

Fiona Pardington Taharaki Skyside

Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

9 May – 22 November 2026

Presented by the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa | Creative New Zealand and Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia will feature *Taharaki Skyside*, Fiona Pardington's powerful new series of large-scale photographs. Pardington (Ngāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Ngāti Kahungunu, Clan Cameron of Erracht) turns her lens on taxidermied birds held in museum collections across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia: specimens shaped by the intertwined histories of colonial collecting, scientific classification and cultural loss. Focusing on species endemic to Aotearoa New Zealand, and working through Dante's poetic vision of the Southern Hemisphere as the location of Purgatory, her portraits honour the deep spiritual and cultural significance of these manu (birds) to Māori, while confronting the legacies that

placed many of them in vitrines rather than in the wild. Some, like the huia and whēkau (laughing owl), are long extinct; many others remain critically vulnerable. Pardington's eye and lens reveal details that will surprise even New Zealand audiences and underscore the fragile, irreplaceable biodiversity at the heart of Pardington's practice.

“Birds can symbolise familial love, romantic attachment, ecological warnings, they can be intimations of mortality, and in my work they can also represent individual people in my life. The ideas I am conjuring remind us of the integral significance of manu within te ao Māori – as sources of food and materials, and intermediaries between human and divine worlds.”

Fiona Pardington (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Ngāti Kahungunu, Clan Cameron of Erracht) ONZM



LEFT TO RIGHT: Tūi, *Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*; Tawaki, Fiordland crested penguin *Eudyptes pachyrhynchus*; Moho, South Island takahē, *Porphyrio hochstetteri*; All pigment inks on Ilford Galerie Smooth Cotton Rag, 1760 x 1400 mm



Taharaki Skyside continues Fiona Pardington's acclaimed practice of working with museum archives, begun more than 20 years ago, and builds on her 2024 exhibition *Te taha o te rangi / The edge of the heavens*. This latest series speaks of manu both as kin and as significant beings within Māori culture. Pre-human Aotearoa New Zealand was an abundant birdland, and birds feature strongly in Māori creation narratives. They appear in Māori rock art in Te Waipounamu, the South Island, which are among the earliest artworks made in the country.

Carefully staged, lit and shot, the photographs capture not just the birds' iridescent plumage and morphology, but the essence of their spirit. Pardington's vivid portraits contemplate the horizon – where mortality meets transcendence – and the ways in which manu traverse this physical and metaphysical threshold. They are spiritual messengers operating between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Taharaki Skyside extends Pardington's interrogation of the frameworks of museology – the settings, classifications and disciplinary apparatus, including the ethnographic containment of cultures and people, and the ways these institutions can deaden cultural agency and practice. Pardington's portraits are both part of, and in response to, a tradition of ornithological illustration and bird painting that characterises eighteenth-century art illustration and the natural sciences. Her confronting but tender portraits are reminiscent of the illustrations of John James Audubon (1785–1851) who, in an approach not dissimilar to Pardington's, prioritised a lifetime of close encounters with birds as a path for the artist "to get closer to the truth".

Many of the birds in Pardington's series are under threat, while others – like the huia – are already lost, drawing the ecological shadow we all live under sharply into view. These portraits shift between reanimating the extinct through photographic artifice and recognising them as monuments of their own decline. Each portrait offers the opportunity for an intense personal encounter, opening the space to contemplate one's own role in the future of the environment.

During her first visit to Venice in 2024, Pardington recognised a visual echo, seeing something of the skies of the Hunter Hills near Waimate in Te Waipounamu where she lives, in the sunsets and sunrises of Venice. In collaboration with her brother, artist / designer Neil Pardington, creative director for *Taharaki Skyside*, these colours are incorporated into the frames of her photographs, uniting the islands of Aotearoa New Zealand with the archipelago of Venice, a hemisphere away.

Creative New Zealand's delivery partner for 2026 is **Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū**, and *Taharaki Skyside* is curated by Felicity Milburn and Chloe Cull.

ENDS

"Pardington imbues her chosen subjects with an unshakable, transformative faith in their worth. Her works for *Taharaki Skyside* carry vital relevance in a global context. Underscoring the far-reaching and devastating losses – ecological and cultural – that have occurred as the result of human impact and colonisation, her images open up moments of extraordinary resonance and recognition. What does it mean when an artist tilts our view skywards? Horizons mark the limit of our vision, the curve where experience and understanding fall away. *Taharaki Skyside* holds us at that threshold between known and unknown.

Through Pardington's lens, these stitched-together taxidermy relics emit unexpected charisma and emotional power. Hers is a careful, tender noticing that repairs and restores."

