

10 MAR – 06 JUN 2025

Curated by Liz Cooper

# CRAFTING HYBRIDS

Macarena Bernal  
Alison Leauanae  
Rowan Panther



COVER  
**ROWAN PANTHER**  
Wayfinding for the  
Disorientated  
muka, European beech,  
mother of pearl shell,  
sterling silver  
2024

ABOVE  
**MACARENA BERNAL**  
Peanuts  
Resin, personal costume  
jewellery collection parts  
2022

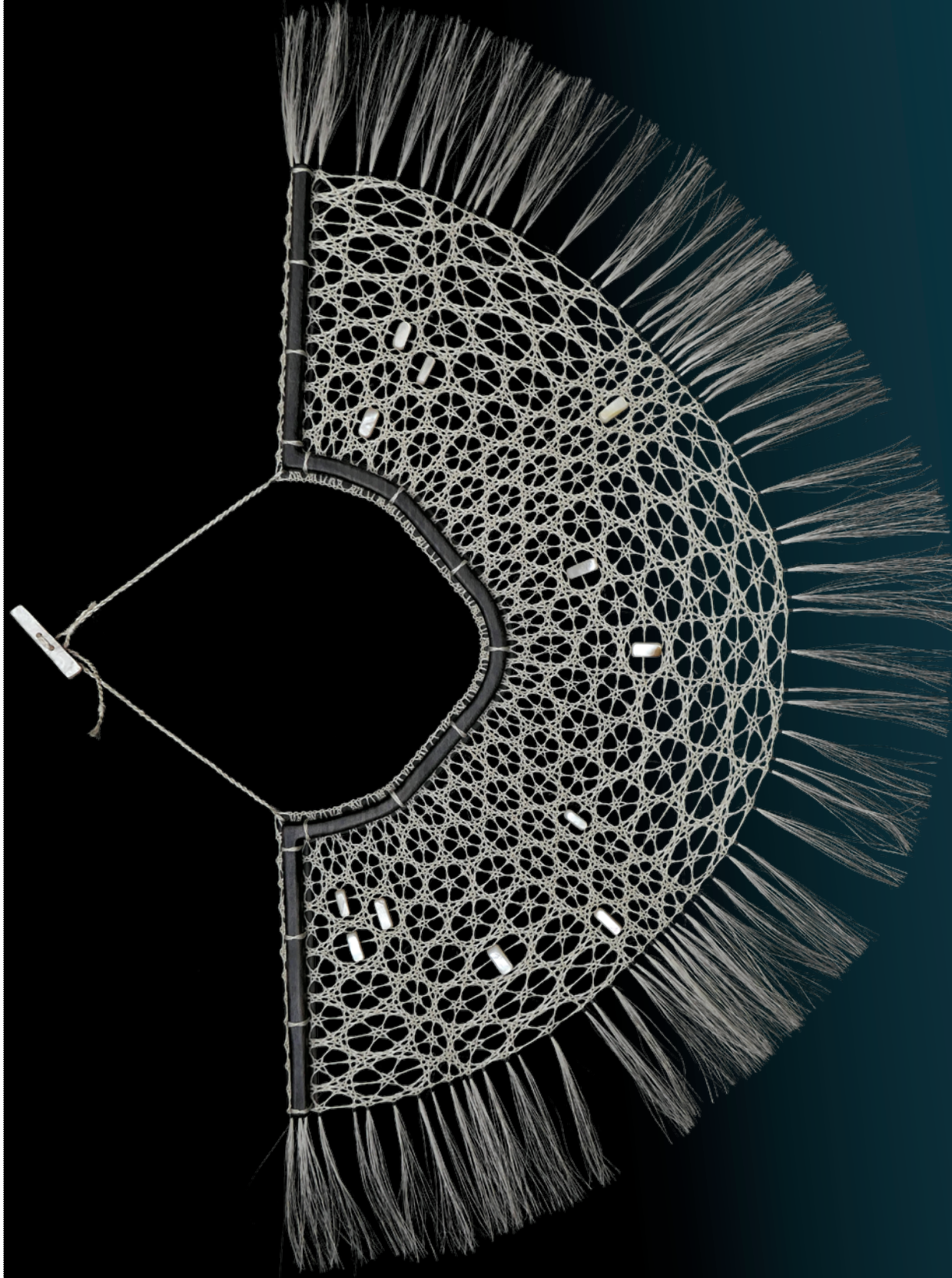
LEFT  
**MACARENA BERNAL**  
Molotov Cocktail  
246 pairs of DIY pearl  
earrings from Alibaba,  
glass bottle, bandana  
2022



