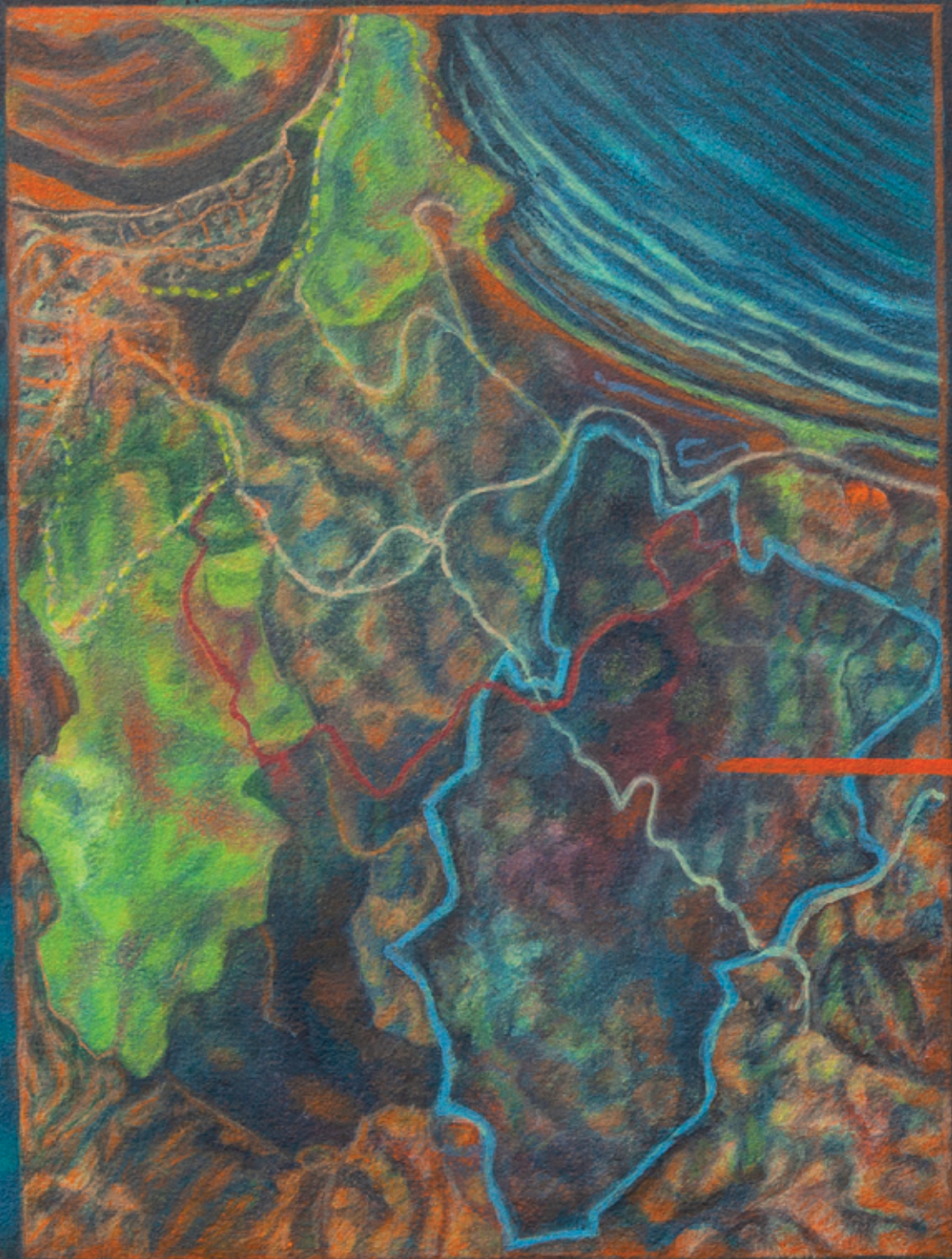


Follow the *River*.

