



“Whakahono 4” from the “Hineukurangi Series” by Carla Ruka, a contemporary Maori clay sculptor. Her inspiration and ideas descend from her ancestors.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Clatsop Community College has invited six indigenous Maori clay artists from New Zealand to share their art and culture with the Astoria community in ‘Uku-Aotearoa: The Spirit of Materials’

Story by DWIGHT CASWELL

A wharenui, the communal meetinghouse of the Maori people of New Zealand, is the focal point of a marae, a place sacred to the people. Everything about and within the wharenui has significance; the longhouse is a living ancestral creature, home to all the ancestors, both human and non-human, back to the beginning of time.

“The ridge beam is the backbone,” Miki’ala Souza, a Hawaiian indigenous artist living in Astoria, explains. “The rafters are the ribs, and the weavings between the posts are the skin and flesh. All the support posts are carved by the men, and the weavings hung between the posts, which are the flesh, are made by the women.”

Richard Rowland, Clatsop Community College ceramics instructor and also a Hawaiian indigenous artist, explains that the carvings of the ancestors are arranged in their correct places, according to where they came from. “Everything was considered,” Rowland says of the wharenui. “Local materials, landmarks, the environment, the designs. There is an incredible sense of intention in the longhouse.” To walk into a wharenui, he says, “is like going to a family reunion. All the people are there, including the ancestors, and everything is alive. Everything has a soul, a spirit. Western culture has no sense of ancestral integration like that.”

Rowland has been participating in the activities of the Polynesian indigenous community for 30 years, which led to a visit to his anagama Dragon Kiln by Maori artists. This led to the 2012 “Pacific Rim” art show and cultural exchange at the CCC Art Gallery.

Since 1995, indigenous artists of the Pacific basin — from Siberia and Alaska to New Zealand — have been gathering to share stories and to create artwork together. In 2014, Rowland and Souza were two of 145 artists present for the seventh International Indigenous Artists Gathering held in Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand). Rowland says, “It was an honor to be there, to hear people tell the stories of their lives.”

Six of the artists at that gathering will now present their work in Astoria, at an event that is both cultural exchange and art exhibition. “Uku-Aotearoa: The Spirit of Materials” opens at 6 p.m. Thursday, May 7 at the CCC Art Gallery. Clay is “uku” in the Maori language, and the living spirit of uku will be on display, expressed through the work of six Maori ceramic artists, who refer to themselves less formally as “muddies.”

Rowland explains that Maori artists are “like any other artist, but more of a collective. Their work is representative of who they are as an individual, and who they are as a culture.” Master Maori artists are the elders in what is, essentially, a family of apprentices whom they mentor. “When I am with them,” Rowland says, “I feel like I’m with family. I’m blessed.”

One of the artists in the exhibit, Colleen Waata-Urlich, is an elder, one of those who visited the Dragon Kiln. This early meeting was the beginning of a lasting friendship and a direct relationship between not only Rowland and the two artists, but also the Maori and Northwest art communities

Four younger artists who will be in Astoria for the first time will join Waata-Urlich and another elder, Baye Riddell. All six are considered among the best ceramic artists in New Zealand, and together they represent a range of tribes, ages, styles and personal experiences. All show a dedication to their indigenous heritage and the responsibilities that come with that lineage.

“It’s hard to emphasize how incredible this is,” says Souza, “Everyone is involved, working with the earth, coming from this place of humility and love. In English ‘responsibility’ has a negative connotation of duty, obligation, a burden. As a Hawaiian, when I speak of a responsibility to my culture it means to respect or to take care of something.”

In the cultural exchange events held over the past 20 years, the artists, although from different regions, have found that as indigenous artists they have many themes in common. Dorothy Waetford, one of the artists coming to Astoria, says, “The artworks we produce — the knowledge, skills and experiences we share with one another — create pathways to address, heal and restore the well-being of ourselves and in turn, our indigenous communities.”

Waetford feels that one thing indigenous artists have in common, “is the never-ending significance of ‘place.’” That idea of place, homeland, community and the responsibility one has for the land is a common issue for indigenous peoples, and a theme for many artists. It is an idea that may serve as a common point around which visitors and locals will begin their dialogue in this cultural exchange.

“Uku-Aotearoa: The Spirit of Materials” is more than an art exhibit. There will be a full calendar of lectures, workshops, discussions, and a “Maori Cultural Experience” for local art students. The connections made during these collaborative gatherings are, Rowland says, “a weaving together like the weavings in the longhouse.”

Rowland says he is, “challenged to advocate for indigenous peoples. This is so organic, supportive and creative. It creates a kind of generosity that moves forward.”

As Colleen Waata-Urlich puts it, “Firm friendships are formed during these cross-cultural exchanges and should not be underestimated. You don’t go to war against friends. There needs to be more understanding of one another internationally. In our own small way as artists, we are contributing to that understanding.”



Dorothy Waetford’s early career began as a performing artist as a member of the contemporary Maori dance company Taiao, based in Auckland, New Zealand. Excited by developments in the contemporary Maori art scene, her interest led her to choosing clay as a preferred medium for art making.



Colleen Waata-Urlich, who is leading the traveling Maori collective with Baye Riddell, has been sculpting, molding and nurturing Maori art for years. She is a Maori clay artist and senior foundation member of the national body



Submitted photos

“Tall Hinaki 4,” from the 2007 “Kapowai Series: Dragon Fly Lake” by Colleen Waata-Urlich.



“Aniwaniwa” by Todd Douglas, who is a fulltime ceramic artist living and working at Muriwai Beach. Douglas uses a broad range of ceramic techniques and surface treatments as well as combines materials such as clay, wood, lashing and LED lighting. “As soon as I touched clay, I was hooked,” he said. “Bringing together the four elements — fire, earth, air and water, clay is like no other material. It has fascinating physical properties such as its malleability, but it also has many cultural and spiritual significances.”

‘Uku-Aotearoa: The Spirit of Materials’

THE EXHIBIT

Welcoming reception
6 p.m. Thursday, May 7
CCC Art Center Gallery
1799 Lexington Ave., Astoria

Maori artists will share their connections to their work and its surrounding mythological and historical origins.

PUBLIC PRESENTATION

6 to 8:30 p.m. Friday, May 8
CCC Performing Arts Center
588 16th St., Astoria
CCC Writing Instructor Nancy Cook

will lead artists in a discussion examining critical issues surrounding cultural landscape, collective and individual vision, and the value of myth and memory. Music by Al Perreira. Hula dance by Ilikea Aguiar-Galloway

HANDS-ON CLAY WORKSHOPS

10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday, May 8
10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, May 9
CCC Art Center Ceramics Studio
1799 Lexington Ave., Astoria

Seating is limited
Contact rowland@clatsopcc.edu



“Pacific Jug” by Colleen Waata-Urlich.

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