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10 MAR – 06 JUN 2025







LEFT  
**MACARENA BERNAL**  
 Degrade  
 polymer resin, pigments,  
 sterling silver, magnet,  
 trimmer line  
 2020

OPPOSITE BELOW  
 LEFT TO RIGHT  
**ALISON LEAUANAE**  
 Moemiti-lima  
 cotton handstitched  
 and woven on paper  
 2025

**ALISON LEAUANAE**  
 Moemiti-ono  
 cotton handstitched  
 and woven on paper  
 2025

**ALISON LEAUANAE**  
 Moemiti-fitu  
 cotton handstitched  
 and woven on paper  
 2025



ALISON LEAUANAE in her studio\_2024. Photo by Bonny Beattie



ALISON LEAUANAE at home\_2024. Photo courtesy the artist



MACARENA BERNAL in her studio\_2024. Photo courtesy the artist





# BIOGRAPHIES

**\_MACARENA BERNAL** is an award-winning artist jeweller who has trained and worked in traditional precious metals as a gold- and silver-smith, and also developed wide skills around contemporary polymers and resin, using a mixture of CAD software and hand-carving design and making processes. Her practice is informed by alternative views of value and interactivity. Her art pieces are political/social in context, and a number were developed while she was in the Handshake 6 jewellery project throughout 2020-2022. Macarena achieved Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in visual arts, before working “on the bench” for others as she developed her own distinctive jewellery practice. Chilean-born, Macarena has been resident in Tāmaki Makaurau since 2012.

**\_ALISON LEAUANAE** is a second career textile artist who makes formally planned and executed hand-stitched works that draw on her love of colour, diverse cultural heritage, and some very personal and family themes. Alison has made three new works especially for this exhibition, which follows her first solo exhibition at Toi Poneke in 2024, and a forthcoming exhibition at Bergmann Gallery Auckland, who now represent her. Alison has a former career in organisational development. She is of Samoan and Pakeha (English and Scottish) descent, born in Tāmaki Makaurau and now resident in Te Whanganui-a-Tara.

**\_ROWAN PANTHER** is a multi-disciplinary creative practitioner and researcher. Her art practice has elements of jewellery/ adornment and textile practice, using traditional and self-taught European bobbin-lace techniques and patterns, to craft works in Pacific materials such as muka and shell. The work shown here is accompanied by a film about its making which debuted at Radiant Pavilion 2024 in Melbourne. In 2024 Rowan became a Research Associate at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. Her family background includes Germany, Ireland, Samoa & UK, and she lives in Te Tai Tokerau.

**\_LIZ COOPER** is a curator, writer and consultant who is drawn to contemporary craft/object practice. Liz is passionate about providing support for creative careers and helping artists and makers reach wide audiences. Born in Tāmaki Makaurau, she lived in London for many years where she studied textiles at Goldsmiths College. She has worked with arts not-for-profits, collectives and individuals across England, Ireland and Aotearoa, and now lives in Tauranga where she is a trustee for The Incubator Creative Hub. Liz is a citizen of both Aotearoa and Ireland.

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@macabjewellery

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@rowanpantherlace

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# CRAFTING HYBRIDS

## CRISSCROSSING AND TRANSECTING MAKER PRACTICES

Hybrid *n.* thing composed with incongruous elements.

FROM CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY, SIXTH EDITION 1978.

Hybridisation is a strengthening process commonly seen in plant cultivation to improve yields and hardiness. In contemporary making, hybrid objects can bring together unexpected combinations of materials, techniques and ideas, creating a pleasing but sometimes unsettling aesthetic. *Crafting Hybrids* examines objects in material-led practices and the creative practitioners who make them; sharing delight and wonder in unpredictable objects, strange but often beautiful, and the inspiring and diverse role models provided by the lives and work of “hybrid” makers. As historian Jock Phillips observes, “The stories of the individuals associated with objects [are] often as intriguing as the objects themselves.”<sup>01</sup>

To be a maker in these troubled times, strength and ferocity of purpose are an asset. Those who embrace their materials exploration in brave ways, unafraid to juxtapose unusual and unlikely techniques and materials intrigue us, for vigour of approach and the pleasing surprises that eventuate. Similarly, makers who are also qualified engineers or midwives are impressive for the breadth of knowledge they carry, and their ability to develop parallel capacities to deliver in very different fields. There is real power in a creative mind that is also able to address some other specialist field with complete commitment and expertise.

