



TOI NGĀPUHI

FEATURED TOI NGĀPUHI CREATIVE



FEATURED: VICTOR TE PAA
NGĀPUHI

WERO: A WAY OF CREATING

After completing his latest wero, a solo exhibition at Pātaka alongside his mentor Sandy Adsett, Victor Te Paa reflects on the many challenges he has faced and chased to become the established painter and Tā moko ringatoi that he is today.

ABOVE: Victor and mentor, Sandy, at Wero standing in front of his painting

The exhibition showcases important people and places from his life. Reflecting on his journey Victor explains, “as I was going, I found tons of wero, everywhere, challenging me on every front to do this, so I named it appropriately”. Not only was the exhibition a wero in and of itself but also an amalgamation of the learnings from the many

wero given to him by his whānau, friends, and teachers along the way. Through his paintings Victor acknowledges the challenges others have faced before him and expresses his gratitude for the taonga tuku iho that he has been trusted with. For him, wero speaks to his whole life: everything, and everyone, that has led him to this point.



As the cheeky, lefthanded, pōtiki of seven brothers, Victor's mama would refer to him as Māui. This comes as no surprise after taking several looks at his paintings and finding something new each time. His exceptional lighting and form hide different kupu and symbols, tricking the mind, keeping you flipping between reo as old as time and future paradoxes. With Māori whakapapa on his mother's side and Tongan whakapapa on his father's side, Victor draws connections and inspiration from across Te Tai Tokerau, Ngāti Whātua, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Te Moana Nui a Kiwa. Growing up in Otāngarei, Victor remembers always being surrounded by toi. He remembers listening to his māma create music and drawing at the table with his brothers. His whānau were always encouraging him to imagine and challenging him to create. Although this exhibition marks his first solo show, Victor is very clear that by no means has he done it alone.

LEFT: 'Urban Poly-kid'. This self-portrait depicts my arrival in Wellington and the love I have for this place.

Victor believes some of the most important relationships you can have alongside your whānau as a ringatoi are with your teachers and mentors. Over the years he has had many different teachers. One thing all his teachers have in common is that they know how and when to challenge him. As he describes "they knew exactly what buttons to press that would motivate me to do better".

After finishing kura at Tikipunga High School in Whangārei Victor started at Northland Polytech. Here, he recalls the early challenges from Allen Wihongi who would say "you can do better than that Victor, you are just too scared to try". Victor admits that when he first started out at Polytech he was not committed or ready. He had initially enrolled to simply learn how to draw skulls and demons with Māori designs on them. He laughs remembering the time he walked into the offices of Manos Nathan, Allen Wihongi, and Gary Whiting to question why the students were not being taught the things that taura were being taught at Toi Houkura in Gisborne. Victor reflects, "I would have kicked my own ass", but instead he remembers them explaining that he was not ready to learn those things, whilst challenging him to go to Gisborne anyway.



ABOVE: 'Koro, Pepi, Kaiako'. This piece represents me being the fledgling student within the nest (house) of learning (wānanga), with the manu being Sandy the mentor nourishing us with the taonga of knowledge of Māori culture. These are our foundations as artists

Once Victor completed his four years of study at Northland Polytech he moved over to Australia. After a year of being away from home and whānau, he decided to come back to Aotearoa and start at Toi Houkura in 2002.

At this point Victor remembers feeling completely out of his league, showing up not knowing anything about Tā moko or how to paint. He refers to this feeling as the “can I do this?” space and explains that although it was uncomfortable at the time, looking back he can see it was what encouraged him to thrive and get better at his toi. Victor likens this experience to poutama: “moving up a level by putting yourself in that challenging space, have a rest and then do it all over again”, and before you know it you have climbed higher than what you could have ever imagined when you took the first step.

It was at Toi Houkura where Victor first met Sandy Adsett, and after six years of him painting over Victor's work challenging him to 'paint his way out of it', Victor could see how all these small wero prepared him to exhibit his work alongside Sandy. “Sandy would take your balance from you and you'd nearly fall, but by almost falling, you'd learn”. Looking at their work side-by-side at Pātaka it is clear that Sandy didn't teach Victor to create like him, but rather he challenged him to execute his own creations as best as he possibly could.

Victor says that one of life's biggest challenges is to be yourself and to follow your own truth. He recalls a specific exhibition where he had to stray from the expectations of others to be true to himself and where his mahi toi was at. Victor explains that as an artist it can feel uncomfortable when others don't understand or resonate with your mahi, especially if those people are the ones who you look up to. However, he urges that it is important to sit in that feeling and trust that what you've chosen this time around, your truth, will always set you up better for your next wero. One of the challenges for the exhibition came directly from Sandy, who encouraged him to do the wāhine seen in Wero. He believes that the role of the taura is to take up those wero from your mentor and do one better which is why he didn't just paint the wāhine, he painted his pou, Sandy, too.

Throughout his life Victor has not been afraid to move and seek the knowledge and experience he has needed. To him, “Hawaiki is not a place, it is a destination”, so he is not afraid to keep moving and sailing beyond the waves to find out what is next. Now Victor can find inspiration anywhere, much like he would as a tama with things like Star Wars and Iron Maiden. He remains open to the world and all its possibilities, whilst staying firmly anchored by who he is and where he comes from.

Life's challenges come in all different shapes and sizes and Victor reminds us that the only certainty we have is that the challenges will keep coming. As he says, “I'm not going to reinvent the wheel, the universe is set, you can't change that... we have the foundation of where we come from, so it's all about what you do with it and the potential of that is limitless”.

Victor is currently based in Te Whanganui-A-Tara and has just taken up a new position at Sinatra's Tattoo Studio. From talking to Victor and experiencing his latest exhibition, Wero, we can see the power of choosing to make and create our way through whatever challenges come our way.

WRITTEN BY: Amelia Blundell, Tai o Hī Tai o Hā Writing Intern



ABOVE: 'To Awaken'. Do the best we can for one another, contributing to our culture, our people. All the cultures and all peoples of this land, Aotearoa New Zealand.



TOI NGĀPUHI

Inspiring excellence in
Ngāpuhi cultural and
creative expression
across Te Taitokerau

Te whakaoho i te ihiihi,
mō te kounga o ngā
tikanga, me ngā
auahatanga o Ngāpuhi,
puta noa i Te Taitokerau.

Contact

info@toingapuhi.co.nz

Physical Address:

Level 1, 3 Cobham Road

Kerikeri 0230