R O B Y N H U G H E S

R O B Y N H U G H E S





1840
16TH NOVEMBER
--- DIVIDE A
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COLONY INTO
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AND EACH COUN
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OUR BEHALF
GRANTS OF
WASTELAN

Transactions

RICHARD WOLFE

In 1922 T.S. Eliot published his landmark modernist poem, *The Waste Land*. A 434-line reflection on the barrenness of modern life, it examined the consequences of World War I and its negative impact on Western civilization. It spoke of disillusionment, desolation and urban alienation, while an early mention of the poem in the New Zealand press suggested that Eliot’s response to the modern world was one of ‘bewilderment and distress of mind.’¹

Some 80 years earlier, the concept of ‘waste land’ was already well established in this country. As another form of alienation, land not under cultivation by Māori – and therefore appearing to be unoccupied and non-productive – was seen as belonging to the Crown. In his instructions from the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1839, New Zealand’s first Governor, Capt. William Hobson, was informed of the desirability of the ‘cessation to the Crown of such waste lands as may be progressively required for the occupation of settlers’. Further, he was informed: ‘To the natives or their chiefs much of the land of the country is of no actual use, and in their hands it possesses scarcely any exchangeable value.’²

As historian Alan Grey has noted, the British interpretation in the Treaty of Waitangi of the ownership of land was ‘intended and interpreted to mean ‘ownership’ not in the Māori senses of community possession ... but in the European sense of private property’, and the difference in interpretation was to be ‘the source of much friction’.³ Another issue concerned what was deemed ‘surplus land’, following the issue of grants in response to claims made to the Government. Any land remaining after settlement of such claims was retained by the Crown, and so was not returned to the original (Māori) owners. Instead, it was ultimately subdivided and sold to new settlers.

Prior to European contact, tracts of land, with boundaries defined by such geographical features as rivers, rocks, ridges and mountains, had multiple owners. The latter held ancestral rights, enabling unlimited access and spiritual connections with the land and its resources. With the influx of European settlers, vast tracts were acquired by various means, many of them questionable, and by the 1860s the average government price to purchase land was sixpence an acre. Such land was

then surveyed and subdivided into allotments and sections, and likely to be on-sold to individual owners for the average price of ten shillings per acre, while waste land was, predictably, valued at much less.

Fundamental to Crown Land policy was the need to create a disposable public domain that could be used to both fund government and sustain settlement. However, the Crown’s claim to unoccupied Māori land – ‘waste land’ – did not gain universal approval. Following debates on the subject in Britain, the Aborigines Protection Society – founded in 1837 to ensure the health, well-being and rights of indigenous peoples – declared the Crown’s principles to be in violation of the Treaty of Waitangi.⁴

This is the contentious territory explored by Robyn Hughes in her most recent series of paintings. The project dates back to 2020 when she began taking photographs and gathering notes on wetland sites with which she was familiar: Cox’s Creek (Opoututeka) in Auckland, the Tairua River Catchment and Graham’s Creek (Waitoko) in the Coromandel, and the Ōhiwa Harbour Catchment in Whakatane.

In the past, such areas were regarded as non-productive wasteland, needing to be modified and reclaimed. And neither were they recognised as important and fragile eco-systems, home to endangered flora and fauna and worthy of preservation.

This interest led Hughes to investigate the original and current names of such places, and their history in terms of land surveys, boundaries, transactions – and the goods involved – and subsequent confiscations. To gain an understanding of the background to the lands in question she consulted documents such as Waitangi Tribunal Reports and deeds of settlement and land purchases, along with works by contemporary historians including Dame Anne Salmond. A sense of the vast areas involved is made apparent in Hughes’ painting *Survey*, which lists a total of 3,884,437 acres in districts around the North Island. In a sign of things to come, the land is overlaid with a complex of surveyors’ triangulations and measuring devices.



SURVEY
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER. 2021.

PIAKO BLOCK, 80,000 ACRES MORE OR LESS
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER, 2024.

After undertaking what would appear to have been some fairly intensive forensic research, Hughes' approach was to combine what she refers to as 'diagrammatic visual clues', text and image. Each of these elements is presented as a reminder of events which can otherwise be overlooked or forgotten with the passage of time. In all cases she provides a reference to the text that inspired each work, thereby allowing any viewer, who so wishes, to consult the original source. By the artist's own admission, the resulting paintings, executed in acrylic pigment on Hahnemühle paper, are not intended as a form of protest, but rather as a more measured method of offering contemporary conversations about the past. By such means it is hoped this might stimulate reflection, contemplation and discussion on the thorny subject of early land transactions in this country.

The incorporation of text is a technique Hughes began in her 'Into Cassino' series, exhibited in 2014.⁵ Intended to provide a sense of immediacy and encourage viewer engagement, this approach was continued in 2017 in her next series, 'Passchendaele - From Home Front to Front Line'.⁶ This focused on the 1917 battle which became synonymous with the mud and senseless slaughter associated with the Western Front in World War I, and no doubt contributed to the notion of a subsequent social and spiritual waste land. While Hughes' most recent series is not concerned with European wars, it is in fact about the historical background to conflict - over land and on our own doorstep.

