

DIANA LOOSER

Media Review: *Te Pae: Exploring the Realms*

Abstract

Media review: Te Pae: Exploring the Realms. Series of three online performances, approximately ninety minutes each, 2022. Performed by Regan Balzer, Horomona Horo, and Jeremy Mayall, with Troy Kingi, Maisey Rika, Waimihi Hotere, and Kurahapainga Te Ua.

Keywords: *Māori, performing arts, taonga pūoro, electronic music, performance painting, cross-arts collaboration, online, environment, metaphysical*

Te Pae: Exploring the Realms, a series of three online performances initially presented in April and May 2022, is a compelling interdisciplinary arts experience that takes the viewer on a profound journey through physical and perceptual dimensions of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world).¹ Featuring leading visual, musical, and body-centered performance artists from Aotearoa New Zealand, the trilogy engages multiple aspects of three fundamental realms of existence: Te Pae Rangi (the realm of light), Te Pae Ātea (the celestial realm), and Te Pae Nuku (the earthly realm). As each contributor works spontaneously, responding instinctively to the other artists to reveal an ephemeral and unique interpretation of each realm through performance painting, instrumental and electronic music, song and chant, dance, and installation/performance art, the artists' collaborative energies vibrantly and originally realize the multifaceted and interconnected nature of these elemental spaces and orders of experience. Reflecting innovations in COVID-era socially distanced and digital production, participants performed in their separate studio spaces while a video edit synthesized the experience for online viewers. *Te Pae* represents exciting advances in contemporary Māori performing arts and skillfully braids traditional and modern art forms into new compositions, while carrying forward performance's long-standing ability to evoke, through intimate embodied and expressive acts, huge spans of time and the vastness of the earth, the oceans, and the cosmos.

The series shares a common aesthetic, and is given artistic coherence through the core ensemble of Horomona Horo, whose sounds on taonga pūoro (traditional Māori instrumentation) blend with those of electronic keyboardist

Jeremy Mayall and interact with Regan Balzer's dynamic performance painting. Yet, each one of these ninety-minute performances has its own focus and emphasis, and each includes different artists augmenting the principal group. *Te Pae Rangī: Exploring the Realm of Light* (April 26, 2022), draws us into the natural world of light and life (Te Ao Mārama). Here, we encounter landscapes and seascapes, the creatures of the earth, and life cycles and evolutionary processes. The piece also addresses the world of humans—with their struggles and successes, conflicts, and harmonies—along with the quest for balance between the human and the environment. As an online viewer, I felt that the editing of *Te Pae Rangī* offered the most coherent experience; although the box insets on the screen expanded regularly to spotlight each artist, the visual focus was Balzer and her layered, fluid series of images that unfolded to complement Horo and Mayall's soundscape, punctuated by Troy Kingi on electric guitar. The sonic atmosphere, which has a similar feel in all three performances, has a complex aural texture, subtended by sustained, meditative bass notes with reverb and echo effects that give the impression of the rhythms and cycles of slow, deep time. This foundation is overlaid with lighter, brighter elements that evoke the animacy and vivacity of the world of light: Kingi's guitar riffs; Mayall's delicate, rippling fingering on the keyboard's upper octaves; and some beautiful touches of birdsong. Horo's taonga pūoro instruments are sculptural artworks in their own right; invested with spiritual significance and individual personification, they could be considered co-performers. They lend to the piece the haunting, high, melodious call of the bone flute; fuller, more resonant woodwinds; the heralding call of the conch; the earthy percussion and the deep breath of the gourd; and, from the air, the warm, healing whirring of the porotiti. This soundscape develops incrementally, scaffolding in bolder and more intricate motifs as Balzer's pictures similarly layer and accumulate.

Like the music, Balzer's painting is impressionistic; she layers vividly hued strokes ambidextrously, using implements and her fingertips, onto a large-scale canvas calibrated to the ambit of her limbs' reach. In white overalls, working rapidly and continuously—though always thoughtfully—she choreographs an embodied relationship with the paint and canvas in a way that turns the imagery into a live, durational performance. Using a wet paint wash that allows her to lithely change and erase previous images, Balzer creates a series of scenes that overlay one another; the overwritten images remain present as pentimenti or in memory, giving us a cumulative sense of development and change over time as well as in space. Beginning on a black backdrop suggesting creation origins in Te Kore (the void, the realm of potential being) and then Te Pō (night, darkness),

Balzer first delineates transformations toward the realm of becoming and of life, before tearing this background away neatly to reveal the white canvas of the world of light. She shows us an ocean replete with sea creatures and birds, which morphs fluently into a landscape with a serpentine river, then into the world of plants, and then the emergence of the human, first alone and then in relation, shimmering with radiant energy. At this point, Horo chants the well-known whakataukī (proverb) “He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tāngata, he tāngata” (What is the most important thing in the world? It is people!). Balzer’s images again dissolve and resolve before us, now showing a whare (house) and then a whole village, a spreading tree, and a forest. In one dramatic moment, sprays of bright red paint across the canvas conjure blood, perhaps indicating the tie to the land, the violence that exists within all human societies, or the ravages of colonization. These processual superimpositions, with their visual links to and embedding within one another, elaborate the concept of a relational whakapapa (genealogy) defined by the interrelationship of all living and non-living things. Together with the musical accompaniment, they present an effective mode of conveying a Māori understanding of the networked components of Te Pae Rangi.

