

Edinburgh Art Festival – Shannon Te Ao

New Zealand artist Shannon Te Ao has been chosen to produce an ambitious new artwork for the Edinburgh Art Festival.



The Edinburgh Art Festival is the largest annual festival of visual arts in the UK, each year attracting over 300,000 attendances. The youngest of Edinburgh's 11 annual international arts festivals, the Art Festival takes place alongside Edinburgh's world renowned summer festivals. Collectively each year Edinburgh's festivals host 3000+ events featuring 25000+ artists and performers, and together attracting 4.5 million attendances from over 70 countries across the world.

Te Ao's selection comes after his success at the Walters Prize in 2016, receiving New Zealand's most prestigious art award. Te Ao has also had a busy year exhibiting across New Zealand with major exhibitions at the Christchurch Art Gallery, the City Gallery in Wellington and Artspace in Auckland as well as producing a new work for the Taipei Contemporary Art Centre.

Te Ao's Edinburgh commission is the result of a collaboration between the Edinburgh Art Festival and Te Tuhi with support from Creative New Zealand as part of the NZ at Edinburgh 2017 season. Te Tuhi is one of New Zealand's leading contemporary art galleries known for enabling artists to create career-changing artworks.

Since July 2016 Te Tuhi Curator at Large Bruce E. Phillips has worked closely with Edinburgh Art Festival Director Sorcha Carey to research and select an artist who could respond to the challenge of the Festival.

Phillips explains: “We selected Shannon Te Ao for his poetic artworks that resonate with audiences by encouraging empathy and slow thinking in an accelerated age where people are quick to judge and have a low tolerance for difference.”

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Edinburgh International Festival and also coincides with the 14th Edinburgh Art Festival. The Edinburgh International Festival was established in 1947 as a post WWII initiative to “provide a platform for the flowering of the human spirit”. “Te Ao’s practice fits this philosophy perfectly.” says Phillips. “His works talk distinctly about the trauma of colonisation that is still very present in Aotearoa today while also reflecting more universal human concerns of love, loss and missed connections”.

Phillips adds that the “Edinburgh Art Festival’s commissioning programme is an internationally unique event that provides artists an opportunity to respond to the city’s rich history by presenting art on the street or in historic buildings. This suits Te Ao’s practice well as his work often creates a type of time travelling by mixing historic and contemporary material.

For instance, Te Ao’s artwork for the Festival will be a multimedia installation that draws on a number of historic references including a 1840s waiata immortalising the physiological and psychological repercussions of sickness and grief, and an intimate dance scene from a 1970s Charles Burnett film, reimagined between two women. By drawing together various threads, Te Ao creates an entangled perspective of the human condition – both real and fictional – to explore humankind’s hopes, its failings, and its potential for transformation.”

Carey shares that the Festival has been working with Creative

New Zealand to maintain a strong New Zealand presence over the last 4 years: “We are delighted to be partnering with Te Tuhi, Auckland and Creative New Zealand to commission a major new film installation by Shannon Te Ao.

The project marks the culmination of an ongoing partnership with Creative New Zealand, first initiated in 2014, to share the work of contemporary artists from across New Zealand with festival audiences. Shannon Te Ao’s new work for our 2017 commissions programme promises to be a highlight of this year’s programme.”

The inclusion of Te Ao’s work is a result of Creative New Zealand’s directive to connect high-quality New Zealand artists with international audiences. Creative New Zealand Senior Manager for International Cath Cardiff says: “The Edinburgh festivals offer an enormous opportunity and we look forward to supporting New Zealand artists to present their work across a range of platforms.”

The 2017 Edinburgh Art Festival runs from 27 July – 27 August.