



Back cover: *Whakapapa*, PĀTAKA Art + Museum, Wellington, 2016. Photo: Mark Tantrum  
Front cover: *Roi Tawhiao en rouge* 2015, 55cm(h) x 42cm(w)  
Charcoal, graphite, pigment and wax on paper. Private collection.

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james ormsby



# JAMES F. ORMSBY

Ngāti Maniapoto, Waikato, Te Arawa and Katimana

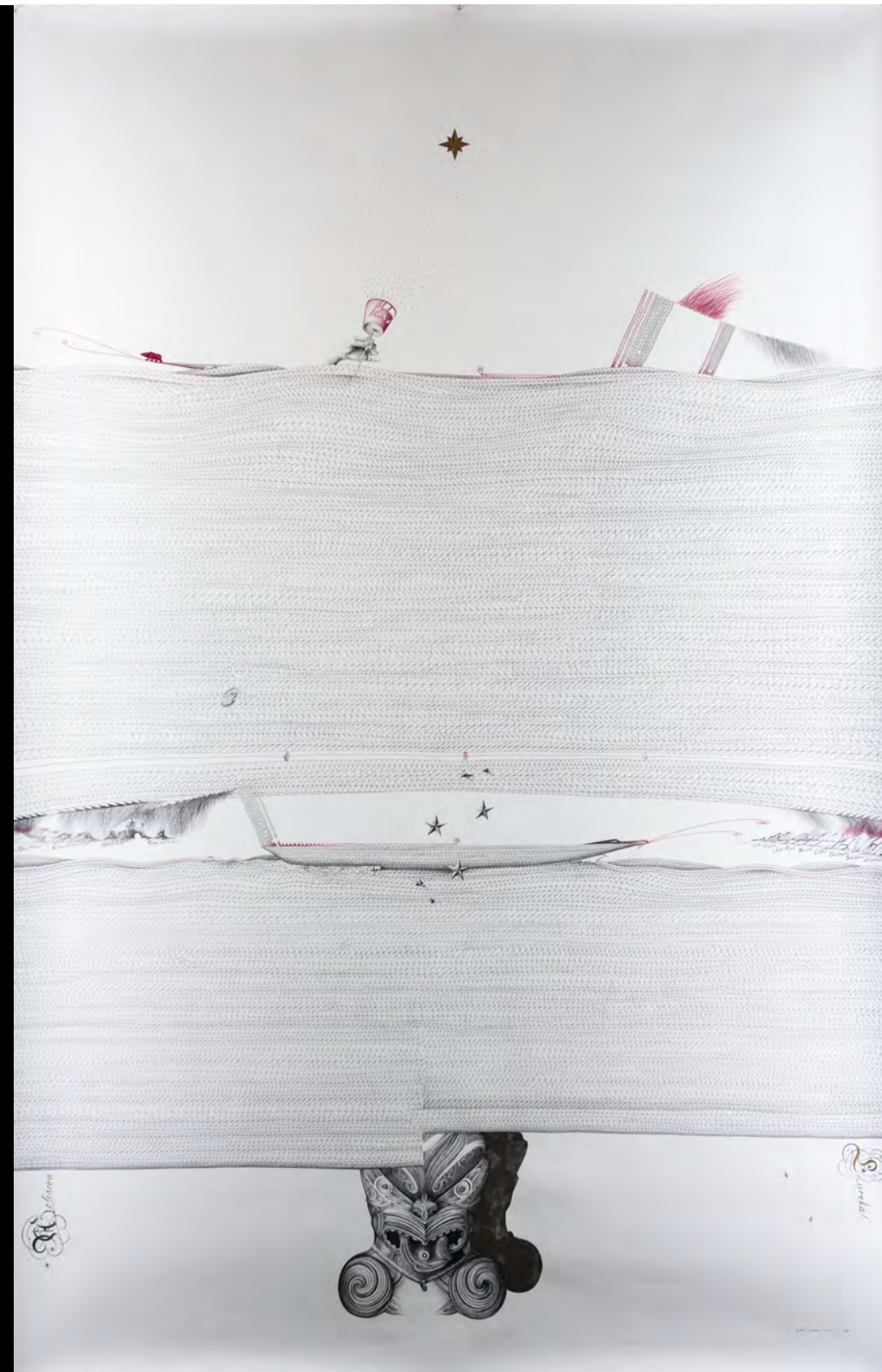
IWI. Waikato  
WAKA. Tainui  
PRINCIPAL HAPU. Ngaati Pau  
MARAĒ. Oraeroa Marae (Port Waikato)

