Whakarare Māori Typeface
Johnson Witehira

16 February – 6 April 2018

In 1972, over 30,000 people signed a petition in support of te reo Māori being taught in schools. The signatures were collected by Ngā Tamatoa of Auckland University and Te Reo Māori Society of Victoria University of Wellington. Te reo Māori was formally recognised as taonga by the Waitangi Tribunal in 1986, and a year later, it was made an official language of New Zealand and the Māori Language Commission (Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori in 1991) was set up to promote "the use of Māori as a living language and as an ordinary means of communication."

This year Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori is 10–16 September 2018, with September 14 commemorating the presentation of the 1972 petition to parliament. 2018's theme is 'Kia Kaha te Reo Māori,' in reference to the strength and wellbeing of the language. We start the university year here with the Whakarare Māori typeface in the Gallery's front window. Designed by Johnson Witehira, the typeface is informed by Witehira's research into the use of text in carving and whare during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Witehira writes, "One of the prominent features was the use of high-contrast letters, where thick and thin strokes appear in each letter. This was probably a result of carvers using type found within early printed bibles and newspapers as models. A unique Māori typographic preference is the exaggerated height, low or high, of the cross-bar element [...] Here, it seems that carvers were applying the principle of tātai hikuwaru (disrupted symmetry) within text."

Witehira experiments with the principles of tātai rahinga (arrangement by scale) with the deliberate and bold contrast between stroke widths, and the principle of tātai hangarite (symmetrical arrangement) where symmetrical structure is overlaid with asymmetrical elements. The character set is purposefully limited to letters used only in the modern Māori alphabet (A E H I K M N O P R T U W G), and it uses macrons as a core component of the character set.

Johnson Witehira (Tamahaki (Ngāti Hinekura), Ngā Puhi (Ngai-tū-te-auru), Ngāti Haua and New Zealand European) is an artist, designer and Lecturer in Communication Design at AUT. He completed a doctorate in Māori Design at Te Pūtahi-a-Toi (School of Maori Studies, Massey University). In his research, Tārai Kōrero Toi: Articulating a Māori Design Language (2013), Witehira developed a platform for contemporary Māori design practice through the exploration of traditional carving.

Te Ara Poutama, the Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Development at AUT, offer beginner to advanced level te reo Māori courses. The beginner and intermediate level courses are free, and you can apply online to study. The courses are offered both semesters and at various times, including after working hours. For more information, visit: www.aut.ac.nz/tereo

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