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## Volume 22 Issue 1, 2022: Special Issue: The Arts will find a way: Breaking through and moving forward

Transformation and visual arts: Donn Rātana in conversation with Claire Coleman

Claire Coleman and Donn Rātana

Editors: Claire Coleman and Bronya Dean

**To cite this article:** Coleman, C., & Rātana, D. (2022). Transformation and visual arts: Donn Rātana in conversation with Claire Coleman. *Teachers and Curriculum Special Issue: The Arts will find a way: Breaking through and moving forward*, 22(1), 47-55. <https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v%vi%i.414>

**To link to this volume:** <https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v22i1>

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## TRANSFORMATION AND VISUAL ART: DONN RĀTANA IN CONVERSATION WITH CLAIRE COLEMAN

**CLAIRE COLEMAN AND DONN RĀTANA**

*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato  
New Zealand*

### Introduction

Interviewed by colleague and friend Claire Coleman, Donn Rātana recounts the creation of various artworks, his interest in the concept of transformation and his approach to artmaking.

A full-time artist and part-time art educator, Donn's approach to life and work (which is also life) is:

- developing positive relationships
- valuing individual's contribution to 'life'
- fanning the ashes of the creative process
- manaakitanga.



**Figure 1: Rakuraku - Guitar Found material.** Assemblage sculpture (50cm).

Donn: Now we're talking about the guitar and which ...well all those four relief carvings were just based on me assembling found objects.

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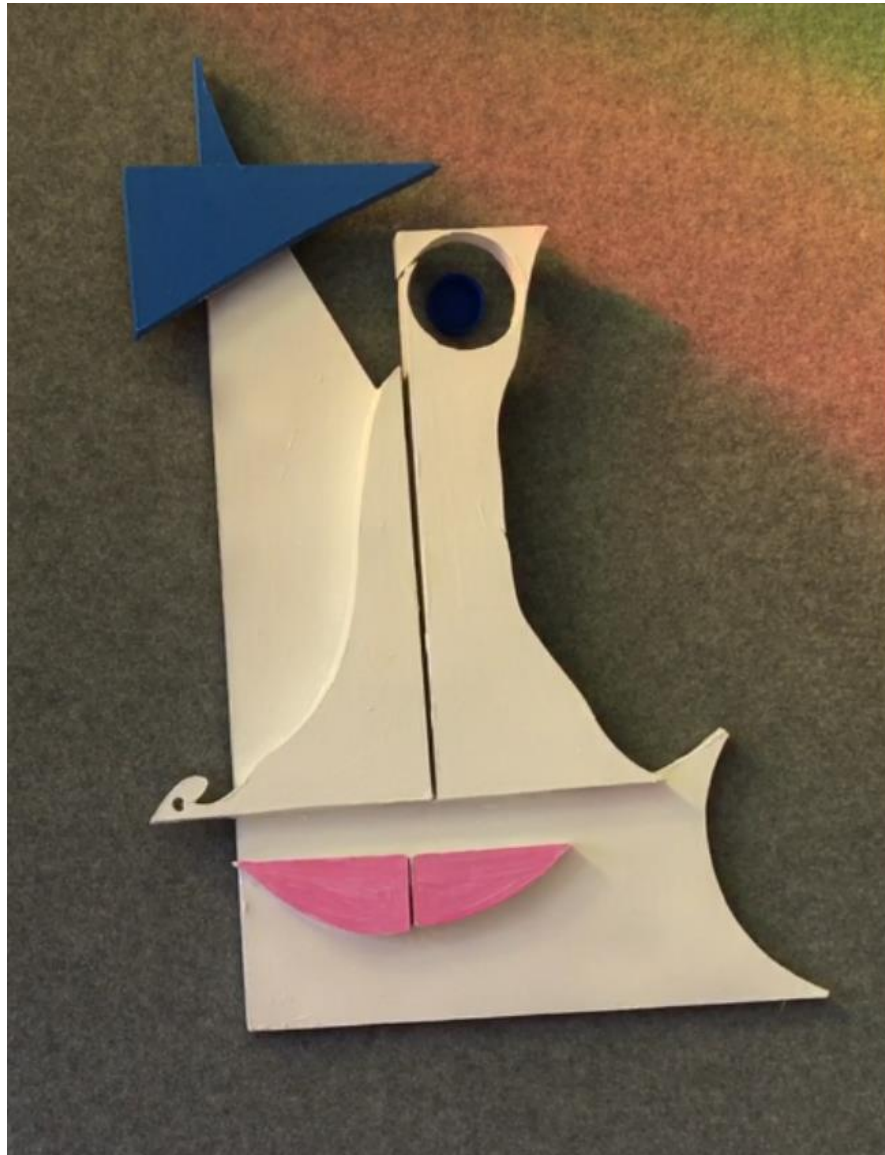
ISSN: 2382-0349

