

*Maureen Lander*  
*Ngā Uri o Rāhiri*

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY  
25 OCTOBER 1997 - 16 FEBRUARY 1998



A “hemispherical” sunburst of pingao leaves, lightly glued to the supporting wall, fans out from a central void filled with soft warm light. Alongside is a vertical row of nineteen small flat baskets or kete, woven from the same green-tinged golden pingao. Deceptively simple in appearance, *Nga uri o Rahiri* weaves a subtle web of concepts central to Maori culture and bound together by language. A clue, perhaps, to the importance of the linguistic strands in the work is the way in which the title of the work is integrated into the installation. Sited, in large letters, on the wall next to the kete, it translates as “the offspring of Rahiri”.

*Nga uri o Rahiri* was commissioned for the opening of the new wing of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, specifically for one of the walls in the hallways which link the existing and new areas of the building. Lander’s choice of pingao reflects the customary Maori use of this indigenous golden sand sedge in making the tukutuku panels that traditionally decorate and “warm” a new meeting house; and perhaps it alludes too to the Gallery’s proximity to the Taranaki foreshore. But the work is also “site specific” in a different way. Lander is not from Taranaki. However, she discerned a possible link between her Ngapuhi ancestor Rahiri and the local Ngati Rahiri hapu and from this the work and its title evolved. Whether there is a clear genealogical relation between the two is still uncertain; yet in Maori culture, the semantic relationship offers a point of contact and a basis for alliance. The people of Taranaki’s Ngati Rahiri gave the work and its underlying concept their blessing, and they participated in very practical ways, with some of their weavers making several of the kete and assisting Lander to install the work.

In Maori “ra” means sun and “hiri”, energy, and from this linguistic serendipity Lander drew the sunburst form with its vivid rays. She has made horizontally arranged circles of straight radiating lines in several earlier installations (including *Mataabo/Sightlines* 1993 and *Bioluminescence* 1996, with Judy Watson). Here, however, the wall-based golden aureole of leaves unmistakably evokes the rising sun. At the same time, the tapering form and

subtly wavy lines of the pingao strands suggest a swarm of active sperm converging on a glowing egg, the compelling, fecund conflux of male and female. Lander’s choice of unprocessed, unworked pingao parallels these natural forms, processes and energies.

The formal line of kete, on the other hand, sees the pingao transformed – twisted, woven, plaited and trimmed in ways that are clearly contrived by human hands and minds. Lander’s earlier installation *This is not a kete* (*Art now*, Museum of New Zealand, 1994) suggested that the kete held in museum collections or displayed as aesthetically pleasing objects in art galleries are no longer “kete” in the Maori sense – that is, things with a specific practical function (such as gathering, preparing or storing food, carrying clothes, cradling babies) or a ceremonial or decorative one (as is sometimes borne by the finer, elaborately patterned kete whakairo). The small pingao kete in *Te uri o Rahiri* are not, however, afflicted with this leaking away of function. Made with a special purpose in mind, collectively they construct an equivalent in weaving of the carved wooden rakau whakapapa<sup>1</sup>. With its aid, the artist or any descendant of Rahiri can trace a particular bloodline down through the generations of ancestors to themselves. Individually, each of these kete conceptually “contains” a generation and a particular person of that generation. This individuality within an overarching social structure is drawn out by the way each kete differs from the others. Similar in size and colouration, identical in materials, some are plainly woven; others have a more complex weave, more ornate handles and joining techniques. Some have loosely rolled tops, in contrast to the traditional tightly plaited band; one has a rolled handle. A couple have flamboyant quiffs of pingao strands; one is embellished with a plaited pigtail, another with a wild, uneven fringe circling the body of the kete.

Within the structure Lander has built, there are references to traditional connections between weaving and genealogy. For instance, each stitch or tui on a tukutuku panel (for which pingao, with its bright colour, is prized) represents a link from tribal ancestors to the unborn of tomorrow. According to Lander, the language of whakapapa (genealogy) is also

the language of weaving. For instance the word whakapapa itself is the word used for the arrangement, sequence and number of strips joined together at the start of a kete. From the whakapapa the kete’s patterns are formed and its base size and potential shape are determined.

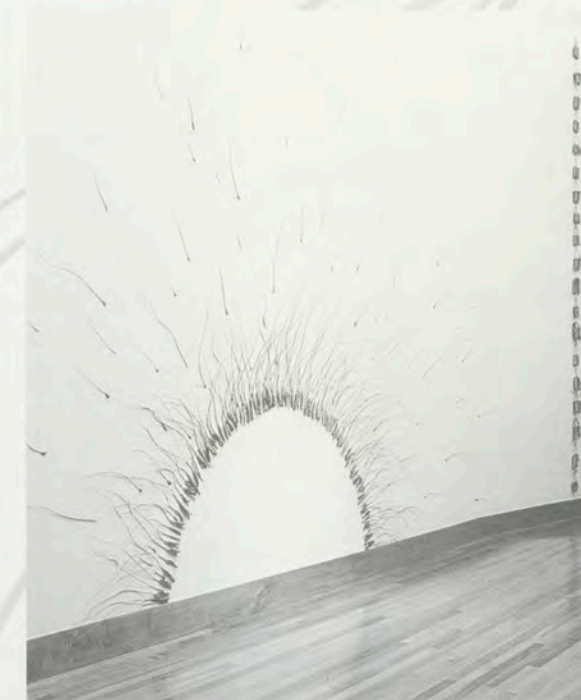
The kete line forms the tahu or backbone of the work – a reference to both the body and to built and social structures. For tahuhu (linguistically related to “tahu”) means both direct line of descent and the ridge pole of a house. The pou tahuhu is the central post that holds up the tahuhu, and Lander’s vertical line of kete can be read as a pou tahuhu, supporting both the physical building (the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery) for which it was devised and the social and family structure to which the work refers.