Hybrid makers bring strength to their work through their lived experiences, their opinions, their materials expertise, and their storied careers. Macarena Bernal demonstrates this through a wide-ranging jewellery and teaching practice: her trademark interactive and colourful polymer-and-pigment collection *Links*, custom *Grillz* for teeth, and commissioned pieces in precious stones and metal that fulfil more traditional jewellery roles — wedding bands, signet rings. She brings a rock and roll swagger to her work, and it’s easy to imagine the energy and laughter in the room when she teaches.

Behind Macarena’s warm personality is serious thought about inequalities and injustices, evident in *Molotov Cocktail*, a political comment on a bizarre use of funding for police equipment in her native Chile highlighted by media:

“Carabineros de Chile (national police) in the year 2020, when both Covid and riots were out of control, spent 15 million pesos (27,000 NZD) on 18kt gold pearl earrings for female police graduates as part of their mandatory uniform. During one of several violent street confrontations that year, two ill protected female police officers sustained serious burns by molotov cocktails thrown at their pearl adorned young faces.”<sup>02</sup>

Press photos showed their male colleagues wearing face shields and helmets, shoulder to shoulder with bareheaded women. Macarena’s response is intriguing and haunting, simultaneously decorative and provocative — a tilted glass bottle ready to throw, filled not with petrol but with many mass-produced pearl stud earrings pierced through a bandana. This object brings together

political commentary with questions about what is valuable: earrings made from real or artificial pearls? Women looking attractive, conforming to notions of femininity, or being enabled to do their jobs safely and effectively?

Questions continue with *Peanuts*, a witty commentary on the value of designer jewellery, when the actual making is by the poorly paid subordinate on the bench, who gets no credit. A riot of dangling chains and findings (the catches and connectors that are the tools of the trade), these quotidian materials of commercial jewellery are ornamented with handmade cast-resin peanuts. The juxtaposition of materials, as with *Molotov Cocktail*, is a deliberate challenge around the value of the materials versus the worker’s labour.

It is also part of the investigation into the history and nature of jewellery prompted by Macarena’s involvement in the Handshake programme. After her first online meeting with mentor Monika Brugge, Macarena noted this exchange:

“*You make Chains*— she said.  
I had never considered what I do to be chains. I always considered them to be Links. I am being that shortsighted, I had never considered the whole chain, only each separate link. (Said with my eyes wide wide open, I’m gagged....wtf)  
Chains have so many readings, so much historical context, and I have not once attempted to dance with them. Not once. I need to let the work meet the issue, let the message embody the work. Let the idea come through, like a revelation.  
*Meaning stays, beauty goes away*— she said.”<sup>03</sup>

*Degrade*, Macarena’s third work in this exhibition, is at once a skilful demonstration of the subtle hues obtainable from pigmenting polymers, an interrogation of the long history of the pearl necklace, and a commentary on ethnicity. Exact colours were obtained from family, friends and others, matching to photos of their skin (often elbows). Macarena mused, “Drawn to the word *degrade*, its meanings, its connotations. Degraded, degrading, dégradé. And what it could mean to wear it.”<sup>04</sup> She had previously played with a colour-graduated necklace of kauri gum, a modern piece imbued with history. “It describes a cycle with many readings. Something everyone can relate to, finding different interpretations. A familiarity from the unconscious. It’s non-pretentious, it does not need much.”<sup>05</sup>

Hybridity suggests complexity, but as Macarena Bernal observed, “It does not need much.” Alison Leauanae’s dazzling works are made very simply with coloured yarns piercing stiff paper, which also shows her deliberate and dedicated approach. Nothing is accidental. Thoughtfulness is common to second career makers — it takes courage and preparation to walk away from a successful job, to pivot to another way of living and working. Intense thoughtfulness is central to Alison’s very considered approach. Her dynamic embroideries are full of unexpected and energetic colour and texture combinations in geometric forms.

The recent *Moemiti* series is a celebration of colour and composition, and a subtle homage to Alison’s Samoan family, particularly her uncle. The late Iosua Toafa was a pioneering artist and teacher, well-known for his 1976 self-illustrated book *Tala o le Vavau: Myths and Legends of Samoa*, written in Samoan and English, and now a taonga for generations of children. The strong black and white drawings inside are accompanied by a striking cover image, rays of sun falling onto a simple pattern of irregular geometric shapes that could be sea or land. Alison has morphed these shapes into an all-over design in her *Moemiti* works, paying homage to her uncle’s creativity and unique contemporary aesthetic.