What are the cords which bind this place,  
close to our hearts with bonds of joy and  
pain? The strand of heritage, close woven in  
the warp and woof, The very pattern of our  
family life.

(Page 34. "Te Parae - the homestead" from - "Lighting  
the traveller's Road - the poetry Hilary Ferguson" pub.  
Fraser Books, Masterton, NZ. 2003. ISBN:  
0-9582332-4-1)

Right: *Pacifica* (Large Drawing #20) 2008  
Graphite, polychromos pencil and silver  
leaf on paper, 230cm(h) x 148cm(w) unframed  
Courtesy of Whitespace Contemporary Art

Far right: *Pacifica* (Large Drawing #20) 2008 (detail)



## James Ormsby Whakapapa

The word *whakapapa* describes a Māori conception of genealogy. Literally translated, it means 'to create layers'. In James Ormsby's artworks, these layers of history and genealogy are excavated and laid bare, like an archaeological dig they reveal the stratigraphy of Ormsby's whakapapa.

A study of Ormsby's lineage leads us back to Scotland, via the Waikato river, to a Scandinavian ancestor named Orm. Orm was part of a Viking raiding party that invaded the Scottish coast around 750 A.D. During a battle at sea, Orm's leg was severed off above the knee. Nearing landfall, he promptly threw his leg onto shore and become the first of his companions to set foot on land. With this act he claimed the area for himself and his descendants.

The Ngāti Maniapoto Ormsby whānau of the Waipā district in Aotearoa New Zealand trace their lineage to this ancestor through Robert Ormsby (1823-1920). Robert Ormsby migrated here from Dublin, Ireland and married Mere Pianika Rangihurihia (1828-1905) at Pirongia in 1844. Through Pianika, James Ormsby is able to claim direct lineage to Hoturoa - the Captain of the Tainui waka who sailed to Aotearoa New Zealand and settled in the Waikato region approximately thirty generations ago.

In his artworks James Ormsby maps out these lines of connection, layering them within a complex weave of histories and genealogies. Similarly, Ormsby's artistic influences are drawn from various Western and Māori mark-making philosophies. Referencing artists such as New Zealand-born Australian artist Godwin Bradbeer and Ngāti Raukawa artist John Bevan Ford, Ormsby presents us with photo-surrealist figures laid over a korowai of interconnected text and aho, lines of ancestry.

The Tāwhiao portraits featured in this exhibition are a personal response to these layered histories of inter-cultural crossover and concession. During the 1880s, the government sought to broker a deal with King Tāwhiao in order to build a rail line through Ngāti Maniapoto territory.

Tāwhiao refused to deal with the government until they had resolved previous land grievances and this created tension between the Waikato Tainui and Waipā Maniapoto forces.

In settling this standoff, John Ormsby, the son of Robert and Pianika Ormsby, having an insight into both worlds, Māori and Pākehā, was able to draw upon his layered whakapapa to bring these two worlds together to facilitate a resolution.

James Ormsby's artworks similarly provide scope for cross-cultural insight, a perspective that is increasingly important in this post-Treaty settlement environment, where neoliberal identity politics are often used to divide communities along lines of ethnicity and economic stratigraphy, rather than drawing us together as a people.

