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KAREN STEVENSON

Media Review: *Kanohi ki te Kanohi: The Living Portrait* (2021)

Kanohi ki te Kanohi: The Living Portrait. Video, 21 minutes, color, 2021. Directed by Regan Balzer; edited by Grant Triplow. Available for viewing on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfyb5StT2ko>.

Abstract

Kanohi ki te Kanohi: The Living Portrait (2021, 21 minutes) is a video collaboration between Māori and other Pacific artists who were producing portraits in their studios in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Produced and directed by Regan Balzer and edited by Grant Triplow, it features work by Shane Tuaeu Andrew (Cook Islands), Regan Balzer (Aotearoa), Kauanoë Chang (Hawai'i), Turumakina Duley (Aotearoa, living in Australia), Michelle Estall (Aotearoa), Tanya Leef (Aotearoa), Rangimoana B. Morgan (Aotearoa), James Ormsby (Aotearoa), Taniela Petelo (Tonga), Vaihere Vaivai (Tahiti), and John Walsh (Aotearoa).

Keywords: *Oceanic art, video art, Regan Balzer, COVID-19 pandemic, portraiture*

Kanohi ki te Kanohi: The Living Portrait is an extremely fascinating look into the creation of not one, but eleven portraits. Exploring different ways of connecting via the internet during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, artist Regan Balzer assembled eleven Māori and Pacific artists, including herself, to participate in a portraiture project.¹ Typically, when a portrait is made a sitter poses in front of an artist who attempts to create the sitter's likeness. During this time, the artist and sitter may develop a relationship that might provide deeper insights into their personalities. In the case of each artist involved in *Kanohi ki te Kanohi*, contrary to conventional portraiture modes, the artist and the sitter were not in the same space.

Balzer's project, which documents eleven artists each creating a portrait of another artist involved in this undertaking, is unique in that the artist and the sitter in each pair never meet. The participating artists were each sent a photograph of their sitter and instructions on how to video themselves while creating the portrait. "Because I was wanting a particular shot captured by the

artists,” Balzer explains, “I sent video recordings of myself providing set-up and filming instructions to each artist, then checked in with them to see how they were doing and if they needed any assistance . . . All videos were recorded by the artists themselves.”² Beyond these instructions, the artists were given free rein to bring about their works (Fig. 1).

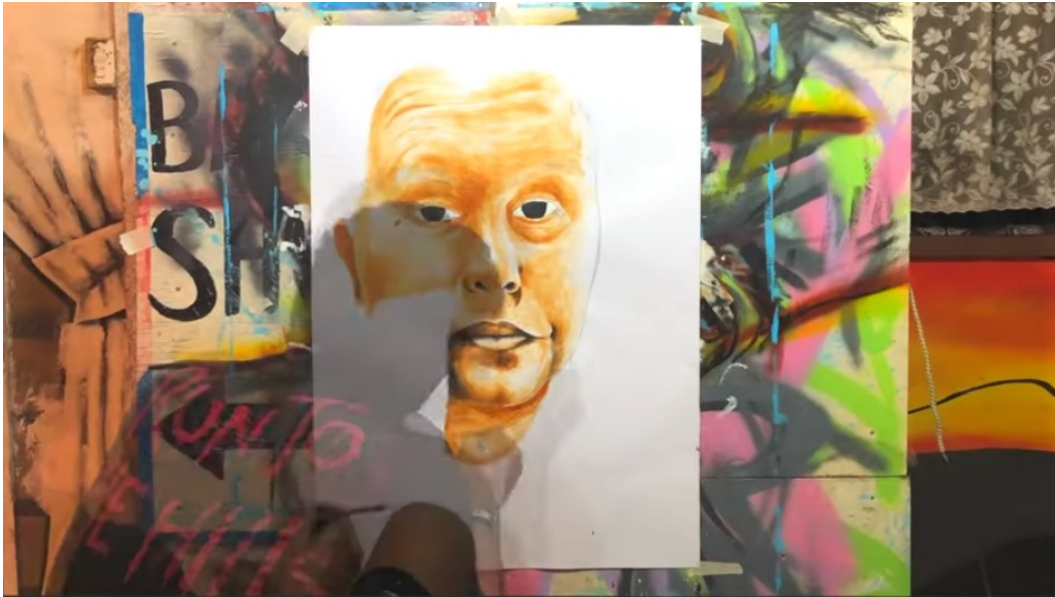


Figure 1. Taniela Petelo painting a portrait of Regan Balzer, 2020. Still from *Kanohi ki te Kanohi: The Living Portrait*, directed by Regan Balzer, 2021. Courtesy of Taniela Petelo and Regan Balzer

