

About this resource

The vision for the Parehuia Education Resources is to connect ākonga to local artists, their work and their stories, and to grow students creative and critical thinking skills. In doing so, they will be able to see the value of art and stories made here in Aotearoa, and see themselves as makers of culture.

This resource accompanies [this artist video](#) and is aimed at ākonga in years 7-13 (or curriculum levels 3-8) and is designed as an adaptable toolkit for teachers to use selectively in devising their own units of classroom learning. Key sections are designed to be easily extractable as handouts for direct distribution to students. It is primarily devised for Visual Arts, but may also be used in English or Social Sciences learning areas.

This resource is also relevant for a majority of the levels achievement objectives in the New Zealand Curriculum for Visual Arts, especially *Understanding the Visual Arts in Context*, *Developing Ideas* and *Communicating and Interpreting*. It also connects to many of the Big Ideas outlined in the Curriculum, especially *Visual Arts communicates ahurea tuakiri and evokes responses*, *Whakapapa — Visual Arts descends from, embodies, and creates forms of cultural expression* and *Visual artmaking conventions enable artists to create cohesive and fluent artistic forms*



Install view at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery
Photo Credit: Samuel Hartnett and Studio La Gonda

Benjamin Work
Motutapu
with Brendan Kitto
2022

Key themes: identity, connection, diaspora, tradition, technology

[Benjamin Work](#)

Born 1979, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland
lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau

Benjamin Work (Ha'a Lātūhifo / Orkney) is an artist with Tongan and Scottish roots. His art uses kupesi (traditional Tongan patterns or designs) to explore the idea of identity—how people understand who they are—especially for those who are part of the Moana Oceania diaspora. Describing the significance of kupesi, Benjamin says:

"These reoccurring motifs are seen right throughout our stories across the Moana. They're not just a design, but they're our visual language... they're vessels that carry knowledge from one generation to another."

Benjamin often works with museum collections that hold historical Tongan objects like ngatu (tapa cloth) and 'akau tau (war clubs). Aware that being an artist gives him special access to these taonga, an important aspect of Benjamin's practice is using his art to help share that knowledge with others, especially other Tongans in Aotearoa. This is especially clear in his public murals which bring kupesi that might have been considered lost out into the open, allowing these stories to be told again.

My practice has been a way of me reconnecting to who I am. So in the research, I'm also finding out more about myself, my ancestors. And I believe that when we look at the kupesi, or the marking-making, whether it's on painting or on sculpture, it's a reflection of who we are. So we see ourselves in those motifs, those kupesi. It's a mirror, and it reminds us who we are. Because in this context, we can forget. We can feel disconnected which now, in hindsight, I believe is a lie, because no one's disconnected, it's embedded in our DNA.

– Benjamin Work

Benjamin draws on all of these different languages, some of them visual, some of them verbal, some of them cultural, some of them just kind of spiritual, and they all come together in a single form that you can encounter in the gallery space, or sometimes in the street.

– Francis McWhannell,
curator and gallery owner

Benjamin Work
Hala Ōtitori
2024
aluminium
3000 x 200mm

Install view at McCahon House
Photo Credit: Samuel Hartnett



Glossary:

Motif – a pattern, symbol, or design that shows up again and again in art, music, or stories. It often has a special meaning and helps express an idea or theme.

Diaspora – when a group of people leave or are forced to leave their homeland and live in different parts of the world, but still keep a connection to their culture or roots.

Inquiry questions

- Watch [the video](#) of Benjamin and Francis. How does Benjamin use kupesi to explore his own identity?
- In what ways can traditional patterns or designs help people reconnect with their culture?
- What do you think Benjamin means when he says kupesi are “a mirror” and “embedded in our DNA”?
- Benjamin says kupesi are not just designs, but a “visual language.” What do you think this means? Can you think of some examples of other visual languages? It might help to consider the definition of *language* first!
- Why is it important for Benjamin to share his work with other Tongans living in Aotearoa?
- How can art be used to carry knowledge from one generation to another?
- Why might Benjamin choose to work with both traditional and modern materials, like tapa cloth and metal?
- How does experimenting with new materials help artists say something new?



Benjamin Work, *Discerning Langi*
2024
acrylic on canvas
600 x 400mm

Making activity: Create your own visual language

Every one of us carries stories—about where we come from, the people who came before us, our culture, our families and our own experiences. These stories help shape who we are.

You’re going to explore a story from your life and transform it into an artwork using your own visual language—a collection of symbols, patterns, and images that help tell your story without using words.

Your task is to research a story about yourself, your family, your ancestors or your culture. This research might look like researching an ancestor online, asking a family member to share a memory or family story, or remembering something important from your own life. Make sure to jot down key details from the story so you can refer back to them later.

Now, think about how you could show parts of your story using:

- Symbols (e.g. a bird for freedom, a shell for the moana)
- Patterns (repeated shapes or lines with meaning)
- Images (people, places, objects from your story)
- Words (optional – only if you want to include a few meaningful words)

Try sketching a few ideas. There’s no right or wrong way—this is your personal visual language. Using your new visual language, create an artwork that tells your story. You might choose to:

- Tell the story in order, like a timeline
- Focus on one important moment
- Arrange your symbols based on scale, color, or meaning

Be creative! Your final piece could be a painting, drawing, collage, or mixed-media work.

Reflection Questions

1. What does your artwork tell us about who you are?
2. Which parts of your story were hardest or easiest to express visually?
3. How does it feel to share your story in this way?