By Reuben Friend





James Ormsby is of Māori and Scottish heritage. He has Ngāti Maniapoto, Waikato, Te Arawa and Kātimana (Scottish) affiliations, and draws on all of these in his art practice. His sources are eclectic and his artwork is clearly bicultural, invariably making reference to his ancestry and to his Christian religion, both of which constantly influence and guide him. Throughout the process of developing and presenting his personal vision, in his art-led research Ormsby has investigated what his ancestors, both Māori whenua and Scottish, would have used to make their marks, the materials they had access to and the symbols they employed to communicate their message. From this knowledge base, Ormsby draws on sources that his forebears would be able to recognize and associate with. From this he has developed a distinctive personal vocabulary of visual symbols, techniques and materials. He uses natural pigments, wax, inks and oils as well as graphite, and in combination with these he employs new technology in developing a distinctive visual language.

Ormsby has a Masters of Fine Arts from RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia). He lived in Melbourne between 1983 and 1995, which afforded him an opportunity to reflect on his cultural identity.

And it was in Melbourne that he began his distinctive graphite drawings on paper: drawing is at the base of Ormsby's art practice. He sees it as a global visual language that can communicate when oral and written language fails. His sources are eclectic: drawing is a traditional European medium but one that is also endemic to Māori, particularly in rock art. Through this technique and in the materials he uses, the artist makes a spiritual connection to his past. For Ormsby, drawing connects us with our ancestors. Through the intricate patterns and minute detail of his meticulous linear designs he makes a link to aho, the strands of heritage, whakapapa, which is a principal theme in his work. Through this analogy Ormsby conveys the concept of a line of descent and, frequently, his own personal ancestral lines. Aho is also the weft thread in customary Māori weaving techniques, thus also establishing an affiliation with pre-European Māori art.

Many of Ormsby's works could be likened to seascapes in which he uses his signature aho lines to evoke the physical nature of the sea, suggesting ocean voyages and ancestral migrations. Through these lines Ormsby draws on the symbolism of the aho thread to imbue this body of water with a sense of history and whakapapa, invoking thoughts about

origins and identity. The work *Pacifica (Large Drawing No.20)* is a kind of indigenous cartography – a map of our Pacific Ocean, its rim, its colonisers and its stories, encompassing its ecological and human history. The interwoven cross-hatching has a correspondence with whakapapa, and can even be read as a cross-section either of an individual or of community. These woven lines refer to us all, and to all our immigrant family lines, be they colonising Māori or Pākehā. Ormsby also used weaving in a metaphorical way to represent the fragility of identity, which is particularly relevant in this work.

In the lower reaches of the artwork is a pou, a carved ancestral figure, which Ormsby has created from a blend of forms based on those of the great whale Tē Hau-ki-Tūranga, a masterpiece of Māori architecture now at Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington. For Ormsby this haunting figure represents Papatūānuku, mother earth, and/or Rūaumoko, the youngest son of Papatūānuku, and the God of earthquakes. The middle horizon outlines Aotearoa's Bay of Islands on the left, morphing into the California coastline on the right. Indigenous names are recorded: Ngā Puhī (Northland tribe), and geographical features such as Rākau-mangamanga (Cape Brett) and Motu Kōkako (the Hole in the Rock).

Across on the other side of the work the first nation tribes of the American continent are listed in geographical order along the southwest coast of California down to Mexico. Other signs and symbols of California are recorded – the bear on the canoe, the gold. The stars are symbols shared by a number of cultures, and are invested with specific cultural significance. Are these stars from the Stars and Stripes, intimating the power and influence of 'the American way'? The speed of dissemination may be exacerbated by celestial navigation (the North Star) or it may be confronted by Matariki.