Hughes has taken a largely topographical approach, adopting a bird's-eye view of the land at issue, overlaying it with relevant text and representations of elements pertaining to changes of

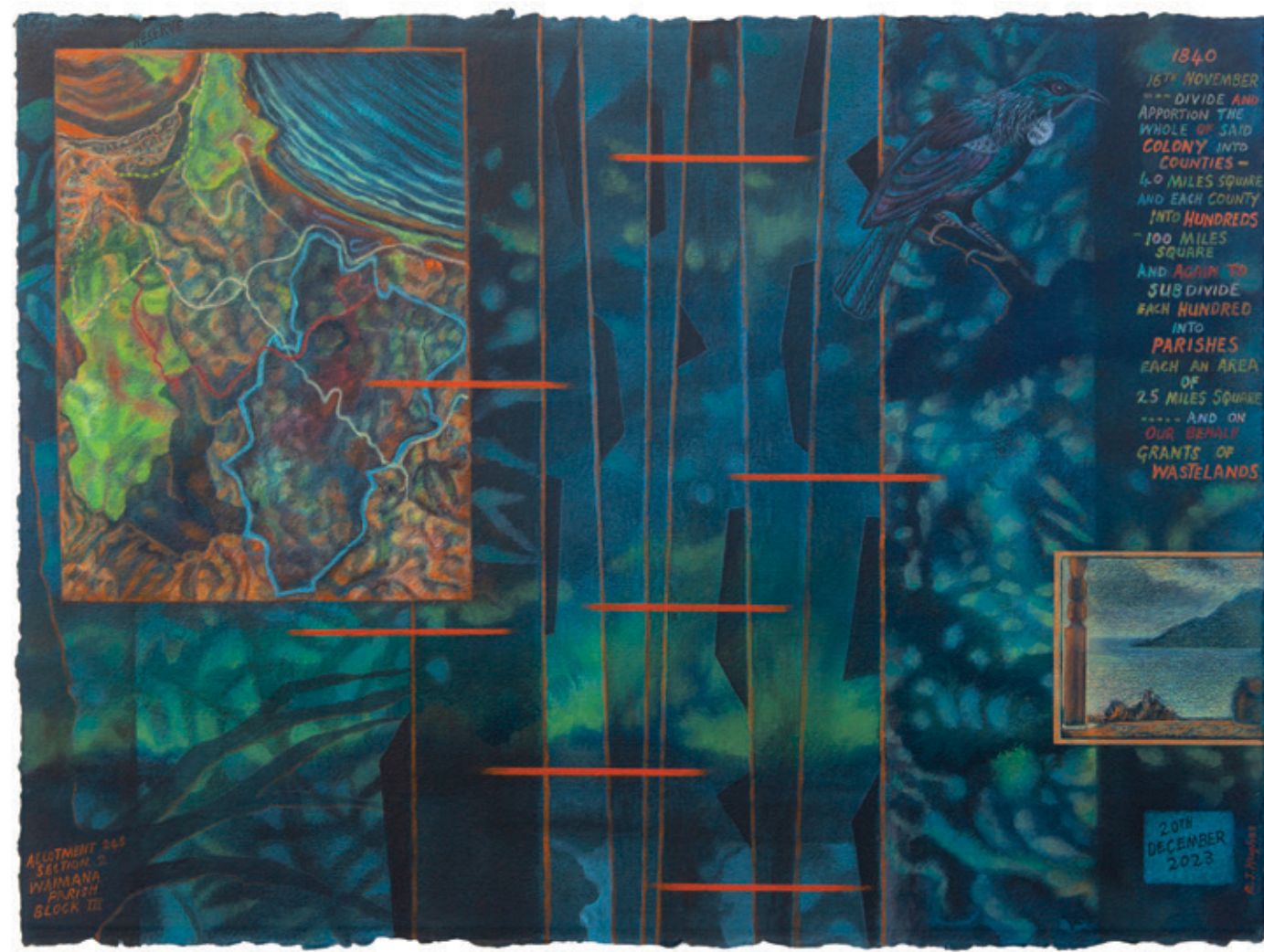


ownership. Compared to the artist's two previous series, the paintings are uncharacteristically small, but distinguished by a similarly energetic over-all approach, creating a highly coloured and richly-textured effect. Thus *Piako Block, 80,000 Acres more or less* presents the official language of title deeds, no doubt the basis of many of the transactions which are the subject of these paintings, and reflecting the all-inclusive nature and sense of entitlement implied by British property law: 'The said parcel of land together with all ways, waters, watercourses, paths, pas, burying tapued ground, woods, forests, ditches, timbers, trees, mines, metals and minerals ... and fish in said waters.' In this instance the land was, astonishingly, '80 thousand acres, more or less', commencing at the mouth of the Orua Creek on the west bank of the Piako River, in the Firth of Thames. Identified as the Piako Block deed of 31 December 1839, the goods traded for this purchase included 120 blankets, 250 lbs tobacco, 40 pairs of dungaree trousers, 70 muskets, 52 casks of powder, 80 spades and £15 sterling, with the names of these items scattered across a map of the land in question.

In *Allotment - Waimana Parish*, a perching and no doubt concerned tui is confronted by text outlining the British Government's plans of 16 November 1840 for its newest colony; to progressively 'divide and apportion' it into counties, hundreds (each of which to be approximately 100 square miles), and parishes (of some 25 square miles), while also making reference to 'grants of wasteland'. European blankets were frequent inclusions among the goods traded, acting as a form of currency, and Hughes includes meticulously rendered sections of such woven garments, either as framing or introductory devices. Along the top edge of *Waste Lands of the Crown* are listed some of the massive amounts of land that were subject to other transactions, among them Motukaraka Block, Hokianga District, 50,000 acres, and Pukuhau Block, Coromandel, 20,000 acres. The disparate nature of the goods traded is graphically illustrated in *Following the Rivers*, where the sale of the Kaeo Block on 31 August 1836 included 400 pipes, 70 blankets, 10 spades, 6 wedges, 2 heifers, an umbrella and a two-man crosscut saw.

A blanket forms the left-hand panel in *Yellow Creek*, concerning Opoututeka, Cox's Creek, Auckland. This waterway marked the western boundary - the others being Hobson Bay (Mataharehare) and Mt Eden (Maungawhau) - enclosing what was then estimated to be 3000 acres (3500 by modern calculation) purchased on 20 October 1840 from Ngati Whatua for £50 in coin and goods amounting to some £215. At top left in *Yellow Creek* an outline of a crown, representing British sovereignty, encloses the 3500 acres of land in question. The same transaction was also the inspiration for *River called Opoututeka*, which is dominated by four horses in silhouette and the legend: 'The Western boundary of this land was the river called Opoututeka'. The details of the sale agreement are specified, and in addition to the horses included £200, 30 blankets, 10 cloaks, 1 tent and 1 sealing box.

