

THE AUSTRIAN AND THE ACTIVIST

Photographer Birgit Krippner turns her "magical third eye" on Tuhoe activist and artist Tame Iti.

If there'd been such a thing as a "bucket list" when Birgit Krippner was growing up, photographing a controversial Maori activist would not have been on it. In fact, the Austrian-born photographer knew very little about New Zealand when she met her Kiwi husband, Murray Nash, 13 years ago.

Now based in Wellington, Krippner has collaborated with Tuhoe activist Tame Iti on an exhibition that combines her striking black-and-white photographs with Iti's oil paintings and sculptural works.

Krippner was given unrestricted access to Iti for eight months last year and her candid shots – taken at Lake Waikaremoana, in Napier, at Parliament, at her home in Karori and at Iti's house in Ruatoki – are a lush visual duvet that wraps itself around the face of Maori activism.

"I aim to tell a story with my photos and Tame has a fascinating story to tell," she says. "He was hurt deeply by the Urewera raids, but has moved on and is helping others to do the same. My photos capture a very important time in Tuhoe's history, as they transition from grievance to a future of greater opportunity and self-determination. It was a very exciting time to do this project."

Krippner, who has exhibited across Europe, met Iti through a friend and was immediately drawn to him. "I knew if I didn't ask Tame if I could photograph him, I'd regret it forever. He's an incredible man with an incredible presence and I tried to capture some of that magic."

Iti, it seems, was equally impressed

with Krippner: "I had to look at that first photo a number of times to appreciate the intricate details, but also the way Birgit captured my mood of that moment," he says. "Since then, I've fallen for her magical third eye."

Krippner, who lived in New York for eight years, whittled down thousands of images to the 25 featured in the exhibition, with the help of friend Jamie Wellford, a former international photo editor of *Newsweek* magazine. "I took my photos to Jamie's New York loft and we chose the ones that best told Tame's story. It was such a difficult process."

After the exhibition closes, she'll take the collection to San Francisco for a solo show at the Harvey Milk Photographic Centre. What does she think Americans will make of the heavily tattooed Iti?

"The fact that Tame comes from a distinctive culture shouldn't stand in the way of the impact of this exhibition and I'm hoping it may even prompt conversations about the treatment of indigenous rights, alternatives to Western capitalism and the emergence of new futures for Tuhoe and others with similar histories and challenges."

Born in Linz, in northern Austria, Krippner worked initially as a graphic designer, but found she had a natural fluency in photography. New York offered a broader canvas for her interest in capturing people on the fringes of society; when 9/11 happened, she was working nearby and spent hours walking the streets, photographing the aftermath. She and Nash, a risk management consultant, have a 10-year-old daughter, Niko, and Krippner eventually convinced Nash that his homeland was a safer place to bring up children.

As a photographer, she's always had a preference for black-and-white images, which help her "filter the noise". "Colour can distract, but black and white strips away the excess, simplifying the image and allowing it to stand on its own."

Iti runs from February 19 to March 8 at Suite Galley, 2/147 Cuba St, Wellington. **SHARON STEPHENSON**

Birgit Krippner photographed activist and artist Tame Iiti (inset) over a period of eight months for her exhibition.

