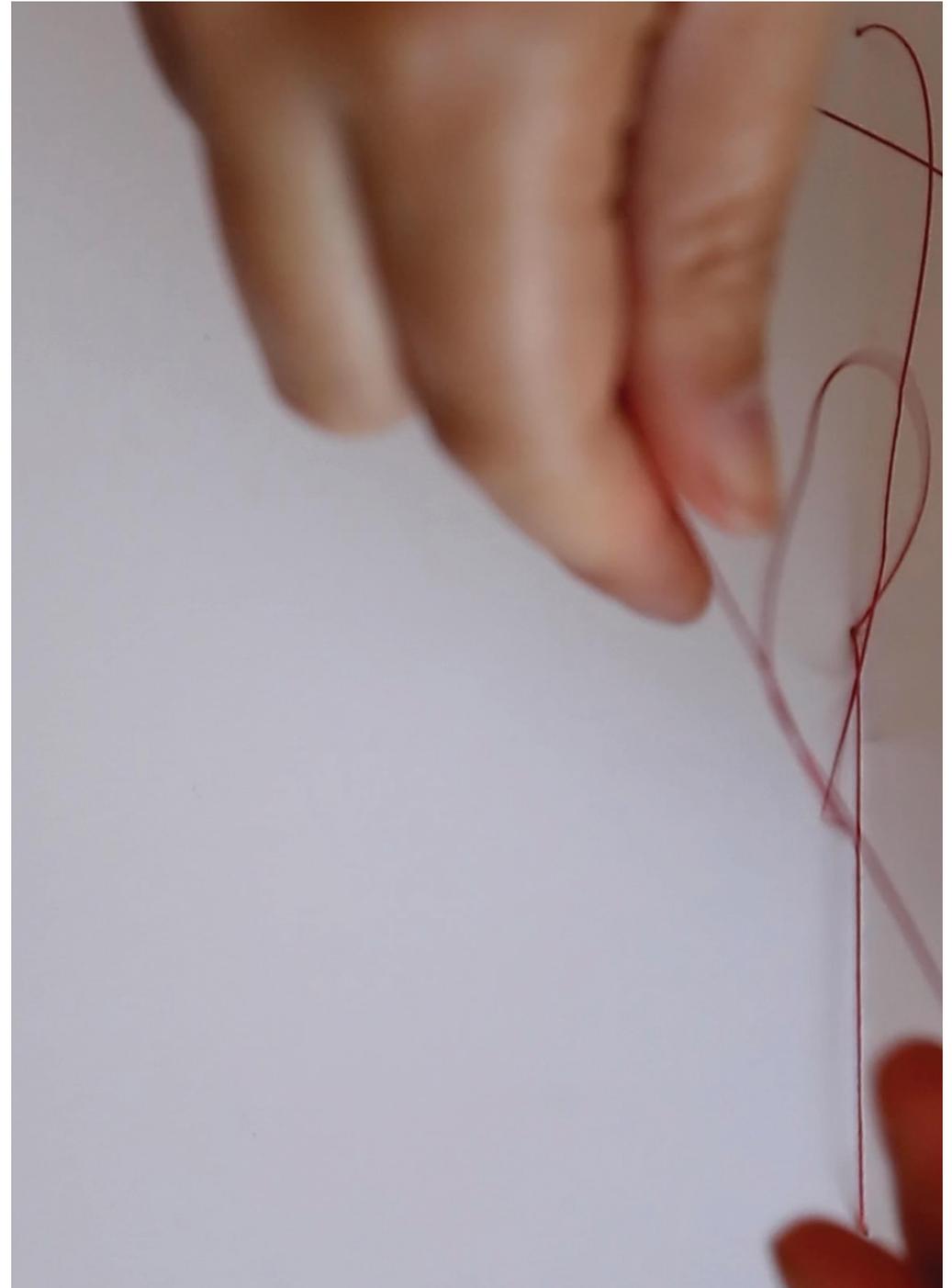
Lana Lopesi, writing on *A dusty handrail on the track*, considers the ways that slippage can occur across temporal lines, too. In that film, Iti engages with the fiction writing of three wāhine Māori – Keri Hulme, June Mitchell and JC Sturm – piecing together an indeterminate narrative using decontextualised fragments of their texts. 'As we read the found phrases in Iti's reconfigurations,' writes Lopesi, 'there is a sense of looking

through portals that collapse the time and space of the original authors, that of the artist documenting her acts of reading and editing, and ours as an audience viewing and reading...'¹

Where *A dusty handrail on the track* pulls writing from the past into an unfolding present, both *Roharoa* and *Shelters* gesture towards absent texts that always exist elsewhere. The manuscript cradles sit empty, the pages that Iti stitches together remain blank. The bookbinding process is a precursor to writing, creating a physical object that is, as yet, unmarked by language. Blankness is typically read as lack: the lack of text, of language, of meaning. Perhaps, though, these blank pages can be more accurately read as containing an abundance: an abundance of language yet to be written, of meaning yet to be forged.

