

# Aaron Kereopa

Aaron Te Whanatango Kereopa (b.1971)

In 1985, the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior was bombed in Auckland's harbour, sparking a new wave of anti-nuclear protest across New Zealand. Kereopa was living on his family land in Raglan at the time when he saw a 'foam blank' carved with fellow surfer Kevin Barker's message "No Nukes in the Pacific".

Inspired and wishing to express his 'screaming silent voice', Kereopa took up some old broken surf boards and began to experiment with the koru, or spiral form, initially using a kitchen knife and spoon to carve out the foam. He shortly realised that the same techniques applied to carving wood could be used with the foam if he used different tools, with a cutting rather than chiselling action.

Kereopa's work utilises a visual language that acts as a code, drawing on themes both universal and personal such as mythology, geography, his tupuna (ancestors), whakapapa (genealogy), navigation, and also popular culture in the form of surf culture and comics.



AARON KEREOPA did not name his first-born child lightly. The Raglan artist is determined that four-year-old son Kaitawhiti – meaning traveller – will journey more smoothly through life than he did.

These days, buyers pay up to \$15,000 for one of the intricately carved and painted surfboard inners he sends to a Queenstown gallery. Fifteen years ago his annual income was \$5700 on the dole. Back then he was living with his unemployed mates, angry, unhappy, a failed student, an undiagnosed dyslexic who drank too much and took life-threatening risks as a surfer.

Now aged 39, the gently spoken artist is a picture of contentment, paintbrush poised over the magnificently carved board resting on his knees while a te reo Maori radio station croons in the background. Partner and "Raglan-hood sweetheart" Jasmin Radford chats with him, their one-year-old daughter Mikahinewai on her hip. "What's my dream?" Aaron asks. "This is it; I'm in it. Making a living doing my art, being able to sustain this lifestyle and a family."

His chosen medium is the polystyrene heart of a surfboard, the blank or buoyant core normally encased in fibreglass. Originally he tore apart boards scavenged from sheds and rubbish bins and carved them with a kitchen butter-knife. Now he imports packs of damaged blank "seconds" from an Australian manufacturer. Using

a surgical scalpel and a Stanley knife, he weaves Pacific cultural designs around his experiences and political views; the latest includes his take on the New Zealand flag. He rarely sketches anything, transferring his thoughts directly onto foam.

Working in the shed alongside their rented semi-rural hillside home grants Aaron plenty of flexibility to down tools and hit the water, either on his stand-up paddle-board or in a single outrigger canoe, occasionally surfing or paddling waka ama. He still surfs, claiming both art and surfing grant him a sense of peace and happiness, that both release creative energy.



His art career has other benefits, too. “I can pay cash for my car – I’ve got the freedom to work and freedom to play with my family whenever I want, pretty much. My only downfall in terms of art production is the kids. They

come out here all the time and I end up making toys.” He grins at the painted paper bag dangling from a wall of the shed. “Look, a kite. It started off being a superhero mask.”

The second of six children, Aaron grew up across Raglan Harbour on the sheep and beef farm his parents managed in tiny Te Akau. When he wasn't on the lambing beat, collecting dead lambs in a plastic sled made from a spray pack, he usually had a pencil in hand, filling page after page with pictures of fast cars and trucks. Drawing was also a distraction from schoolwork which was hard for Aaron. He was in his late teens before doctors diagnosed the astigmatism that affected his vision, blurring textbooks and blackboards. No one discovered he had dyslexia, albeit teamed with a photographic memory. He could sometimes fool teachers by memorizing reading books or large bodies of text. “The other kids thought I was cheating. I thought I was brainy but obviously the teachers didn't,” he says of the years he was held back a class.



Like his siblings, he attended South Auckland's Wesley College. Those years strengthened his Maori cultural knowledge and broadened his horizons. “School taught me how to tie a tie, polish my shoes. It taught me to be with people other than just Maori, that there were greater things out there than how Maori communities live – I thought it was just beers and work. Samoan, Pakeha... there were Tongan royals... seeing other brown people who were leaders in kingdoms.” In addition to cultural exchanges in Canada and Hawaii, Aaron learned to design moko and paddle a war canoe, to speak Maori and compete in kapa haka.

One day he picked up a broken surfboard from a corner of the shed. He'd seen a television news item of a Gisborne surfer waving a carved surfboard blank to protest nuclear testing in the Pacific. Both the art form and the political statement appealed to Aaron. “I thought I could say something here about what I'm going through just in our own country. I started with angry faces, making angry Maori warriors and giving them away.”

In 2001 he took boards to a surf expo in Coolangatta and made \$380. He began selling boards at beach markets, initially dismissing critics who claimed his work ought to be in galleries. As demand and his prices grew – \$50 a board, \$150, \$350, \$400 – he began to envisage a future where art was his sole income.

He sent a bundle of carved boards home so his brother, Raglan-based surf champion Daniel Kereopa, could test the market. “He started giving them away at charity events 'cos he's quite famous. All these stars were buying them.” Demand was similarly overwhelming in a Raglan café, then a local gallery. Aaron's big break came after one of his boards wound up in a Queenstown home and an art gallery owner spotted the piece and tracked him down. That was four years ago and the gallery takes – and sells – everything he produces.

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