ALLOTMENT, WAIMANA PARISH
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER. 2023.



ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER. 2023.

ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER. 2023.



YELLOW CREEK
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON CANVAS. 2021.

SALT MEADOW
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON CANVAS. 2021.

PAKU BAY WITH CHLOE'S RAINBOW
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER. 2022.

PAKIHI BLOCK
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER. 2023.



In most cases Hughes has adopted an elevated view of the landscape, but in *Tauwhare* she presents an oblique perspective of the prominent landform of that name, southeast from Whakatāne, and has overlaid it with dotted lines suggesting its subdivision into 14 numbered sections. This refers to another historical grievance, for Whakatāne and Ōhiwa are located in the centre of an approximately 110km stretch of land across North-Eastern Bay of Plenty that belonged to ‘rebel’ tribes and was confiscated by the government in 1866 under the New Zealand Settlements Act 1863. From the 1820s, a number of tribes had claim to the Ōhiwa Harbour, the right to harvest its abundant kaimoana, and access the land and resources surrounding it.

As with *Tauwhare*, Hughes presents the distinctive headland of Paku, on the north side of the entrance to Tairua Harbour, on the east coast of the Coromandel Peninsula, in elevation. In *Listen to the tides* it is accompanied by stingrays, a kotuku

(white heron) and representations of traditional Māori weaving patterns. The latter, a triangular shape known as the niho taniwha pattern, which translates as ‘the teeth of the taniwha’ and represents strength and stability, was inspired by the tile patterns observed by Hughes during walks around Auckland’s Viaduct Harbour.

The subject of two works in this series is ‘Wahapū ... where ocean tides and river waters merge.’ One of these, *Salt Meadow*, lists the original (Māori) names for the flora distinctive to such estuarine environments and habitats: karepō, mānawa and ureure, otherwise recognised and known as seagrass, mangrove and saltwort. The previously mentioned *Wahapū* ... also refers to a more recent issue, the construction of a 95-boat marina. Consisting of a retaining wall enclosing approximately 2.1 hectares, and with resource consent to excavate some 32,000 cubic metres of material, mostly sand, this development represents a major disruption to local marine life.