By piercing and binding these pages together, Iti's hand creates a site of infinite potential, threading futurity into these imagined and unseen books.

¹ Lana Lopesi, *Through a window into a time not my own: On looking and language in Ana Iti's and Shannon Te Ao's recent work*, March 2021, <https://artnow.nz/essays/through-a-window-into-a-time-not-my-own>





Earth

The steel frame of *Shelters*, stretched with a fine layer of opaque frost cloth, offers protection to an unseen garden bed. Beneath its canopy we imagine the earth itself, lying rich with vegetation. There is no life without soil, without earth. We are all – human, kahukura, ongaonga, book – reliant upon its generative power to survive. While both tangata whenua and tangata tiriti hold different relationships to this earth, we all exist within – and impact upon – its expansive relational ecology.

In her large-scale sculpture *Only fools are lonely* (2018), Iti brought earth directly into the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, laying a skin of hand cut clay tiles over a cedar ramp. This use of earth as material rearticulated the presence of Papatūānuku, despite the layers of architecture that separated the sculpture inside the gallery and the earth beneath the building. Where *Only fools are lonely* made the fundamental presence of the earth tangible, *I must shroud myself in a stinging nettle* engages with a whenua that, while inescapably present, is physically absent.

The sculptural forms of *Shelters* gesture to an unseen book above, and the soil of an absent garden below. The earth that lies beneath them shifts when we consider the shelter offered by the third structure referenced by their form. A pup tent is

a small, easily transportable tent that offers temporary shelter to those passing over the land. Popular with trampers, its contemporary usage is generally recreational. However, its was also used by surveyors and colonial forces as they traversed the land of Aotearoa in service of the colonial project. During this period the earth became a sought-after resource, much of its surface stripped of vegetation.

In *Roharoha* we see a forest floor littered with decomposing apples. As the kahukura feeds on its oozing sugars, the flesh of the apple gradually reintegrates into the whenua which gave it life, and so the cycle continues. *I must shroud myself in a stinging nettle* embraces a relational ecology guided by Papatūānuku, of which Emilie Rākete writes: ‘our politics look below, to the warm earth and the immanent tendencies which guide its billions of inhabitants’.²

² Emilie Rākete, *In Human: Parasites, Posthumanism, and Papatūānuku*, 2016, https://artspace-aotearoa.nz/media/pages/exhibitions/potentially-yours-the-coming-community/2743884209-1570583709/emilie_rakete.pdf

Bodies

A stinging spine, laced with toxins, pierces the skin, causing a painful physiological reaction. The hair-like spines which radiate out from the ongaonga stem are tiny, but if we encounter them in large enough number, their sting can pose a significant threat. From the perspective of the kahukura, however, this plant offers both refuge and sustenance, its presence vital for the survival of the species. By placing the kahukura at the heart of *Roharoha* Iti de-centres human bodies within this ecological network. The toxic threat of the ongaonga is reinscribed as a source of nourishment and shelter as we are asked to look at this ecology from a perspective that is not our own.

While physical bodies are largely absent from *Roharoha* and *Shelters*, their presence haunts both works. They can be imagined lying underneath the opaque canopy of *Shelters*, seeking temporary respite from the environment through which they travel. They are present, too, in *Roharoha*, both in the visible form of Iti's hands, and in the numerous bodies that have altered the environments in which these native species live. *I must shroud myself in a stinging nettle* is populated with absent bodies, and as much as they require shelter, it is worth remembering that they also require sheltering *from*.

There is, of course, another body implicated here – that of the viewer who moves between these shelters, who holds this text in their hands.

We all bring our bodies with us. Our engagement with the world around us is inflected with the specificities of our own embodiment. *I must shroud myself in a stinging nettle* prompts us to consider the ways that our own bodies function within these ecologies – whether that of the gallery, the ngahere, or the broader connective tissue that links them all.

How does our physical presence alter these sites?

How do we seek shelter?

How do we offer it?



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Making new generations of myself

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Te Whare Toi

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All images by Ana Iti, *Roharoha* (still), 2022, courtesy of the artist.