

**Linda Tyler**

Convenor of Museums and Cultural Heritage, University of Auckland, Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau.

## Exhibition Review: ***Karen Rubado, under intense scrutiny***

Te Tuhi Wall Project, Te Tuhi, Auckland

7 December 2019 – 15 March 2020

Curated by Andrew Kennedy.

Reviewed by Linda Tyler.

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Did you know that a shredded Tim Tam wrapper will furnish you with four metres of soft plastic to weave with? Artist Karen Rubado has become extremely intimate with the properties of biscuit packaging, having hand-woven what six families could collect for her in a month into a twenty-metre-long piece for the big wall at Te Tuhi over the summer.



Figure 1: Karen Rubado, *under intense scrutiny*, 2019. Soft plastic weaving, Te Tuhi Wall Project, Te Tuhi, Auckland. Photo credit: Sam Hartnett, Auckland.

It is scary how much of plastic wrapping there is hanging there, but the way it is constructed and draped is oddly beautiful as well. How radical to take rubbish and transform it into riches for the eye in this way. It hovers up your attention as you walk into the foyer at Te Tuhi, and invites you to take a closer look at the shredded bits of branding. Rubado would like us to scrutinize what we are buying as intensely, before it goes into the trolley at the supermarket. Perhaps it would help if, like cigarette packaging which carries images of the harm that smoking does to the human body, soft plastic was printed with pictures of the floating Great Pacific Garbage Patch swirling ever larger and more deadly. This is what our reckless consumption is doing to the planet.

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Born in Christchurch in 1969, Rubado has spent most of her life in the United States, the ultimate buy it, use it, throw it away, culture. Returning to New Zealand, she completed a BVA at AUT University in 2015 and finished her MFA at Elam School of Fine Arts in November 2018, with a studio project accompanied by her dissertation entitled *Weaving Structural Improvisation into Contemporary Arts*.

Watching weavers at work in Thailand inspired her to try her hand, and she bought an antique wooden loom, strung it up, and hasn't stopped weaving for almost five years. Uncowed by the weight of tradition and expectation of technical skill incumbent on practicing both handcraft and contemporary art, she decided to embrace the serendipity allowed by the practice, throwing usb cables, VHS tape, and charging cords into her warp threads to create a weft of cheap redundant technology.

Challenged to make a project for the Auckland Art Fair in 2018, she gathered up as many writhing discarded cords and cables as she could find and transformed them into energetic wall hangings. With sculptor and architect Krystina Kaza and painter Vivienne Worn, she transformed Wellington's playstation into a homage to provisional practice in 2019. As she wrote in her MFA thesis, "Improvisation becomes a language of subversion and rebellion and combined within a practice that involves weaving, it becomes a subtle form of opposition."

She joins a fine tradition of refuseniks (pun intended). Women have been using weaving as a mechanism for resistance since Penelope first unraveled Odysseus' shroud in Homer's *Odyssey*. The pursuit of woven perfection is pointless: she

wants her materials to speak their unadorned and unlovely truth. As one who dutifully takes her soft plastics along to Countdown to be recycled, I was appalled to discover that for six months last year China stopped accepting our plastic, and it got sent to landfills. As curator Andrew Kennedy points out, "Originally introduced as a way of increasing consumption, disposable plastic has become emblematic of a system broken in the name of progress." We have finally done away with the single-use plastic bag; as conscious consumers we can challenge manufacturers to reinvent product packaging as well.

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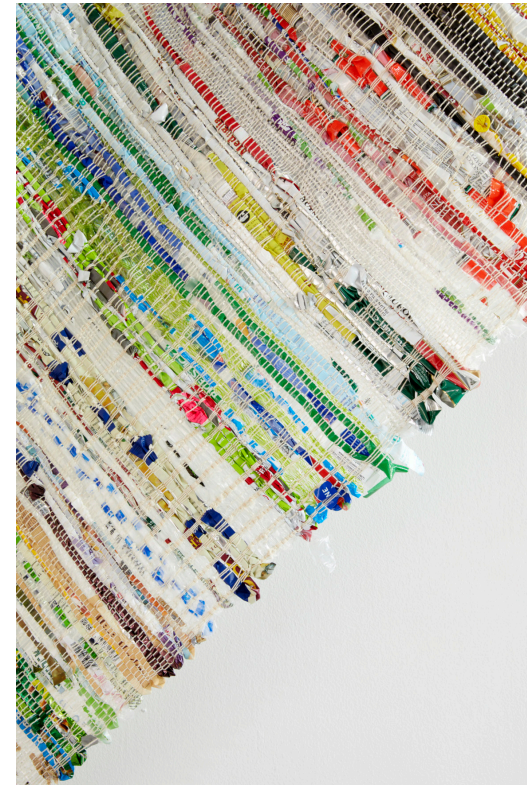


Figure 2: Karen Rubado, *under intense scrutiny*, 2019 (detail showing the plastic). Soft plastic weaving. Te Tuhi Wall Project, Te Tuhi, Auckland. Photo credit: Sam Hartnett, Auckland.

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