When their portrait and video documentation were completed, each artist sent them to Balzer, who began the editing process, which was completed by Grant Triplow. As a result, the project is multifaceted; there is the creation of eleven portraits and the production of a video, the latter of which not only documents each individual artist’s process, but also shapes a community of artists. Perhaps most important is Balzer’s objective: to investigate the practice of portraiture. *Kanohi ki te Kanohi* teases out the idea of an Indigenous perspective of portraiture while also providing a sense of community—a foundational element of Indigenous art practice.

Balzer’s vision for this project was very clear to her. The portrait, in the Euro-American world, has been used through the centuries as not only a record and representation of a particular individual, but also as a demonstration of the sitter’s beauty, wealth, and power. Pacific peoples have also frequently been the subject of portraits. In New Zealand, Charles Frederick Goldie and Gottfried

Lindauer became quite famous for their portraits of Māori individuals; Thomas Andrew, Alfred Tattersall, John Davies, and Charles Kerry were prominent photographers in Sāmoa; and Paul Gauguin became renowned for his depictions of Tahitian women. But in contrast to Euro-American artists' portraits of people like themselves, depicting their beauty, wealth, and power, these portraits were images of the Other, of the exotic. Balzer wanted to enable artists from Pacific islands—Aotearoa (New Zealand), the Cook Islands, Hawai'i, Tahiti, and Tonga—to take back the power of portraiture and showcase their artistic practice from their uniquely Indigenous lenses. In my interview with Balzer, she stated: “This project began with my interest in portraiture and how many non-Indigenous [artists] have found fame through their portrayal of Native/Indigenous people. For me, it was important to find a way that expressed an Indigenous approach to making art in relation to portraiture” (see Figs. 2–3).³



Figure 2 (left). Taniela Petelo, portrait of Regan Balzer, 2020. Still from *Kanohi ki te Kanohi: The Living Portrait*, directed by Regan Balzer, 2021. Courtesy of Taniela Petelo and Regan Balzer
Figure 3 (right). Photograph of Regan Balzer, 2020. Still from *Kanohi ki te Kanohi: The Living Portrait*, directed by Regan Balzer, 2021. Courtesy of Regan Balzer

In our conversation, Balzer suggested that many Indigenous peoples view portraiture differently. She emphasised that a portrait is not just a representation of a particular individual: “Our faces are not just our own, but are reflections of

our ancestors.”⁴ She explained that there are key aspects to an Oceanic approach to portraiture that she wanted to explore. She was interested in capturing a moment in time of an artist in their studio. As an artist is rarely the subject of another artist, she was curious to see if this process would create a sense of community, especially considering that an Indigenous Pacific worldview is often about the collective rather than the individual. She also hoped to connect each artist with their portrait, and investigate the notion of a “living taonga”⁵ or the exchange of mauri (“life principle” or “essence” in the Māori language).⁶

Portraiture enables the recording and celebrating of people and their connections with one another. The work’s title, *Kanohi ki te Kanohi*, is a Māori phrase that translates into English as “face to face,” indicating that this project is about *the relationship* between artist and sitter. Balzer, reflecting on this undertaking, commented: “Many of the artists seemed to feel a connection [with each other and across large distances] in some way, which was an interesting dynamic. I guess this reflected the connection between sitter and the artist, and [proved] that this can still exist even though they weren’t physically present in each other’s space.”⁷

Because each artist and sitter never met, it seems to me that this project is about connection and community at a time when the world was in isolation; the Covid-19 pandemic cut us off from friends and family. It created an environment in which using technology enabled us to experience the closest thing to interacting in person. Commenting on this development in modes of communication, Balzer stated: “I wanted to see how I could use technology to work through the perceived barrier of distance, to explore how, through technology, we can continue to connect across the Pacific and support a collective arts practice.”⁸

The notion of cultivating a collective arts practice with artists working at great distances from one another, and without communicating with one another, seems an impossible task. Yet, the artists involved in this project, in their individual spaces, creating portraits of people they had never met or communicated with, did just that. *Kanohi ki te Kanohi* is thought-provoking in that it was able to relieve the artists of their isolation while also providing a virtual window through which we, the audience, can engage with both the artists and the sitters. Spending time, both looking at and creating an image, built a real connection between the viewer, the artist, and the person whose portrait was being captured. There is a true sense of intimacy in this process and in viewing this video. We watch as each work morphs into an image of the next artist and their work; we discern a meaningful exchange. We become participants in this expanding, yet intimate relationship between artists and their creations.