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Claire: So what does relief carving mean?

Donn: Relief carving is that it stands out from the wall. It's not 3D in the sense that you can walk around. But I was at an art workshop, and the majority of the carvers were doing traditional customary carvings. And I just decided I'd pick up all the offcuts, whatever they left behind and repurpose it into images that I thought might convey some sort of meaning, to me anyway.

One of them I picked up was all these pieces that I thought fit quite well into a guitar shape. And the guitar has always been, I've always found it you know, I grew up with it as part of the furniture even though I couldn't play the thing until I was about 21, and I think it was just passion and lust that made me play the damn thing. Because it was all the cool dudes who played the guitar got the cool woman. Everyone else could play the thing, but I couldn't.



**Figure 2: Captain Crook.** Asemblage sculpture (70cm).

But then I picked up one that sort of looked like a sail of some sort, so I adapted it with other pieces to be our mate, Captain Cook, Captain Cook the crook. So it was easy for me to see the whole shape, but it was a struggle to hook other people into it, you know when they were just plain pieces sitting there, MDF board. The other piece that I've done was on White

Island, Whakaari, White Island where the eruption happened, and people died. It seemed quite ... it got quite emotional that piece I was doing, because I was listening to the news and shaping it and shifting it and moving pieces. So it's the shape of the island on the horizon, and I've got these other shapes moving away, so it's like the waka transporting the people who passed. I thought about colour. Most of these, I tried other colours before I settled on the single limited colour, and I thought, well white does seem to suit that one. It represents the name of island and the concept of mourning. There are some unusual shapes that come in, and I don't want to write an essay underneath them, hopefully, a title might hook them in, but the whole understanding really, I guess is just people talking to me about what I'm trying to convey.



**Figure 3: Mauriora-Life Force. Tapu- Noa.** The balance of individual space (42cm x 59.4cm).

I still I love, I love assemblage, collage, mixed media, repurposing images and trying to go for more abstract interpretation. I was gifted an iPad from my family because they thought I was going through quite a few folios, visual art folios, which is pretty cool because I like that payment. I can redevelop ideas and sketch over the top of it and add pieces to it.

Claire: You're adapting to the digital?

Donn: Yeah, I thought I'd go to the digital and most of my work is quite loose. I'm a gestural worker, you know, a whole-body language dancer or with the paintbrush, I don't really like to use too many official artist materials. You know, if it was a bit of cardboard or a piece of wood that works better than a paintbrush I'd use that. I am not trying to layer and trying to get to something super realistic.

Claire: Canvas and lots of acrylic oil paintings not so much.

Donn: Yeah, I do like it but I think, wow, it's not really the material. Like one person said to me, an artist friend, I've done about 40 layers and I said yes, but it's the last layer that counts. You can have all those layers. But it is your final layer that's going to really matter. That is the layer that brings the artwork out of the mist.

Claire: Is the purpose of the layers to build depth to it?

Donn: Yeah, that's how they go. They start very light, and they keep adding and so, creating this almost 3 D effect.

Claire: With paint?

Donn: With paint, yeah. Effects. But it can be done in so many ways. There's no sort of right. For me anyway. There are skills, I mean, you can learn how to do, but sometimes the essence gets lost, the essence of the artist.

