



Living the (only) dream (left)

No one does
sparkle quite like
Reuben Paterson.

Nearly two
decades since
our first profile,
Claire O'Loughlin
revisits the artist
in the city that
never sleeps and
finds him awake
to new glittering
possibilities.

Reuben Paterson (Ngāti Rangitahi, Ngāi Tūhoe, Tūhourangi, Scottish) has always lived in a world of glitter. His childhood was spent amongst the shimmering black sands and sunlit water of Piha, and his career has focused on making iridescent artworks. Now, he inhabits that sparkliest of cities, New York.

The Big Apple's sparkle is real, he says. Manhattan rests on a bed of quartz, kyanite, and dumortierite, formed 450 million years ago in the collision of the east coast with the Atlantic Ocean floor. For Reuben, this crystal bedrock emblematises the vibrancy of the city, and made him feel instantly at home.

He talks about landing in a new place, suggesting you can learn from its history "to settle your own identity within it. I'm finding that quite easy because we've got crystals. We've got art galleries. We've got studio spaces."

He moved his life and his practice from Auckland to NYC in May 2023, landing a studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and an apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side. "Yes, I'm living the dream!" he laughs.

"I thought, where could I take my practice?" Reuben refers to his practice as 'he', someone outside of himself whom he nurtures and cares for. The personification says much about Reuben as an artist — rather than a creator working in isolation, he sees himself working in tandem with his practice to bring ideas to light.

PAGE 34: Reuben Paterson in his New York studio

Photo by Henry Hargreaves

RIGHT: ArtZone issue 12, 2005, cover image: Reuben Paterson, *Glitter Suit* (detail), in collaboration with World, 2005

FAR RIGHT: Reuben Paterson, *Gourds I*, dried gourds, nickel plated pins, sequins, clear coat, 1500mm x 500mm, 2020

Photo by Ryan McCauley

Photography by Henry Hargreaves



ArtZone first interviewed Reuben in 2005. He was 32, and had blazed onto the art scene four years earlier. Filled with inspiration and joie de vivre from his recent travels, he declared, "My major influences are experiences. Without them there is no new window to my world."

That's still true today, he says, but his artworks and experiences have become even more entwined — now he sees that his artworks direct his experiences as much as they respond to them. And they've been doing that since the beginning.

He was born in 1973 in Auckland, and grew up between East Auckland and Piha on the West Coast. His father had moved to Auckland from Matatā in the Bay of Plenty, the whenua of Ngāti Rangitahi.



ORANGE BARREL | MEDIA



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Reuben knew he wanted to be an artist when he was five. He went to Elam School of Fine Arts in 1993, studying printmaking and painting.

“I loved art school. I’m a big fan of disco, and my grades at the end were A, B, B, A, so I was happy!” He spent a few years as a primary school teacher, making art in his spare time. As a teacher, he encountered glitter in the kids’ craft box. One of his proudest achievements, he says, is pushing the possibilities of glitter beyond its associations with craft, carnival, and drag.

His work includes paintings, sculpture, installations, textiles, and video. All of it shimmers in some way.

His use of glitter is multifaceted — he is interested in how it catches and casts light, but also in its meaning and connections. Glitter is synthetic, but for Reuben, it also relates to the natural world. “There’s this whakapapa in the materials that links me back to the shore, and back to the sea.”

A pivotal moment came when his father passed away while he was still teaching. Up until that

PAGE 38: Reuben Paterson in New York
Photo by Henry Hargreaves

ABOVE: Reuben Paterson, *The Only Dream Left* (install view), City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 2023

Photo by Cheska Brown

Image courtesy of the artist and City Gallery Wellington

RIGHT: Reuben Paterson, *Cream* (install view) at Page Galleries, 2022

Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries



ABOVE: Reuben Paterson, *Whakapapa Get Down Upon Your Knees (2)*, glitter and acrylic on canvas, 4000 x 4000mm, 2009

Photo by Schwere Webber

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, purchased 2010

point, he had done a few glitter paintings, simple abstractions with weaving lines — “very Mondrian”. He wanted to make a work for his father, and “I wondered if I could put one glitter colour on top of another, but do it in a way that had a really sharp, clean, crisp line. It worked.”

Using this new technique, he made his first full glitter painting, *The Whareniui that Dad Built*. It was exhibited at Te Tuhi gallery in Pakuranga, where he was brought up. The next year, in 2001, it went to the Pacific Biennale.

“That work launched everything. I’m forever grateful to my father for it. I’ve always experienced my work as this continual gift from him. The work was there to celebrate him, and I’m still celebrating him. Without his connection, I don’t have my descent to Ngāti Rangitihī, which comes out in every kōwhaiwhai or fabric-type design.”