At issue here are historic land transactions, many of which had unsettling outcomes for the original owners. By way of contrast, a human touch is evident in *Paku Bay with Chloe’s rainbow*, which concerns the Tairua River catchment, a rural landscape which includes a house and fence, the latter decorated with a child’s painting. Another personal touch, on this occasion on the part of the artist, are the references to the fact that certain of these paintings were produced during the constraints of the nation’s Covid-19 lockdown and contain references to Hughes’ movements, and the rules and regulations regarding personal distancing and the size of gatherings.

Overall, Hughes’ intensely symbol-charged images provide a means for the laying out and assessment of salient facts and background details concerning selected historical events. Such information is presented objectively and accessibly, and in a form that relates to the locality concerned. Somewhat belying their physically attractive appearance, these paintings

collectively provide the raw material for a reconsideration of the means whereby land – in particular that which was described as ‘waste’ and/or ‘surplus’ – underwent changes of ownership. A century and a half later, it continues to be a matter of much debate.

But just as this series reflects on past events, as in how Aotearoa New Zealand was systematically surveyed, subdivided and sold off, it also draws attention to another and equally urgent issue. With the establishment of European settlement, low-lying and swamp lands were considered fit only for draining and conversion into productive farm land. As the world copes with climate change and an increasing number of extreme weather events, these areas are now being reassessed and recognised as nature’s means of absorbing excessive rainfall. At the same time, they provide homes for otherwise endangered flora and fauna, some of which long preceded the arrival of humans and were therefore the original inhabitants of this land.

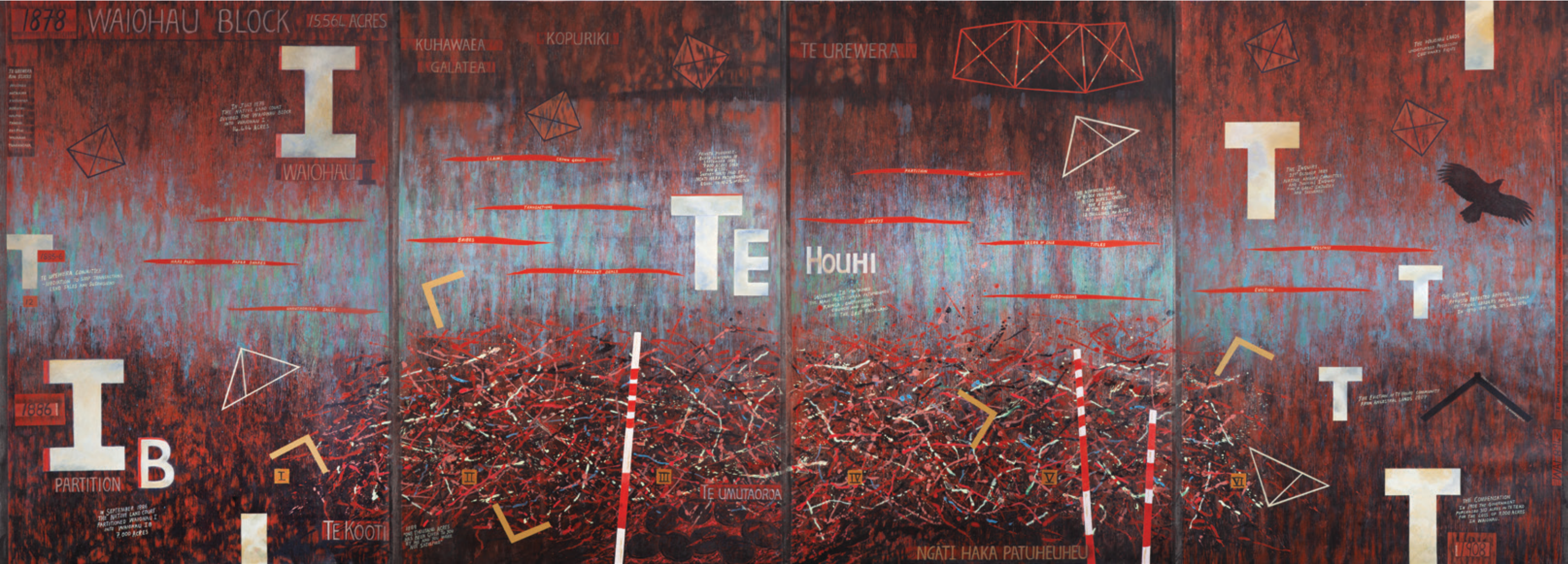
TAUWHARE
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER, 2023.