Then I got into the, you know, this beautiful iPad and drawing pen, which was, I didn't realize that, you know, you could do some straight lines without using masking tape. And then filling in all the spaces, where all I'm doing is making a straight line, dragging a colour and bang, it's instant. Because I'm a very fast worker. Since I don't really like spending too much time on artworks. I like to finish them in a week or a day or whatever and work all night to get it done. Because I find if I come back to it, I keep changing and changing and I've lost the flow.

Yeah, so that's just the way I work really, I could get these instant results very quickly. And I was doing heaps of mahi. And the only thing I didn't like about the iPad was the smooth, glassy surface. My family decided to put a surface that was textured, like paper and when you're drawing, you can actually feel it. Almost hear it rustle

Claire: Is that a cover on the iPad?

Donn: Yeah, it was quite cool and so, for me, I was looking at, okay, traditional, customary images, but breaking them into spaces really, shape and space. And I've always loved shape and space. And I just, I do these, these little ones, I just draw drafts and then plan to print them quite large.

Claire: These were just printed.

Donn: Yeah, yeah, I just print them off. And, yeah, boom. Cool. Yeah. But all the time I'm looking, you know, even when, when I'm walking around, I'm a visual person, I see shapes, and I go, that's quite a cool shape. I don't take a photo of it unless it really hits me, but I'll just keep it in my head somewhere, file it under miscellaneous and then hopefully, hopefully, it does come back when I'm trying to explore the shapes and the colours. Colours for me, it's just experimental. I don't really try and go oh, this colour goes with that colour. I don't stick to the strict whakapapa of the colour wheel. Sometimes, I'll go to a paint shop and I'll look at all the reject paints, where people have tinted the colour, and don't like their colour, so they put it back. And I'll just combine those, close my eyes, pick one out and go yeah, try these two together. Sometimes it works and sometimes it's just ugly.

Well, yeah, but most of the time it's always trying, I mean I just like exploring it all the time and I go online sometimes and have a look at how other artists are working, not old artists just the contemporary artists from graffiti to new age, young people, see where they're at with theirs and hopefully they're the fearless ones and not worried about how it's going to look.

You know you start off as a kid when you're first doing your mark, you're fearless. It doesn't matter whether you do it on the wall, the carpet or whatever, on a piece of paper. That is how you draw a cat, until some adult shows me how to draw a stick figure and all the other pro forma ways of drawing animals and houses and things but most of the time they're fearless and then they hit school ... and sorry kid this is what we do, yeah.





**Figure 4: Export Butter.** Metal sheet sculpture- powder coated (2m).

Claire: Thank you. What can you tell me about this piece, I have passed it millions of times but what is its significance?

Donn: Oh yeah, the yellow metal piece I call it Export Butter, now how that actually came about ... they built a fountain, you know down there with the rippling waters and whatever, and it's all just pumped water it's just pumped up and comes down, people think that's a creek that comes off the road or something.

Claire: Oh, you've shattered everyone's illusions.

Donn: Yes, I have ... and they had this power unit for it and it was next to that tree and they go, "Well, we can't have that like that, it looks terrible, let's go to Donn, see what he can do". So, I said, "Oh yeah, I can cover that, we can cover that with a sculpture, but I will have to just do some research." And okay, I can do things pretty quickly. The actual making the thing is the quickest part, the research is usually the hardest. So I had to go and think ... now ... what sort of thing. Okay, I'll look. I know that there used to be kahikatea trees all around here until they got chopped down when the Waikato was colonised. They discovered that kahikatea/white pine was good for making into boxes and didn't taint the butter, so they stuck butter in it and sent it over to England. So that is why a lot, most of the trees are gone now really, so I imagine a lot of them ended up in someone's kitchen as kindling. I thought, yeah, okay, I'll do these just using metal plates so it would cover that power box but still have it in the shape of the butter. It's sort of figurative in the sense that it has a figure-like shape, holding something and I thought, yeah, I mean I would have preferred it to be almost as tall as the kahikatea tree, almost as the height of the buildings. It represented all of the butter that was taken to England. You know a stack of butter that's all gone to England really would have been that size. But we didn't really have the time, and so it ended up being the size it is and actually fits the area Kowhai Court, which is yellow. And, yeah, I was actually peeved but finding out all about the butter and looking at the history of butter and exporting it was a buzz. I really enjoyed that part. I did lots of drawings,

lots of writing about it, but then sort of trying to bring all that down then to make it a pretty simple image.