In contrast to the natural form of the sunburst, the line of kete relates to various aspects of culture: history, obviously; tool making; the weaving arts; and the constructing of a visual language. It also refers to forms of measurement and to structures for recording social relationships. Yet there are linkages between the two parts of *Nga uri o Rahiri*, acknowledging the inextricable intertwining for Maori of nature and culture: the use of a single material for both; the linking of the sun’s energy to the genetic vigour of the whanau or hapu, since, traditionally, Maori lines of descent “were claimed according to their vitality and power.... This power was like the power that made plants grow and flourish....”; and the multiple and subtly shaded meanings of the words that tie them to each other.

Priscilla Pitts

- 1 A carved wooden staff whose notches act as a mnemonic for reciting genealogy.
- 2 Anne Salmond “Nga huarahi o te ao Maori: pathways in the Maori world” *Te Maori: Maori art from New Zealand collections* ed Sidney Moko Mead, Heinemann, Auckland, 1984. p112.

*Rahiri*  
*Kabarau*  
*Taurapobo*  
*Tupoto*  
*Kairewa*  
*Miringa*  
*Urukarito*  
*Terewhare*  
*Kaibape*  
*Taku Terewhare*  
*Te Rangahau*  
*Elizabeth*  
*Mary*  
*Mabel*  
*Durelle*  
*Maureen*



Published by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery on the occasion of the artist’s project *Nga uri o Rahiri*, a work by Maureen Lander assisted by Whero Bailey, Mina Timutimu and Mahoetahi Kipa.

Distributed by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, PO Box 647, New Plymouth, New Zealand, telephone (64 6) 758 5149, fax (64 6) 758 0390, email [frontdesk@govettb.org.nz](mailto:frontdesk@govettb.org.nz).

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Design: Verne Barrell

Photography: Bryan James

ISBN 0-908848-24 2

This project is supported by Creative New Zealand Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa

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## MAUREEN LANDER

1942 born Rawene  
1987 BFA (photography) Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland  
1989 BA (Maori studies) University of Auckland  
1993 MFA (sculpture) Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland  
Lecturer in Maori Material Culture, Maori Studies Department, University of Auckland

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- \* solo exhibition
- 1986 *Karanga, karanga* Fisher Gallery, Auckland
- 1987 *Toi tu te whenua: the enduring land* Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton
- 1988 *Talking to a brick wall* Fisher Gallery, Auckland\*
- 1989 *Space to breathe* Proba Gallery, Auckland\*  
*A community of women* National Art Gallery, Wellington
- 1990 *11 Manako* window installation, Auckland City Art Gallery\*
- 1991 *Homage to Huna* Artspace, Auckland\*  
*Headwaters* Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui\*
- 1992 *Conversions* Canberra Contemporary Artspace, Canberra  
*Nga kaupapa here abo: fibre interface* Te Taumata Gallery, Auckland  
ARX-3 Perth
- 1993 *alter/image* City Gallery, Wellington and Auckland City Art Gallery  
*Nga puna waiora o te maunga o Taranaki* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth\*  
*Pu manawa* Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington (and touring)  
*Combings: photographs by invited artists* Lopdell Gallery, Auckland
- 1994 *Art now* Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington  
*Ikaroa* Whakatane Museum
- 1995 *Gold leaf* (with Amanda Wright) Lopdell House, Auckland  
*Korurangi* New Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland  
*Fresh and fruity* Napier Cultural Art Trust and Museum, Napier  
*Eco-Art sculpture symposium* Corbans Wine Estate, Waitakere City  
*Te Atinga indigenous artists* Hei Tiki Gallery & Rotorua Council Chambers, Rotorua
- 1996 *Bioluminescence* (with Judy Watson) The Pacific wave festival of arts Victoria Park, Sydney  
The Performance Space Centre, Sydney  
*Grass skirts* Carnegie Case Project, Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga\*  
*Ko te Hapai o ki Muri, ko te Amorangi ki Mua* Manawatu Art Gallery  
*On form* Lopdell House, Titirangi
- 1997 *Whakatu in your eyes* Suter Gallery, Nelson

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- Art now: the first biennial review of contemporary art* Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 1994
- Barton, Christina and Deborah Lawler-Dormer (eds) *alter/image: feminism and representation in New Zealand art 1973-1993*. City Gallery, Wellington, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1993
- Brown, Amy (ed) and Jocelyn Carlin *Mana wabine: women who show the way* Reed Books, Auckland, 1994
- Conversions: festival of installation works* Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, 1992
- Kirker, Anne *New Zealand women artists: a survey of 150 years* Craftsman House, Sydney, 1993
- Korurangi: new Maori art* Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, 1996
- Menzies, T. Te A. (ed) *He wai: a song: first nations women's writing* Waiata Koa Collection, 1996
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- Nga kaupapa here abo: fibre interface* Te Taumata Gallery, Auckland, 1992
- Nga taonga a o tatou kuia* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1987
- Nicholas, Anne *Fabrications* Random Century, Auckland, 1990
- Parsons, J. "Interview: Maureen Lander" *The Performance Space Quarterly Magazine* No12, 1996
- Pu manawa* Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 1993
- Rosier, Pat "Weaving the strands" *Broadsheet* September 1985
- Sanderson, Anna "The drawing in of breath" *Art New Zealand* 75, 1995

