



19 June 2024

Major artwork a taonga for Rolleston

Selwyn District's newest public artwork will be officially opened on 6 July.

Toro Atua, by Dr Areta Wilkinson (Ngāi Tahu), is intended as a legacy for future generations.

Made up of twenty shimmering, stainless-steel figures on golden poles up to four metres tall, the artwork will be a distinctive landmark in Rolleston Town Centre. It will be permanently located in the reserve next to Te Ara Ātea, Rolleston's cultural and community hub.

Dr Wilkinson was commissioned to create Toro Atua by a panel from the Rolleston Residents' Association, Selwyn District Council, SCAPE Public Art and Ngāi Te Ruahikihiki ki Taumutu, following a competitive selection process. SCAPE Public Art fund-raised over 50% of the project budget to supplement historical council funds that had been set aside for a public artwork.

The opening event, hosted by Selwyn District Council, will be at 5.30pm on Saturday 6 July. It is a free, public event, and everyone is welcome.

Selwyn District Mayor Sam Broughton says, "watching the work take shape, I'm sure that the artist has more than achieved her vision of creating a distinctive herald of Rolleston, which will delight and intrigue residents and visitors." Toro Atua is another sign of Rolleston, and Selwyn District, coming of age, says Mr Broughton: "not only are we the fastest growing centre in the region, but we are also becoming more confident in embracing and celebrating our distinctive landscape and cultural heritage."

The sculpture draws on the cultural narrative for Te Ara Ātea gifted to Selwyn District Council by mana whenua, Ngāi Te Ruahikihiki ki Taumutu.

Ruahikihikitanga Portfolio Leader, Puamiria Parata-Goodall welcomed the artist's sensitive response to mana whenua stories. "Toro Atua reflects many strands of the narrative, where we speak to the whakapapa, kōrero and mahinga kai traditional food and resource practices. Another key aspect is the importance of the site as a pouwhenua or marker in the network of traditional and contemporary trails across the landscape of Tauwharekākaho Rolleston."

Artist Dr Areta Wilkinson says creating Toro Atua is an immense privilege and a career highlight. "Objects become taonga through the community of care around them. Already many people have contributed their energy and skill to this project. My hope is that Toro Atua will become integral to the sense of identity and landscape of generations of local people."

Dr Wilkinson paid tribute to the team at ENI Engineering in Christchurch, despite it being a departure from her usual hands-on approach to artmaking.

"It's been great, actually; they have taken a lot of care, and we have worked very well together."

Josh Down of ENI Engineering says one-off jobs like Toro Atua require close attention to detail. “We’re lucky to have guys on staff who love a challenge. I think they’ve done the work proud, and it’s a great showcase for local manufacturing.”

After the completed figures were set in place, specialist lighting was installed by CORDE to enhance the impact of the artwork at night.

The Rolleston Residents Association chair Mark Alexander says they are pleased to have been part of the process of bringing this artwork to our Rolleston community and to our Selwyn District.

“We thank all that have contributed including the artist Dr Areta Wilkinson and especially SCAPE Public Art whose fundraising efforts doubled the available funds for the project.”

Executive Director of SCAPE Public Art, Richard Aindow, says Toro Atua represents a new departure for the Christchurch-based organisation. “In its 26-year history, SCAPE has engaged with over 250 artists, including producing 17 permanent artworks, in Christchurch. Public art has such power to connect people in and to public spaces, so as a Selwyn District resident myself, it’s a thrill to produce artwork that Rolleston residents can enjoy in their own backyard,” he says.