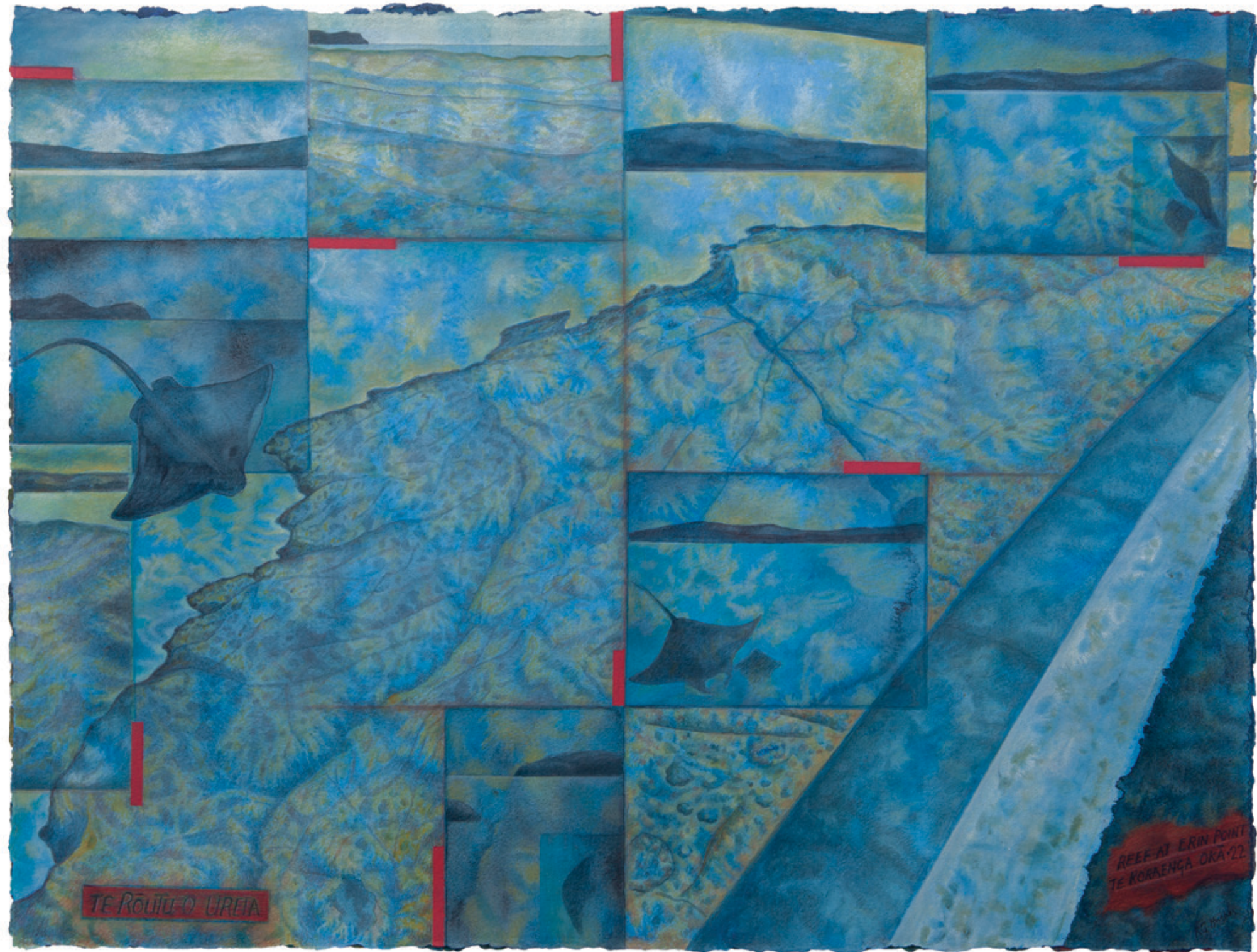
LAND OF OUR ANCESTORS
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER, 2024.



AS THE BIRD FLIES
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, FOUR PANELS, 4240 X 1510, 2025



REEF AT TE KORAENGA
ACRYLIC PIGMENT ON HAHNEMÜHLE PAPER. 2022.



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Follow the River.