Claire: Cool, thank you.

Donn: Research, yeah. Cool research takes longer. Students ask me how long does it takes me to paint. I go, “Well, how old am I? 50 years.” It takes me about two hours to do the painting, but the research and the ongoing skill-building is ...

Claire: Timeless?

Donn: Time, yeah ... time.



**Figure 5: Colonisation Hinaki.** Metal rods- sheet metal, paint (3.5m).

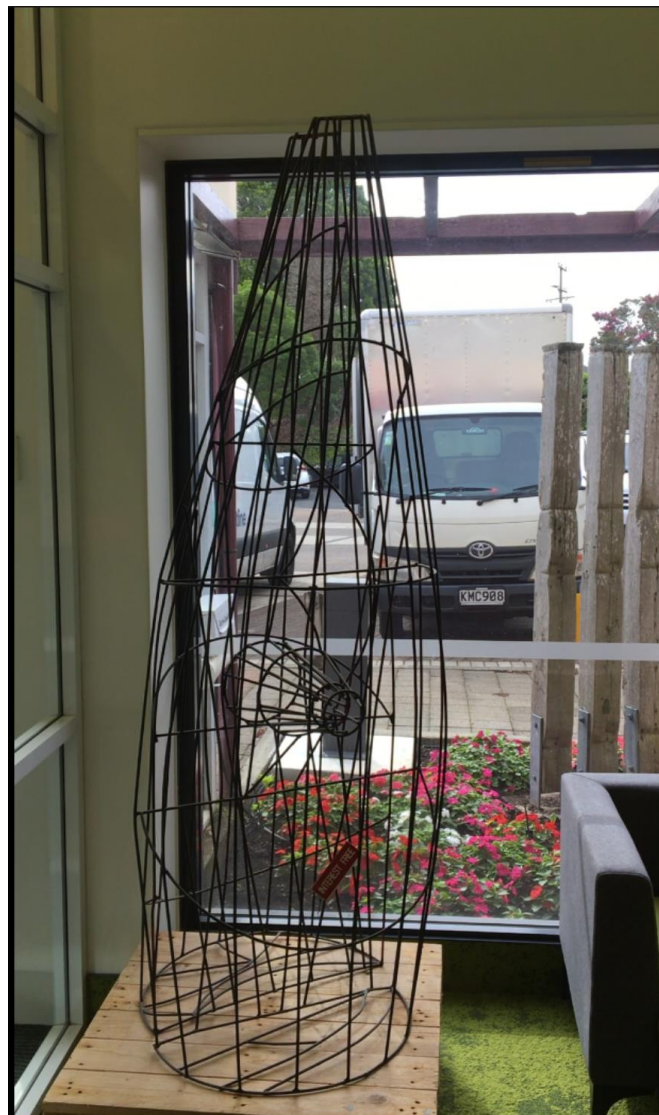
Claire: What can you tell us about this work, the hīnaki<sup>i</sup>?

Donn: Yeah, the hīnaki. I did a series ... a body of work on the hīnaki. Anyway, the first one I did was shaped like a Coca Cola bottle and the whole thing was about entrapment and how we get entrapped into these shapes, these ideas and the Coke bottle was about American culture. We all get sucked into that. There is no need to put the bait in. It had the structure of a hīnaki. The fine lines welded together, which was an experience for me, but it worked and the text that wrapped around the Coke bottle was not Coca Cola, it was “cola-nisation” but with the same font or with a similar font. Although I got in contact with Coca Cola and asked to use their font, they said yeah it would cost you about \$90,000 or whatever for that little piece, and I went eh.

But there are so many variations on that font, so I just used that. I am not going to fork out megabucks anyway.

Right, and then the people who were helping me construct it, they thought it was really awesome and looked like the big carrot and all those other things that are stuck outside towns, you know? Like the L and P bottle<sup>ii</sup>. I said right, let’s jump on it and squash it and they said, “Oh, we just spent all this time doing this.” And I’m going, “Yeah, but what do you do with plastic shit, you squash it and throw it away.”