Felicity Milburn and **Chloe Cull**, curators, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū

Notes to Editors

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Exhibition Credits

Fiona Pardington: Taharaki Skyside
61st International Art Exhibition –
La Biennale di Venezia
9 May – 22 November 2026

Commissioner: Kent Gardner, Chair
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa
Project Leader: Arts Council of New Zealand
Toi Aotearoa | Creative New Zealand
Creative Director: Neil Pardington
Curators: Felicity Milburn and Chloe Cull
Delivery Partner: Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetū

The artist acknowledges the collaborative support of Neil Pardington in overseeing the entirety of the design of *Taharaki Skyside*, and Andrew Paul Wood for his role in the conceptual development of this body of work.

Visiting the Exhibition

Pietà Venezia, Castello 3701, Venezia
9 May – 22 November, 11:00 – 19:00
Vernissage: 6 – 8 May, 10:00 – 19:00
Closed Mondays

We use the imagery of kā manu – birds – to lift the words of our pepeha so that they may carry us to the ancestral homelands of our people. The words are etched into the space between earth and sky. We travel with the manu in spirit and mind; a journey of connection that moves us across place and time.

He rau ki taharaki – To the multitudes skyside
mihi kau ana – We greet you
He rau ki taharaki – Plumes skyside
kitea ana – We see you

He rau ki taharaki – Pages skyside
Ka kōrerohia – Will be spoken
He rau ki taharaki – Many songs skyside
Ka waiatatia – Will be sung

Dr Hana O'Regan (Kāi Tahu) ONZM, leader in Māori cultural development, te Tiriti o Waitangi rights, language advocacy and education.

“Fiona’s photographs are more than images: they are acts of return. Each bird, each shimmer of feather and darkened horizon, carries presence and absence in equal measure – the breath of life, and the hush that follows it. Her work holds the paradox of beauty and loss with grace and precision, summoning both ancestral memory and contemporary urgency. To stand before these photographs is to feel the gaze of Aotearoa returned, patient and knowing.”

Kent Gardner, Commissioner, Aotearoa New Zealand at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2026 Chair, Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa

About Fiona Pardington ONZM

Fiona Pardington (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Ngāti Kahungunu, Clan Cameron of Erracht) is responsible for some of the most memorable images in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand artmaking.

For more than three decades, she has crafted a highly respected practice nationally and internationally, operating largely within the tradition of the photographic still life. Pardington often works with museum collections, highlighting the vital cultural and spiritual significance of taoka and natural history specimens for Māori.

Pardington has been the recipient of numerous awards and honours, including the Moët et Chandon Fellowship (1991–2), the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship (1996–7) and the Ngāi Tahu residency at the University of Otago Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka (2006).

In 2011, Pardington became a New Zealand Arts Foundation Laureate, and in 2016 was named a Knight (Chevalier) in the Order of Arts and Letters (Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres) by the French Prime Minister, the first New Zealand visual artist ever to receive this honour. In 2017, Pardington was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit and in 2025 was promoted to an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her services to photography.

Pardington's works have been extensively collected by all of Aotearoa New Zealand's major public galleries, as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Musée du Quai Branly (Paris), the National Gallery of Art (Washington, US), the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Victoria.

Fiona Pardington is represented by STARKWHITE.

About Creative New Zealand

Creative New Zealand is the national arts development agency of Aotearoa New Zealand and has supported New Zealand artists at La Biennale di Venezia since 2001; the 2026 national pavilion will be the 13th in Aotearoa's New Zealand's history at Venice.

About Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū

Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū is the public art museum of Ōtautahi Christchurch and home to one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most significant public art collections. It runs an active and acclaimed programme of exhibitions that ranges from artist-led installations to large-scale surveys and also operates a highly respected art publishing programme.

“Taxidermy occupies a unique space between love, death and fetish. When photographing in museum collections, I have observed the artifice of the birds’ presentation, the way they have been posed, the care with which they have been assembled and, sometimes, their worn condition. By using strategic lighting and angles I am trying to draw out their charisma – to free them from the constraints of being mere objects.”

Fiona Pardington (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Ngāti Kahungunu, Clan Cameron of Erracht) ONZM

IMAGES LEFT TO RIGHT: *Tūi, Prothemadera novaeseelandiae*; collection of South Canterbury Museum (2011/211.1), Timaru, Aotearoa New Zealand 2024; *Tawaki, Fiordland crested penguin, Eudyptes pachyrhynchus*; collection of South Canterbury Museum (2008/157.1), Timaru, Aotearoa New Zealand 2024; *Moho*, South Island *takahē, Porphyrio hochstetteri*, probable sub-adult, Deas Cove, Thompson Sound, Te Rua-o-te-Moko Fiordland, 1851; collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (OR. 022236), Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand 2025. All: pigment inks on Ilford Galerie Smooth Cotton Rag, 1897 x 1458 mm

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