ABOVE: Reuben Paterson

Photo by Henry Hargreaves

LEFT: Reuben Paterson, *Dilana* (install view) at Page Galleries, 2021

Photo by Ryan McCauley

Image courtesy of the artist and Page Galleries

In his paintings, glittering kōwhaiwhai and koru interweave, sometimes juxtaposed with flowers and paisley. He does not use glitter with a light touch – the canvas is thick with it. It reminds me of the stiff, glittery polyester clothes of the 60s and 70s.

“I’ve often taken fabrics from my grandparents, or from memories of homes, or I’ve adapted fabrics into Te Ao Māori that contain the koru that were done by Pucci, and taken all the colour out and made them red, black and white.”

“I think work is so densely biographical, without that being obvious.”

Reuben’s practice has always had a spiritual dimension but in his early career, people focused on the materials rather than the meaning. Kōwhaiwhai in glitter was a bold move, and moved people to ask whether cultural identity could be described using such a material.

“I was happy to let that be. Growing up as a gay man, I’d lived like that my whole life — I was used to being subverted. But we live in a very different world now, especially post-pandemic. Spiritual awareness has become a part of everyday life.”

No work embodies the spiritual more emphatically than *Guide Kāiarahi*, a 10-metre vertical waka installed at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki in 2021, his most significant work to date. Made from hundreds of crystals and rising from a reflecting pool into the sky, the waka is ethereal, almost made of light. It feels transitory, liminal, as though we have just managed to catch a glimpse of it on its journey from Papatūānuku to Ranginui. Light shining through the crystals casts a star pattern on the wall to navigate by.

The inspiration for *Guide Kāiarahi* came from the phantom waka seen on Lake Tarawera in 1886, where Te Paea Hinerangi, Guide Sophia, was leading a tour group. The eruption of Mount Tarawera 11 days later displaced Ngāti Rangitihi, Reuben's iwi, who moved to Matatā. At the blessing of *Guide Kāiarahi*, mana whenua of Ngāti Whātua blew into a pūmoana shell to activate the work. When they did, the lights in the reflection pool were turned on for the first time.

“That was my tūpuna, and Te Paea Hinerangi (Guide Sophia), being there for the activation.” Reuben personifies his works, as he does his practice. Like all things in Te Ao Māori, they each have a life force, a mauri. “They guide me or show me where we’re working together very symbiotically.”

Guide Kāiarahi is much more than a physical object. He is what his name indicates — and he has been guiding Reuben ever since. From him came the inspiration for Reuben's next significant work, *Koro*, exhibited in the recent survey at City Gallery Wellington, *The Only Dream Left*, curated by Karl Chitham and Aaron Lister.

Koro is a large conch shell, big enough for a child to climb into, covered in crystal barnacles. He is made from building materials all derived from sand — including the glass crystals and the shimmer of the paint. The materials form a connection to nature, and to Reuben's whakapapa. It honours his grandfather Jack Paterson, who was a sand miner in Matatā, and his great-grandfather John Paterson, who built the Town Hall opposite the City Gallery. Reuben managed to get a piece of concrete from the Town Hall and bury it underneath *Koro*'s plinth.

RIGHT: Reuben Paterson, *Guide Kāiarahi*, stainless steel, transparent acrylic and glass, 10000 x 719 x 2603mm, 2021

Commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, owned and generously supported by the Edmiston Trust



ABOVE: Reuben Paterson, *Koro*, cast aluminum, automotive two pot, concealed concrete anchor and cut-glass crystal, 739 x 679 x 1352mm, 2023

Photo by Yuxin Liu

As a conch shell, the work relates to the idea of breath and language.

“I think he really honours Tangaroa and Tāwhirimātea — sea and wind. But also Papatūānuku, where those shells land.”

Instead of sound, *Koro* emanates light. Inside a dark room, the light on his crystal barnacles — representing an ecosystem and family of their own — casts rainbow colours and stars across the surrounding walls. Like those cast by *Guide Kāiarahi*, the stars represent navigation.

“It was a beautiful idea for me to activate: bringing the spiritual back into the body of a work, through tikanga and ritual, but connecting it to my grandparents, and to sand, as a foundry. Without sand we don't have cities. It builds on this idea of a necessity. Spirituality is one of those necessities, one of those building blocks.”

Koro, and the wider *The Only Dream Left* exhibition, felt as auspicious to Reuben as *Guide Kāiarahi*, helping him navigate his way forward. In New York, he is excited to be living that “last” dream, and feel like he can start again, displaced from his comfort zone.

For now, Reuben is letting his new life take flight, and his practice lead him. He has a new show coming up at Gow Langsford Gallery this year, which will be works about New York.



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