Genealogical connections with the more-than-human world also come to the fore in the second performance piece, *Te Pae Ātea: Exploring the Celestial Realm* (May 12, 2022). Tracing creation lineages and the birth of the atua (gods), the performance recognizes and honors key celestial bodies (sun, moon, planets, stars), acknowledging their familial relationships and domains of responsibility, and cycles through Maramataka, the Māori lunar calendar. The inclusion of singer and songwriter Maisey Rika gives *Te Pae Ātea* greater structure and narrative content, as she guides us on a voyage through the cosmos with spoken narration and sung sequences in English and te reo Māori. Rika’s gentle melodies soar lightly, with grace and clarity, supplemented and enriched by the immersive aural scape created by Mayall and Horo. Throughout, Balzer works at her canvas, generating the stylized figures of atua from a multicolor, abstract palette. The painting evolves more slowly than in *Te Pae Rangi*, possibly indicating the pace of cosmic temporality, but it works as a counterpoint to Rika’s words, drawing out the personified animacy of these celestial bodies and illustrating votive rituals, such as the star oven built to feed Matariki (the star cluster associated with the Māori new year), its steam of cooked delicacies rising to the heavens to strengthen her for the coming year. Balzer’s final picture is particularly striking: it morphs into an image of the pale, full moon, adorned with golden orange spirit figures that grasp the orb and reach down toward the earth through the darkness. The artist uses her fingertips to create a firmament of white stars; as the closing lights

decline to a luminous blue, the image glows gorgeously with hues of purple and phosphorescence while the pulsing, bell-like echo of the pahū pounamu (greenstone gong) fades softly into silence.

The final performance of the trilogy, *Te Pae Nuku: Exploring the Earthly Realm* (May 26, 2022), amplifies the life force of Papatūānuku and the restless energies of Rūaumoko in volcanoes and earthquakes. It also acknowledges minerals and natural resources, and celebrates the human and supernatural life that comes from the earth. In this piece, the core ensemble is joined by vocalist Waimihi Hotere and dancer and performance artist Kurahapainga Te Ua. This group represents a rich collaboration, but the video edit made it more difficult for this online viewer to witness the whole arc of each performer's work; the process of cutting between artist segments made for a more fractured experience and diminished my appreciation of their interdependence. Nevertheless, *Te Pae Nuku* generates some captivating moments. Hotere's vocalizations alongside Mayall and Horo's sonic background lend a wonderfully warm resonance to the breath and sentiments of Papatūānuku, evoking a range of emotional states from joy and laughter, to tears, to the earth under stress. Te Ua's performance installation offers an intense physical and elemental engagement with stone and soil. Pouring and heaping the dark, fertile dirt into different configurations, and smearing her limbs with its mud, Te Ua performs an entwined choreography of flesh and earth, dancing with sweeping and angular gestures executed with martial precision. I interpreted the piece as an homage to Hineahuone (earth-formed woman), the first woman created by Tāne (progenitor of humankind), thus celebrating the birth of humans from the earth. Balzer's culminating and dominant painted image reflects and augments Hineahuone/Te Ua with an aura that accentuates her mana. Together, these various vocal, embodied, and visual acknowledgements of female power in relation to the earth and people form a pleasing through-line for *Te Pae Nuku*.

The *Te Pae* series is an elegant accomplishment; the interweaving of various performance mediums creates a holistic experience of earthly, lived, and celestial realms apprehended through multiple senses. Whereas I appreciated how the performances lulled their viewers into meditative states of reception, their durations still seemed prolonged; dramaturgically, a tighter structure might have achieved the same effects with greater impact in a shorter time. That said, *Te Pae* is an inspiring example of a technologically innovative, multi-arts platform that encourages new ways of registering and engaging the worlds that hold and define us. While *Te Pae* does not ignore more troubling aspects of conflict and discord, its overall feeling is uplifting, emphasizing generativity, resilience, healing,

and growth. The interconnectedness that characterizes the series' form and content serves as encouragement as we begin to emerge from a period of isolation, highlighting the role of the performing arts in creating and validating community across different domains.

Diana Looser is based in the Department of Theater and Performance Studies at Stanford University. Her research interests include historiographic, ethnographic, and cross-cultural approaches to performance, particularly from the Pacific Islands region (Oceania). She is the author of the books Remaking Pacific Pasts: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Theater from Oceania (2014) and Moving Islands: Contemporary Performance and the Global Pacific (2021), as well as numerous essays.

Notes

¹ The three online performances are available for viewing at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVZWqbhFV68>, <https://youtu.be/vWugBFX-cSc>, and <https://youtu.be/r6ZKyWQD7pU>. The final artworks from the three *Te Pae* performances are being exhibited in the *Toi is Rongoa* exhibition at Waikato Museum, Hamilton, New Zealand, July 9, 2022–January 16, 2023. *Te Pae* also staged a live performance at the Ahurei Reo Māori festival in Wellington on September 17, 2022: <https://www.tereofest.nz/events/te-pae-exploring-realms/>.