

WORDS
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RACHEL MATAIRA'S PHOTOGRAPHS OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON REALITY.

PHOTOGRAPHY
Larnie Nicolson



Award-winning photographer Rachel Mataira says accolades are a nice result, but for her, the highlight of her vocation is being able to access places she wouldn't usually get to see. Whether she's photographing at the United Nations Climate Summit, documenting meaningful moments in our history like the Ōtautahi/Christchurch mosque attack and Black Lives Matter protests, or capturing the natural splendour of our landscapes, they're all experiences that empower her to keep working as a photographer. Since quitting her day job around a year ago, she's been committed to that full-time.

So Rachel, do you have a studio space? When we're not in lockdown, I'm away most weeks shooting. There are various showrooms around Auckland that display my work; however, my studio would most likely be defined as the outdoors. To edit my work, I have an office space at home, plus a shared space in Parnell where I can be social and collaborative.

You place a dual focus on landscapes and social commentary — why do they float your boat? I believe it's important to highlight not only the beauty of our world but also its harsher realities. For me, social commentary provides an avenue to talk about and consider the deeper and more pressing topics in society.

Are there particular subjects you have something to say about? I'm working on two personal

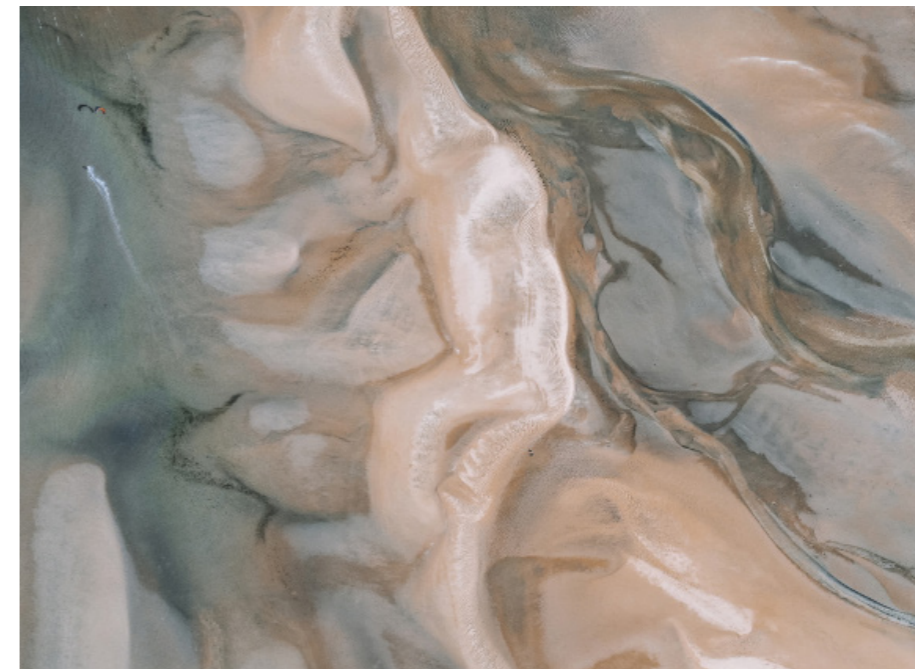
documentary projects at the moment. The first is an exploration of my Māori heritage, and some of the internal and external conflicts I've faced growing up being Māori in a primarily Pākehā environment. The second I'll keep close to my chest for now!

My landscape photography leans towards talking about human impact on the environment. Through studying the beauty of our landscapes over time, I've seen how much they're changing for the worse as well.

Is not being able to shoot internationally an issue for you at the moment? To be honest, being in New Zealand for the past 18 months has been a blessing. I've seen so much more of the country than I might have if international travel was an option, and I'm lucky to have had both domestic and international clients who've kept me busy at home.

Is it impossible not to be constantly on the lookout for a moment that could be captured?

Don't get me wrong — I'm always thinking of ideas and things I'd like to do. But leaving my job to work as a photographer full-time has given me space to lead a more balanced life. To set myself up, I meditate every morning without fail using the Waking Up app created by [neuroscientist, philosopher and *New York Times* best-selling author] Sam Harris, who offers both a great meditation practice and also lessons. Then I usually end the day exercising, >



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ABOVE LEFT Rachel's photo *Aoraki* was taken on the road to Aoraki/Mount Cook in Central Otago and later used for the cover of the book *Climate Aotearoa*, edited by Helen Clark. **ABOVE MIDDLE** Pictured here in the Titirangi home Rachel shares with her partner, *Canoes* depicts Awaroa Beach in the Abel Tasman National Park. **ABOVE RIGHT** Rachel says she feels the most alive when she's out in nature or exploring a social or environmental issue through her lens. How does she know when she's got the shot? "Good question," she says. "It's usually just a feeling of being complete. Sometimes it takes five minutes of shooting to get that feeling, and sometimes it takes five days."



TOP *Kite* is an aerial shot of Whakatū/Nelson's Tahuna Beach. Rachel was inspired by the difference in scale that can be seen from above — the magnificence of the dunes juxtaposing the relatively tiny kitesurfer. **LEFT** *Abel* offers a different view of Awaroa Beach. Many of Rachel's landscapes have this dreamy quality to them. "Both my landscape and documentary work is a reflection of how I see the world, and I try to keep it as close to how I view life as possible," she says. For her, lighting is everything, so she usually shoots in the early mornings and evenings. "I like to be in a shooting position approximately 20 minutes before sunrise and one hour before sunset."

cooking something delicious, hanging out with my partner Jayden or seeing friends. I find a lot of happiness and peace on my yoga mat too. Obviously there are exceptions, but I try to be as consistent as I can with being balanced.

What do you want your photographs to inspire in other people? Sometimes we get caught up in our everyday routines, which then become our view of the world. I'm shooting in different places, meeting different people and seeing lives being lived very differently, so I hope my work offers perspectives that are different to the viewer's or reconnect them to a time that's different to their current sense of reality.

Tell us about your Little Reminders series with Ruby Jones, whose illustration following the Ōtautahi/Christchurch terror attack warmed hearts worldwide... Ruby and I wanted to create an ongoing series to share 'little reminders' — simple things to consider in our daily lives. We touch on remembering your individual worth,

honouring where you are in your life and finding joy. We hope to continue it and share it in real life once Covid restrictions allow.

What else is on your agenda right now? I'd love to produce more work when we're able to travel freely again, and I've recently started an image licensing platform for my landscape photography. Over the past 18 months, a lot of businesses around the globe have been wanting images of New Zealand, so I've created a place where they can license my work that I don't sell as prints. The goal for 2022 is to get other creatives on board and build a licensing platform where creatives can be paid well for their work and ensure ultimate copyright retention for it into the future. I'm working on some exciting and interesting ways to make that happen, so if anyone would like to hear more, they're welcome to get in touch.

What keeps your chin up? Enjoying the simple things every day. 🍷
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ABOVE This photo was shot at Ihumātao Peninsula in Māngere, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland during the 2019 protest. Rachel reckons the most essential tools of her trade are an open mind and staying flexible. "I'm constantly in new environments, changing weather conditions and meeting new people, so I need to be able to adapt accordingly." Of her recent move into self-employment, she says, "Working for someone can be challenging and working for yourself can also be challenging in a different way. Uncertainty is inevitably going to creep in for everyone at times. If I need to recalibrate, I think it's good to remember that life ebbs and flows — and that's the beauty of it."