

Woven together

Every facet of artist Nikau Hindin's practice of *aute* bark weaving is informed by preserving Māori culture, as Ella O'Keeffe discovers ahead of a collaborative installation at the Biennale of Sydney.



Opposite page: Nikau Hindin in her studio displaying some of her *aute* works. **This page:** The artist in the process of adorning the *aute*.



Nikau Hindin's artistic practice begins the moment a mulberry tree germinates. As the plant grows, the seasons move, and new shoots poke through their woody stems, Hindin patiently awaits the moment of harvest where she will cut the plant right back, strip the bark, beat it, scrape it, fold it, and dry it. What is born out of such a physical approach is a bark cloth material called *aute* – a bright white mass of paper which Hindin adorns with traditional star maps painted in *kōkōwai* ochre. She documents the seasons and cycles of Aotearoa New Zealand, not only through visual mapping intrinsic to her culture, but via the mulberry trees and the way she must listen, closely, astutely and tenderly to what they need in order to keep the centuries-old tradition of making *aute* alive.

From March, Hindin will exhibit a new work, commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney and Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, which sees her join forces with Ebonie Fifita-Laufiletoga-Maka, Hina Puamohala Kneubuhl, Hinatea Colombani and Kesaia Biuvanua, fellow female makers from Tonga, Hawai'i, Tahiti and Fiji. Together with these women, Hindin will explore what it means to carry the responsibility of revitalising a culturally significant practice within a community, one that bonds all of their cultures through craft.

VOGUE AUSTRALIA: What drew you to working with *aute* as a practice?

NIKAU HINDIN: "What really drew me to this physical and intense process was initial work using natural materials and creating what we call *taonga*, which are all of our things that are of value. So when making these *taonga* using traditional methods – and when all of your resources come from the natural

environment – you have to know a lot about the seasons and different types of stone or the right type of shell ... Also, the work that you end up doing is really labour-intensive, which I enjoy; having to be really observant with the material and quite responsive to the wood you're working with. It's also about your relationships, not just with the growers of the plant or makers of tools, but with the plant and responding to the plant. You have to consider the water content and how that changes depending on the moon ... Practices like these make us more in tune with where we are, and who we are. I'm making something that can contribute to storing and revitalising knowledge."

VA: You are working with something over its entire lifespan.

NH: "Exactly. Its life as a cloth is influenced by its life as a plant. So any scars or anything that happens during its life all comes out in the cloth."

VA: *Aute* is a traditional technique but had fallen out of practice until recently. What are the intricacies, and challenges, of reviving it?

NH: "It was very challenging to work because I didn't have a specific teacher for the practice of it. So it was only over time, through connecting with people and through growing a relationship base, that things became easier. There's an element of it being a really big responsibility to carry when you're revitalising the practice, and trying to work out how to best do that. I'm always mindful that I have to pass on that knowledge to the next generation. What's the best way to do that? It's a huge time investment and such a resource-heavy practice that it's not something that can be taught in a few days. In order to teach it, you need to go through the whole season from →

harvesting to processing, and then in wintertime, you do the adornment side. It's a serious amount of time to pass on. Even this year, working for the Biennale, I'm one of the youngest practitioners. I'm working with Hina [Puamohala Kneubuhl from Hawai'i], and I've already learned a lot of things. Same with Ebonie Fifita-Laufiletoga-Maka from Tonga, where they have a huge unbroken tradition of making bark cloth. The really good thing about this project was being able to connect and spend time with all of these other women who are at various stages of the revitalisation of the practice."

VA: What has the revitalisation journey been like on a personal level?

NH: "I've really had to come into myself as a person, but also as a *wahine* Māori and draw on my *whakapapa*, and my relationships. Also my relationship with the plant and having faith that I'm always being respectful in that process. It's so important to always have that intention with *toi* Māori. *Toi* means the highest level of craft. And I think the foundation has always been to make *aute* here in the best possible way, and to execute it to its highest form, respecting the plant and the process. You have to really try hard to be self-reflective and understand that your role is in service of your community and in service of the plant. It can be really challenging because there are so many other things that you're constantly having to negotiate, like capitalism and surviving, and paying your bills. So it's like, how do you sell your work? Should you sell your work? At what point is the work ready to be sold? Should you exhibit it? How is it presented? Why is it being presented in an art context, and how does it change its value within the cultural context? There's a lot of challenging paradoxical things."

VA: How does that responsibility carry over into the harvesting process and ensuring that necessary level of respect, especially since *aute* was once quite scarce?

NH: "A big challenge has been finding resources. Finding enough plants to harvest and growing them, and finding groves around the North Island [of New Zealand]. We have quite a few groves of *aute* in different places, so it was a big turning point when a few years ago, we found someone who was growing *aute* in her yard, and because she was in the far north, it was really hot, so the conditions were really good. So we've been using a lot of her plants. It's taken a long time to develop a process that works for the plants that are here and also building relationships. I have two main apprentices who are really amazing, and slowly we've been building relationships with different communities."

VA: A lot of indigenous practices are rooted in protecting the land. Can you talk a bit about how important you feel it is to communicate that sense of protection through art, especially in the midst of the climate crisis?

NH: "From the very beginning, I have always tried to express that through my work. I think because it's so process-driven, and the process is dependent on the environment, and your connection to the environment. My practice maintains my connection to the environment, in a way that when I show that work, I'm really talking about the essential nature of our environment, as well as our relationship to it."

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Above: The artist at work. **Right:** Hindin paints the *aute* with traditional star maps in *kokowai* ochre.



VA: Tell us about the work for the Biennale.

NH: "So it's about bringing these incredible women, and incredible makers in their own right and within their own communities, together. Each of us are making large-scale cloths. And then my apprentice and I are making five big *manu aute*, which are human-sized kites that have a wingspan of 2.7 metres. I guess the purpose of us all coming together was to kind of create a world and an installation that I couldn't have done all by myself. It's so labour-intensive to scale a practice like this, so you need many hands. It's been about sharing our knowledge exchange. We went to Tahiti and Hawai'i, and we helped beat out the cloth. And then all of the makers came to Aotearoa and we adorned that *aute*. It's just been a really amazing cultural exchange of learning. Because all the works are made out of paper, mulberry, the same plant, but we have different names for the different processes. So all the *aute* has been processed in quite different ways. It's not often that all of these nations can come together in a context like this."

Nikau Hindin's new work will be exhibited as part of the Biennale of Sydney, which opens on March 9 at White Bay Power Station.