When talking to artists and inviting them to be involved in the project, some who Balzer spoke with declined the opportunity. Some felt that the process might be too revealing, that they did not want their practice “exposed,” while others were not comfortable with having their portrait created. Even though the ten who agreed to participate, in addition to Balzer, “weren’t quite sure about how things would all fit together, they were open to taking the journey to see what would happen.”⁹

The work in its entirety presents a rare opportunity for the viewer. It is quite a privilege to be able to watch these artists create. They utilise different media and work in their individual styles as they slowly build up an image. Some start with the background, some with the curve of a cheek, others with the roundness of an eye or the sweep of a brow. What is equally engrossing are the transitions from portrait to artist. One looks to see how the sitter was captured; but once the sitter turns to the process of creating the portrait of another participant, the viewer becomes absorbed in their process. And then it begins again.

Originally, Balzer wanted to create an exhibition as the final presentation of this work; the physical portraits would be hung in a gallery space accompanied by the video documenting their production. Thus, what we are offered in *Kanohi ki te Kanohi* is only part of the original concept. Nonetheless, I found this video captivating—in particular, witnessing how each portrait transformed into the artist portrayed. One truly gets a sense of a “living taonga” as the artists share a bit of their life force, or essence, with each other and also with the viewer. In this, Balzer was looking to offer an Indigenous interpretation of portraiture. While the portraits, in and of themselves, would not have accomplished this goal, the video does because it reveals the process of collaboration and sharing. *Kanohi ki te Kanohi* provides an exceptional fashioning of Balzer’s vision.

Artists (in order of appearance)

Taniela Petelo (Tonga)

Regan Balzer (Aotearoa; Te Arawa, Ngati Ranginui)

Rangimoana B. Morgan (Aotearoa; Ngati Haua, Ngati Maniapoto, Te Whakatohea)

Kauanoë Chang (Hawai‘i)

John Walsh (Aotearoa; Te Aitanga a Haviti)

Michelle Estall (Aotearoa; Te Rarawa, Te Aupouri)

Vaihere Vaivai (Tahiti)

Tanya Leef (Aotearoa; Ngati Marutuahu, Ngapuhi)

Shane Tuaeu Andrew (Cook Islands)

James Ormsby (Aotearoa; Ngati Maniapoto, Waikato, Te Arawa)

Turumakina Duley (Aotearoa; Tuhoë, Ngati Awa, Ngatiterangi—living in Australia)

Karen Stevenson, of Tahitian heritage, moved to Christchurch in 1995 to take a position at the University of Canterbury. Her writings include The Frangipani is Dead: Contemporary Pacific Art in New Zealand, 1985–2000 (Wellington, NZ: Huia, 2008); Johnny Penisula, Reinterpreting Tradition (Suva, Fiji: USP Press, 2016); and Filipe Tohi: Journey to the Present: Makahoko mei Lotokafa (Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific Press, 2015).

Notes

¹ Regan Balzer, “Lockdown Only Makes Us Stronger,” *The Big Idea/Te Ariā Nui* (Auckland, New Zealand), August 19, 2021, <https://thebigidea.nz/community-announcements/lockdown-only-makes-us-stronger>.

² Regan Balzer, personal communication, May 2023.

³ Balzer, personal communication.

⁴ Balzer, personal communication.

⁵ Taonga is “treasure, anything prized—applied to anything considered to be of value including socially or culturally valuable objects, resources, phenomenon, ideas and techniques.” *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*, <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>, accessed June 20, 2023.

⁶ Balzer, personal communication.

⁷ Balzer, personal communication.

⁸ Balzer, personal communication.

⁹ Balzer, personal communication.