



WHARENUI HARIKOA: LISSY ROBINSON- COLE AND RUDI ROBINSON

by Dr. Pounamu Jade William Emery Aikman

“IN darkness, illumination,” I thought while attending the launch of **Lissy Robinson-Cole** (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) and **Rudi Robinson’s** (Ngaruahine, Te Arawa, Ngāti Pāoa, Waikato ki Tai) vivid and compelling installation, “Wharenuī Harikoa,” at **The Dowse Art Museum** in Lower Hutt, Aotearoa New Zealand, in October 2022.

A new take on the art of whakairo (ornamental sculpting and carving), “Wharenuī Harikoa” is a scale replica of an ancestral wharenuī (meeting house), sculpted not in wood—as is typical—but in elaborate, crocheted neon wool. Scaffolded by

an aluminium and plywood frame, the brocaded fabric atop lays dormant in wait until the otherwise darkened exhibition hall switches to ultraviolet light. As in any wharenuī, there are elaborate and articulate whakairo wūru (woolen carvings) that adorn its interior, from intricate tukutuku (ornamental latticework) panels, to carved pou (columns) in the likeness of recent and distant tūpuna (ancestor/s). Visually dramatic, the kaleidoscope of neon vivifies both viewer and creator, communicating a deeply personal, while at the same time, profoundly universal message. As dark gives way to fluorescent radiance, therefore, the wharenuī awakens, revealing in

blazing luminescence an electrifying tapestry of life, anguish, hope, and healing.

Lissy and Rudi describe their textured sculpture as “a refractive prism of tūpuna-inspired light,”¹ one which, in hushed darkness, comes sharply into view. Like the spectrum of colour unleashed as white light passes such a prism, “Wharenuī Harikoa” is illuminated by purpose in abundance. At its heart, the wharenuī is an invitation and, equally so, a beseeching reminder to see the latent potential of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) in healing intergenerational trauma, “transforming [it] into deeply felt joy one crochet loop at a time.”

“One loop at a time” speaks to the deliberately unhurried way in which the fabric whakairo is produced, which, just as its archetypal form, demands patience in the back-and-forth encounter between artisan and medium. In this forced pause of breath, a hurried world becomes still, the dissonant cacophony of the outside world momentarily muted. As viewers gaze upon the luminous final form, they are invited to experience this stillness of mind, a serenity made possible only by finding light in the dark.



Left page: **Lissy Robinson-Cole** (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) and **Rudi Robinson** (Ngaruahine, Te Arawa, Ngāti Pāoa, Waikato ki Tai), *Wharenuī Harikoa* (interior), 2022. Crocheted New Zealand neon wool on carved polystyrene, 13 x 16.75 x 310.5 feet installation. Photo: Nick Taylor, the Dowse Art Museum, Aotearoa New Zealand. Top: Exterior view flanked with the likenesses of carved ancestors outside and within. Below: Exterior view with the crocheted likeness of celestial ancestress Hine Tūrama in the foreground.







Lissy Robinson-Cole (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) and **Rudi Robinson** (Ngaruahine, Te Arawa, Ngāti Pāoa, Waikato ki Tai), 2021. Photo: Russ Flatt (Ngāti Kahungunu).

That purpose and healing emerge from the dark is no accident in Te Ao Māori, for existence, as we know it, emerged from the primordial void, Te Kore. Refusing the biblical conventions of night and day, Te Kore is understood instead as a realm of limitless potential and being, the nothingness from which everything was born. This inert potential is realised in “Wharenuī Harikoa” by riding the hazardous crest between convention and innovation, in daring to offer a new way to see and experience Te Ao Māori. The textile wharenuī is a world first, with a half-tonne of technicolour wool used as the sculptural essence of the exhibition. This interface, between tradition and divergence, is one our tūpuna have long straddled, seeking to push boundaries into the unknown, immortalised in the heroic ancestral Pacific

Left page: **Lissy Robinson-Cole** (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) and **Rudi Robinson** (Ngaruahine, Te Arawa, Ngāti Pāoa, Waikato ki Tai), *Ururangi*, 2022. Crocheted New Zealand neon wool pou (ancestral column) of the celestial body, *Ururangi*, who signals atmospheric conditions (such as wind) for the forthcoming year on carved polystyrene. 75.5 x 20 x 7.75 feet. Photo: Sam Hartnett.

figure of Māui-pōtiki. In seeking advice from master carvers, as well as their wider whānau (family or relation) on their wishes and intentions for “Wharenuī Harikoa,” Lissy and Rudi have achieved just this: invoking Māui-pōtiki and bringing the cultural mainstay of Te Ao Māori—marae (ancestral meeting spaces of enduring cultural and genealogical significance) and wharenuī—into the avant-garde of the now, transgressing orthodoxy to reveal a shimmering world of new possibilities.