So we squashed it and for me, it gave it a better shape.



**Figure 6: Urenaki Hinaki: One-night stand. Metal rods (2m).**

This one here is called Taranaki and Urenaki. Okay, so it's about being drunk and not knowing what you're doing and ending up having sex and having a baby and all this other stuff and everyone goes ... What! It was the shape of an old beer bottle. It used to be but also, I got in there and I put in all the hīnaki bait, and the bits of text saying ... no deposit ... pay later ... and what was the other one ...

Claire: Interest free?

Donn: Yeah. And that's how people were getting sucked in, poor people. You know, these trucks are going around and say, "Look, this T-shirt, you can buy this T-shirt, it's only going to be 50 cents a week", but by the time they're finished paying for it, it is \$100. It was a play on all of that. I had a number of different hīnaki shapes representing different aspects of life and the bait connected to it. How we get sucked in and then it's hard to get out of.

My grandfather used to make hīnaki, and I always thought they were a work of art, and sometimes I would help, and I am going, "Wow, this structure." The structure. Okay, it's about catching food, but it just looks cool.

Claire: What is the ... I don't know, I guess the technology of the hīnaki?



Donn: The hīnaki is an eel trap and, like any fish trap, they can get in, like crayfish, eels and anything else, but the structure of it, the technology of it, is they cannot get out again because of the funnel shape.

Claire: Right? Okay, yeah. Cool. Okay can we talk about this final piece downstairs?

Donn: I was in Garden Place in Hamilton and it used to be the only green in the whole area. Kids used to go there in summer, play in the fountain and people would lie on the grass and it used to be quite a nice place. I thought, yeah, this seems to be the only green bit around here. So I started off with the centrepieces as Garden Place, as the heart of the green in the city and then the red is basically based on the concrete.



**Figure 7: FK FRMS – Virus, Triptych.** Acrylic Paint (3m x1.2m).

It reminded me of this old song I think it's called "Tar and Cement" <sup>iii</sup> or something like that. It was a cool song. Anyway, as I started to go out into the suburbs, more and more new houses, more and more roads, more and more. It's just like a virus spreading out. So that's why you got the red on the green. Suddenly it's gone. If you look at that today, that painting was done a wee while ago, that whole place is covered in red now. Kirikiriroa is almost joined up with Huntly. Slowly Auckland's coming to see us and the title of that one was FF, fucked farms. So everyone was like, what! and I said, "Yeah, well, used to be good there, used to be strawberries and a garden. There was all this horticulture, gardening, you know, small gardens, not big ones, I used to go to the greengrocers, and those places and then suddenly bang."

Claire: Thank you for discussing your artwork and process with me. One final question. Many of the pieces seem to have a provocation that challenges ideas and asks critical questions. What do you think is the role of the arts to raise critical questions?

Donn: The art that I do usually asks the question that there is always another voice in the narrative, it doesn't always have to be a white/pink perspective. It is trying to add colour to the (colourless coloured person/colourless person). There are heaps of word associations with "a person of colour" so are we saying that pākehā are colourless? I would hope that the viewer of the art can see/feel/react, be puzzled maybe. Show some emotion, positive or negative. When I turn the TV on BANG! It offers very few approaches to telling the story and remains a BIG WHITE/PINK world. Conversely, I am amazed at the creativity of some artists who can widen the viewers' thinking.

Claire: Well, I think you are one of those artists! Thank you for sharing your work and ideas.

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<sup>i</sup> A hīnaki is a traditional Māori basket-like baited pot used to catch eels in open water. Commonly, the hīnaki had one entrance which the eel would swim into and then find itself stuck.

<sup>ii</sup> Ohakune in Aotearoa New Zealand is famously the home of carrot farming whilst Paeroa is famously the home of a lemony soft drink L&P, which stands for Lemon and Paeroa.

<sup>iii</sup> "Tar and Cement" is a song by Verdelle Smith released in 1966  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIDLdgeP9Bw>