The upper part of the drawing clearly references migration – of people, of culture and of ideas. The waka like prow of the canoe on the left looks rather like the beak of a bird: birds were traditionally used by Māori to aid navigation. However, in a contemporary twist, this watercraft appears to be powered by an outboard motor (at the extreme right) suggesting the speed at which aspects of modern culture have gone global, and the power of its influence. So why the KFC bucket? For Ormsby this is a signifier of the multi-national chains that are taking over indigenous culture, replacing historical local culture with imported Americanisms. While *Pacifica* insinuates the challenges presented by the world-

wide migration of American culture and consumer-driven mores, Ormsby's *Genesis (PPV)* reflects on his European heritage. In this work the artist's signature aho lines have been usurped by digital text as he creates a contemporary illuminated manuscript, one that merges two cultures. The content is sourced from the Bible in English and in Te Reo Māori, with the illuminations hand-drawn by Ormsby and interspersed amongst computerized text which is ink jet printed in the artist's unique digital font. Through the development of a format virus, Ormsby has rendered the text almost unintelligible as in fact many mediaeval manuscripts might well appear nowadays. This serves also to illustrate graphically the vulnerability and fragility of computers and information technology.

*Genesis (PPV)* is part of Ormsby's *Psaltear* series which he began in 2010 with a number of drawings based on dual sources, the artist's whakapapa and the Ormsby Psalter in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. This famous, medieval book of psalms was commissioned to celebrate a marriage that never took place and the book was left unfinished, but it remains an exceptional amalgam of medieval art and history. It was presented to Norwich Priory in East Anglia, England, by Robert of Ormesby, a 13th century monk.

Below: *Genesis (Proto-Psaltear V)* 2010, Polymer ink, gold and silver on paper, 1.4m.h. x 5m.l., Courtesy of James Wallace Arts Trust, NZ  
Photo: Kallan MacLeod





The artwork of James Ormsby does just this. It affirms a distinctive whakapapa, one that is recognisably personal as well as indicative of a wider community. Nowadays most artists can lay claim to a global context – the key to individuality now lies in the retention of one's own heritage, integrity and cultural identity while working within the international arena. James Ormsby is forging a singular pathway, finding a distinctive voice while retaining a personal identity in a collective cultural context.

Through his personal ancestral lines, the artist is also descended from the second Māori King Tāwhiao, a leader of the Waikato tribes, a Christian and a prophet, known as a man of peace. In *Roi Tāwhiao en rouge* the emphasis on the mouth signifies King Tāwhiao as a leader of great mana, and an outstanding orator. Traditionally chieftains drenched themselves in red ochre to stand apart from the rest; red was a tapu colour, denoting the sacrosanct.

A companion piece, of another archetypal leader *Ariki 1*, is the starting point for Ormsby's portraits. This work is based on a plaster life-cast made by the on-board phrenologist who accompanied French explorer Dumont d'Urville to New Zealand in 1840.

Ormsby's work is one of the distinctive developments that distinguish contemporary art practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand. His work raises issues around the sustaining of individual and collective cultural identity. This is a matter of international concern in the post-modern period and is developing as one of the principal considerations of the 21st century. In homogenised societies in an age of globalization on an unprecedented scale, there is a need to retain a distinctive voice, to stand strong in the face of assimilation. Individual cultures must maintain an independent voice. The artwork of James Ormsby does just this. It affirms a distinctive whakapapa, one that is recognisably personal as well as indicative of a

wider community. Nowadays most artists can lay claim to a global context – the key to individuality now lies in the retention of one's own heritage, integrity and cultural identity while working within the international arena. James Ormsby is forging a singular pathway, finding a distinctive voice while retaining a personal identity in a collective cultural context.

Dr Robin Woodward

Below: *Whakapapa*  
PĀTAKA Art + Museum, Wellington, 2016  
Photo: Mark Tantrum



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#### PAULNACHE

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Left: *Tawhiao Cartoon (Large Drawing #22)* 2008  
Graphite on paper  
240cm(h) x 180cm(w)  
Private collection