SCAPE thanks the project’s funders and sponsors, who made the work possible. They are:

- Selwyn District Council
- Rolleston Residents’ Association
- Creative New Zealand
- CORDE
- ENI Engineering Ltd
- Rolleston family
- Rātā Foundation
- Te Runanga o Ngāi Tahu
- Ngāi Te Ruahikihiki ki Taumutu
- Cooper Development
- Hughes Construction
- Isaac Group
- IPort Business Park
- TM Consultants
- Tawera Studios

ENDS

Selwyn District Council Media

027 273 7911

media@selwyn.govt.nz

To arrange interviews, contact:

Michele Hollis, SCAPE Public Art, 021 289 0919

Opening Event Details:

Saturday 6 July, 5.30pm. Rolleston Reserve, behind Te Ara Ātea, 56 Tennyson Street, Rolleston.

Please dress warmly and bring a torch. This is a free public event hosted by Selwyn District Council that will feature Ngāi Tahu storytelling by Juanita Hepi; everyone is welcome.

High resolution images and captions available for [download from this link](#).

Further Information:

About the artist

Dr Areta Wilkinson is a contemporary artist whose creative practice moves freely on and off the body as site, and into the field of installation. Her exquisite works explore art as a form of knowledge and practice with Māori philosophies—especially whakapapa and a worldview informed by Ngāi Tahu perspectives. She quietly crosses disciplines and boundaries with immense skill and perception. Areta is inspired by place and sees her work as a continuous exploration of the narratives that have shaped both her identity and her practice.

Alongside her creative works, Areta has a strong collaborative ethos and supports a community of artists in her orbit. She has worked collectively with artist groups like Oxford Gallery toi o Waimakariri and Paemanu: Ngāi Tahu Contemporary Visual Arts and worked on partnership projects with iwi agencies and cultural organisations such as Te Matatiki Toi Ora The Arts Centre. Areta is an active member of the Māori Womens Welfare League Rāpaki Branch as modelled by her Taua (grandmother).

Her work is well represented in New Zealand collections including Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, and Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. Areta currently lives and works in Oxford, New Zealand near the foothills of the Southern Alps. In 2022, she became an Arts Foundation Te Tumu Toi Laureate receiving the Jillian Friedlander Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa Award.

More about the artwork

Themes

In developing this artwork, Dr Areta Wilkinson identified three “premises” arising from the cultural narrative of Ngāi Te Ruahikihiki ki Taumutu about the original village Orariki. These premises are:

Mauri: the life-giving force. In this artwork, “mauri is expressed through an assembly of imagined figures teaming with liveliness. Semblances of feathered, land-bound or marine creatures, these characters both familiar and other worldly vibrate with life from their elevated stations high above our heads,” says Dr Wilkinson.

Mahinga Kai: natural resources and the traditional practices of harvesting, preparation and storage, according to the seasons, which entailed migration through the landscape.

Pouwhenua: wayfinding, ancient trails, new directions. “Toro means to scout, explore and extend. Toro Atua are divine scouts sent forth to search, guide and scrutinise our movement and impact on this whenua,” says Dr Wilkinson.

Visual Language

Toro Atua employs an original visual language developed by the artist, drawing inspiration from ancestral rock art. The figures on each pole are not intended to directly map onto or represent specific natural or supernatural creatures. Instead, the artist invites us to be curious and use our imagination when we look at Toro Atua. “Shapes are evocative – bearing a hint or trace of something we recognise,” she says.

Relationship to broader creative practice

Dr Wilkinson sees Toro Atua as part of a broader exploration of mahinga kai, which can also be seen in smaller works shown in recent years, including in:

[Paemanu: Tauraka Toi. A Landing Place, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2021-22](#)

[Moa-Hunter Fashions, Christchurch Art Gallery, 202-21](#)

About SCAPE Public Art

SCAPE Public Art is the largest producer of contemporary public art in Aotearoa New Zealand, delivered through deep, enduring partnerships with industry. SCAPE has three interdependent workstreams: permanent free-to-view public artworks as a legacy to the communities that host them; an annual, curated season of public art in Ōtautahi Christchurch; and a year-round education and engagement programme with a focus on delivery to disadvantaged communities.

www.scapepublicart.org.nz