

THE DIRT ON TURUMEKE HARRINGTON

A conversation between the artist **Turumeke Harrington** and friends **Mya Morrison-Middleton** and **Piupiu Maya Turei** in early December 2024.

We are talking about **HOME GROUND**, a show of landscape art, with no scenic stills. These paintings are made from whenua pigment harvested from places Turumeke has lived, or her ancestors have lived. A castle is built using paintings (bricks and mortar) and arguments about the housing crisis and wealth disparity (renters making castles for landlords). Lines are playfully drawn between relevant history and the current hot (property) mess.

We're also talking about **KORORIWHATEPŌ** that pairs with the exhibition *Kororiwhateao* which opened last month at Utua Pai! Gallery and Workspace in Whanganui. Familiar characters from previous artworks appear across sculptures and embroidery, where they meet new friends that are sown (sewn) as seeds for future artworks. Watch this space, it has potential.

HOME GROUND

Mya:

Can we talk about the castle?

Turumeke:

It's taller than me. You could walk through the gate.

Piupiu:

Statement piece for sure.

T:

This castle looks like a quilt but it's hard edged and is made of rocks from the places that I live, or want to live, or where my tūpuna have lived. There's Moeraki, there's Mākara. There's a lot of Pūrau. Some of the blocks have writing that no one will see. In some I was having an argument with myself about my resistance philosophically to the idea of land ownership. There's also an argument about capital gains tax.

M:

So the castle is called **Mana, Whenua (Their house, their castle)**. Did you watch that TV show *My House, My Castle*?

T:

Yes.

M:

What about the TV show where they design big fancy homes and there's always a nightmare?

P:
Grand Designs.

T:
Oh, always.

P:
Did you see that one and this couple bought it, and then the wife cheated on the husband with the architect?

M:
Oh my god.

P:
And then they got a divorce, and the ex-husband said, 'Oh, you can keep the house'. And the new couple were so happy, but then it turned out that the house was actually built on a swamp and it was constantly flooding.

T:
I think I'll draw a big portcullis inside the castle, on the wall. There are nine single bricks from the castle that stand alone. Some of the blocks in the castle are mortar and some couldn't go into the castle, they were too distracting.

A portcullis is a heavy gate used in medieval fortresses to protect them during an attack. They are lowered using chains and ropes. Sometimes there were two portcullises and enemies would get trapped inside them.

We're looking at *He matapihi (Thrust)*. It has a green background, and layered on top is thick, gritty paint made from ground up whenua (earth) pigment.

P:
It's got a cream rectangle on it.

M:
Is it a window?

T:
Yeah. It needed a pause in it from the arguments in the writing underneath.

P:
About life in general?

T:

Yeah. And about what is fair to expect and not expect of people. Negotiating relationships with people. Or how to behave in line with your own values.

P:

That's a hard one.

M:

Reminds me of being a flatmate. Is it fun making these paintings?

T:

Yeah, it's fun to spend days grinding rocks and making paint. Sometimes the paint came out too slick, it didn't look like dirt anymore. With the top layer I have to work fast or else it sets and I can't make the lines. There is freedom in using the whenua paint to cover everything. It's grounding. That's such a bad pun.

M:

I was thinking about puns on the walk over here. Do any of your artworks not have a pun in them somewhere?

T:

Oh sure. Surely there's at least one. The puns on bricks are so good. I'm trying ways to use paintings to not only be paintings. To build with them as an installation. The windows order everything together, they are the same size as the blocks in the castle.

A SECRET HIDDEN BIT

This is not the only secret part we have hidden. It's not that we wouldn't want the world to know, we all agreed that ambiguity is nice. It's fun to not be explicit. If we could, we would cover these secrets in paint, too.

Now we're looking at *Blue (Ipu)*

T:

I was making lots of paintings of vessels when I was in Pūrau, and afterwards. I was enjoying how narrative ceramics put pictures onto things.

P:

Drawing things in clay, drawing on clay.

Two, whetū (Flagged as spam)

T:

Some of them don't have text but have references to other things, like the flag He Whakaputanga. I was reading about The New Zealand Wars.

He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tireni or the Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand was signed in 1835.

Drink and be...

T:

There's a mere in the background.

Walls, of all kinds, make backyards (kuhuka)

T:

More thinking about Nimbyism. Borders and walls.

NIMBY: Not In My Backyard - things like colonisation, homelessness, affordable housing.

M:

Going to ground. The quarter acre dream. Crunchy.