In this world of the new, elegance is found in simplicity. “I never loved sewing,” Lissy described, but crochet offered a form of expression that was both sparkling in effect and uncomplicated in manufacture. “With crochet, I was astounded with what you can make with wool... it is so simple to do.” Bringing essence to form in this way has been similarly central for Rudi, whose prowess in wood and metal crafting formed the elemental basis from which “Wharenuī Harikoa” arose. But it was the union of soft and hard that came to define the dazzling cashmere masterpiece, with Lissy one day adorning a tekoteko (carved



Lissy Robinson-Cole (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) and **Rudi Robinson** (Ngaruahine, Te Arawa, Ngāti Pāoa, Waikato ki Tai) studio (*The Nathan Homestead*), 2022. Design process and carving of crocheted ancestral pou tuarongo (rear standing post), Pōhutukawa, by Manutahi Gray (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu), who tethers us to memories of our lost and loved ones. Photo: Samuel Evans (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu).

figurehead) Rudi had carved with neon acrylic wool. “And that’s the magical moment it all began,” described Lissy.

This fusion of warm and cold, of dark and light, is at the heart of “Wharenui Harikoa.” Rudi recounts how his previous work with imprisoned tāne (male) Māori centred around crochet, the woolly medium a fabric tether to past memories of sitting with Nanny, or in bed beneath quilted blankets her hands had made. “Because the medium is soft, people soften,” Rudi explained, and as tāne took to crochet, a new possibility emerged: “You can be soft but staunch, for this is another way of expressing yourself as a Māori man.” It is this potentiality for joy that is so profound, but one premised on an elemental and unavoidable truth: to truly experience joy, to appreciate the wonders of what is, is to know of the aching pain of sorrow and suffering. To fully

appreciate this frequency of joy is to have experienced the loss and despair that makes the human experience a universal one, a joy knowable only through the melancholy of everyday life. As we enter into the wharenui, this mamae (pain) is absorbed into the wool itself, as Lissy explained, a layer of fleecy warmth enveloping the viewer “...like you’re in the embrace of your Nanny’s blankie.”

In the epoch of our tūpuna’s tūpuna, who ventured forth from the ancient homeland of Hawaiki innumerable generations ago, bioluminescent sea creatures lit the way as our ancestors made their earliest oceanic journey to Aotearoa. Like these incandescent kaitiaki (guardians) upon the waves, “Wharenui Harikoa” lights the path for the plethora of uri (descendants) Māori to reconnect with Te Ao Māori, who, through the

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machinations of colonisation and urbanisation, have been cast adrift from their cultural moorings, such as whenua (ancestral lands), marae, tikanga (cultural protocols), and te reo (Native tongue; the Māori language). Tikanga associated with marae underpins the exhibition, with those in attendance removing their shoes before entry (a protocol of respect inasmuch as it is one for acknowledging transitioning thresholds); partaking in karakia (prayer; ritual incantations) through te reo to open the event; and singing waiata (songs of support) in support of Lissy and Rudi. This microcosm of “being Māori” offers itself both as an instrument of reconnection for those whānau adrift, and also as a gracious invitation for curious onlookers to participate. It is this ethic that was on vibrant display as I sat in the audience of last year’s launch, an enduring hallmark of the exhibition as a whole.

Whakairo in any form tell a story—be it of love, loss, learning, or leadership—and these messages are imparted to our whānau and young people through artistic expression. As I entered the exhibition hall that day, the buoyancy of spirit, amplified by the vibrancy of colour and form, was as arresting as it was tranquillising. For Lissy and Rudi, the glow-in-the-dark spectacle—a feat made possible only through modern technology—transports us to an aperture between this world and the next, to the “much deeper realm [where] the tūpuna and atua (ancestors of ongoing influence) [reside].” It is this space, recreated in “Wharenuī Harikoa,” that produces such an atmosphere of healing, reconnection, and belonging.

But beneath the intricate crochet one final story is revealed: the fearlessness and fortitude of purpose to carry “Wharenuī Harikoa” into the day, to take it into a world where Indigenous art is not always guaranteed the reverence it so deserves. Sailing into these new horizons blazes a trail for those to come, pushing boundaries and redefining the way we see and make sense of the world around us. “Wharenuī Harikoa” is ancestrally-ordained in design and ingenious (or perhaps, Indigenious!) in its execution, bowing respectfully to the past while embracing with vigour the present and future. A more formal and complete launch of the exhibition is planned for Matariki (the lunar Māori new year) in June this year, following which the wharenuī, as “an expression of aroha for our tūpuna and people,” will take flight across Aotearoa and beyond.



Lissy Robinson-Cole (Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) and **Rudi Robinson** (Ngaruahine, Te Arawa, Ngāti Pāoa, Waikato ki Tai), 2022. Photo: Hohua (Luatuanu’u, Sāmoa, Kāi Tahu, Te Aupōuri).

This article builds on a previous review of Wharenuī Harikoa, published through the Journal of Pacific History. See: “Exhibitions.” The Journal of Pacific History, (ahead-of-print), pp. 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2023.2173477>

lissycole.com

¹ Lissy Robinson-Cole and Rudi Robinson, interview with author, online (Zoom), April 19, 2023. All further quotes are from the same source.

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