Colour is key for Alison. “Colour resonates with me — it’s a lot about memory — things we see, things we have. Experiences that colour remind us of.”<sup>06</sup> Growing up in Auckland, Alison’s childhood was enlivened by bright and clashing colours from her Samoan whanau. The colour of houses, buses and school uniforms seen on holiday in Samoa. Adults’ outfits at formal events where everyone would “dress in colour, in bright colours that don’t go together,

07\_ Ibid.

08\_ Keynote: Social Fabric, Interconnectedness: Patterns and Diversity, Rowan Panther. Published in Context Issue 46, Summer 2024/25, Costume & Textile Aotearoa New Zealand.

09\_ Ibid.

10\_ Zoom conversation, December 2024.

11\_ Keynote: Social Fabric, Interconnectedness: Patterns and Diversity, Rowan Panther.

and shiny”<sup>07</sup>. This clash became representative of the importance of family and friends gathering and acting collectively.

In *Moemiti* Alison’s colour blends are sophisticated if unexpected, combining many hues in tessellating shapes that fill the available space. Her unlikely medium of paper presents technical challenges that she revels in meeting, pushing to the limit how much thread can be carried without breakage or rips. Alison’s former career in organisational development assists her exquisitely prepared approach to these works, a series that expands within a tightly controlled visual vocabulary. The artist is quiet and reserved in person, using her practice to reveal glimpses of what matters most to her and her family, encoded gestures that acknowledge the considerable philosophical and cultural influences informing her stitching.

Fellow textile artist Rowan Panther has a similarly painstaking approach to making, combining the “slow craft” of bobbin lace with an appreciation of materials indigenous to the Pacific — muka and shell. Like Alison Leauanae she has a hybrid CV, in this case with a parallel career in costume and props-making for film. Rowan’s hybrid approach to materials and making techniques creates very distinctive objects that might be adornment, or purely art pieces. She brings to mind high fashion raranga practitioner Shona Tawhaio, and the statement leather pieces of Irish born designer Una Burke. All three makers have also been active in costume, working on fantasy and sci fi productions.

Whereas props are made to assert the personality of the actor bearing them and the overall narrative arc, Rowan’s art pieces are objects with their own presence — stand-alone pieces, imbued with mana, holding stories to discover. Rowan has Samoan and European heritage and has been considering the role of navigation and seafaring in her own and our collective pasts. “In Pacific navigation, you need to know where you have come from to go forward.”<sup>08</sup> While Rowan’s practice is startlingly innovative in her use of materials, the designs are ancient. “I feel inspired working with practices that are centuries old, that carry a wide rich history of their own.... These techniques have been practiced and perfected for years and I love the idea I am simply manipulating them now to fit my own aesthetics and end goals.”<sup>09</sup> *Wayfinding for the Disoriented* incorporates a frame of European beech and tiny pieces of mother of pearl in a deliberate design imbedded into the delicate lace. The artist draws together the materials and symbols of her life to create a secret map, “a navigational chart in response to my own life. Mnemonic devices were used by the navigators, personal to each.”<sup>10</sup>

In 2024 Rowan fulfilled a long-held dream, becoming a research associate at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum. As she roamed the building, she reflected on her enduring love of museums. “It is the layering of all the lives contained within the walls. Different backgrounds, different belief systems, different cultures in different time periods, crisscrossing and transecting each other.”<sup>11</sup>

Crisscrossing and transecting is the essence of hybridity. Each maker has her own story, her own journey, and brings richness from her varied activities and beliefs to the act of creation. Each object has a presence that is so much more than the sum of its parts — muka, cotton, metal, resin, paper, shell. The quality and history of these materials have been pondered, the meanings investigated, the designs contemplated. Thoughtful approaches are common to all hybrid makers; the seemingly accidental is carefully considered, the act of hybridisation is planned and deliberate, yet takes inspiration from random aspects of our lives.

03\_ “We have contact” - artist’s blog entry, 17 April 2020 <https://handshakeproject.com/we-have-contact/>

04\_ “Thinking skin pantones” - artist’s blog entry, 21 August 2020 <https://handshakeproject.com/thinking-skin-pantones/>

05\_ “Don’t think jewellery” - artist’s blog entry, 8 May 2020 <https://handshakeproject.com/dont-think-jewellery/>

06\_ Zoom conversation, December 2024.