P:

Breaking ground too.

PIUPIU

Turumeke shows us a photo of a piupiu that will hang between the exhibitions. Piupiu is adoring the piupiu. The piupiu (Piupiu) sways.

KORORIWHATEPŌ

T:

This show is called *Kororiwhatepō*. There was *Kororiwhateao*, which was the show in Whanganui at Utua Pai!, and they are buddies. The show in Whanganui had whenua pigment works on paper and big, bling jewelry. It was the wearable and paper version of this show. I was trying to partner them up, but still have two different shows. I'm trying to tie all of the work right now together as 'landscape art'. Which is a funny term.

M:

Where does Kororiwhatepō come from?

Turumeke:

Kororiwhateao and Kororiwhatepō come from Matiaha Tiramōrehu's manuscripts.

Turumeke often references the writing of Matiaha Tiramōrehu in her artwork. Tiramōrehu is an important Ngāi Tahu spiritual and political leader, born during the turn of the 19th century.

We're now scrolling through photos of embroideries, and silver sculptures. There's a walnut with a sash.

T:

I was thinking about ritualistic jewelry, like sashes and badges, regalia, tiny pins and medals. Also vessels. Sports balls. Energy.

M:

It's show day. Seeds, whakapapa, potential?

T:

I was eating walnuts constantly last year. Especially while making this show. I like the idea that there is potential energy, and literal potential artworks in these walnuts.

P:

They're very organ-like. Like a brain, or lungs?

M:

Walnuts are good for your brain.

T:

I was trying to start a bunch of different things, and get across as many ideas as possible, so I have many places to return to. I'm not done with these ideas yet.

M:

What is that one?

T:

It's a piece of gravel from outside my front door that I made a mould of. It's for all the plots of land that have been turned over for urban development and then just sit there as gravel carparks.

NOW, THE DIRT:

Turumeke requested we write this next part without her. The brief from her was 'as if you are writing a gossipy Cosmopolitan magazine article about my artwork.'

Read with caution.

Mya:

Turumeke said she wants this bit to be rude.

Piupiu:

I don't know how to give her rude.

M:

What even is magazine gossip? What would the headline be?

P:

The bright paint colors with the whenua remind me of people in hi-vis digging up soil. Also of haukāinga and papakāinga practices. Working the land, and the idea of belonging to the land.

M:

The future is bright. The past is full of potential. I'm glad the NIMBY works are back.

P:

I think you have to be self-aware to understand Turumeke's work. You're considering your place. I liked it when she talked about how she has to make the artwork fast because of the way the materials are fussy. The whenua paint dries quickly.

P:

Bright colors are the palette of summer. But also, everlasting. It's timeless. Who doesn't need a pop of color? I like the combination of the whenua with the fluorescent colours.

M:

It's really nice. I can't think of any facetious gossip about it.

We asked for a hot take from a bystander who described the show as, 'building on a body of work about home, place, and making a living.' We'll stretch this to say that it is a contemplation on purpose. Another source said the only safe place to put money is property or gold.

M:

I wonder if she has read *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme because there is a castle in it, well, a tower. The set up is that the tower is the character, like the setting is the character. The main character is defending the tower by socially isolating herself and by the end of the book *spoiler alert* the tower disintegrates as the character accepts other people and relationships into her life, even though it's messy.

P:

Many hands make a castle.

M:

Well, yeah. Sometimes you have to destroy the castle to live a life. I think Turumeke takes her artwork seriously, but she doesn't want us to have to experience it in a heavy way.

P:

Bricks are great and heavy. I think the bricks are interesting, Building bridges. Building beautiful homes. What does it take to make a home? You probably need bricks. And dirt. And gravel. I think that Turumeke Harrington is very dirty. She's been using a lot of dirt, getting her hands all dirty and sticky with paint.

M:

The dirt on Turumeke Harrington is....

P:

So good.

Mya Morrison-Middleton (Ngāi Tūāhuriri, Ngāi Tahu) is an artist and writer based in Ōtepoti where she works as Visitor Programmes Coordinator at Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Also based in Ōtepoti, **Piupiu Maya Turei** (Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, Ātihaunui-ā-Pāpārangī) is an artist, curator, mother, and facilitator of the project space Tini Whetū.

TURUMEKE HARRINGTON: HOME GROUND / KORORIWHATEPŌ
PAGE GALLERIES, 5 DECEMBER 2024 – 25 JANUARY 2025