

BEYOND KIA ORA : THE PARAESTHETICS OF CHOICE¹

by George Hubbard and Robin Craw

Maori people making art can be seen as Maori artists, and art made by Maori can be seen as Maori art. One focus of 'CHOICE' is to challenge viewers' perceptions of what Maori art is or can be, and its place within New Zealand art as indigenous art.

Maori art is moving from the margins to the centre. The 1960s and 1970s saw the beginnings of theorizations about the function and nature of contemporary Maori artworks as commentators, critics and curators wrestled to make them a 'proper' object of analysis and sale within academies, art galleries and auction rooms. Maori art became a preconstituted category based on a Eurocentric notion of indigenism with Maoriness as its trademark – a cultural curiosity / commodity legitimised by the rhetoric of biculturalism.

Some artworks may have elements that suggest the content is more Maori than others. A video image of a Maori face, although hyper-real, will automatically evoke a sense of realness or of the 'real thing', having been captured by the camera. In contrast, a piece of bronze sculpture without an exterior of obvious Maori association may not be seen by the viewer, whether Maori or Pakeha, as 'Real Maori Art'.²

'Real Maori Art' is usually identified by its offering of signifying traces of a 'primitive' past. Reflected in the mirror of a supposed Maori Renaissance, classical and traditional Maori modes of representation evoke a nostalgia for the mythical golden age through accepted images of Maoriness purporting to convey the creative genius of the real Maori.

The definition of Maori art? An oppositional dichotomy that has been largely determined by its presentation in the past. Institutions and art galleries have attempted to define what Maori art is by accommodating exhibitions that, unless traditionally based and / or craft oriented, serve only to decoratively enhance the venue under a banner of dubious cultural equity.

Clinical identification by some art critics / curators of tendencies towards 'Maoriness' in recent New Zealand art, combined with a proper naming of the present as the 'Maori Renaissance', render a posthistorical perspective on Maori art problematic.³ To name 'now' as the Maori Renaissance is to seek a justification for re-presented Maori culture from within the canon of European art history. Thus the worst excesses of late 19th and early 20th century ethnological and museological theorizing upon, and about, Maori art are continued under the guise of an apparently progressive and demystified commentary, but ultimately at the expense of Maori people making art. Such an anxious discourse seeks to maintain the prescriptive myth of the primacy of the specifically Maori image / symbol / technique / theme. Critics could do us all a favour by maintaining a selective silence on this issue, before Maori art becomes merely an ethnological echo of a hyper-historicized culture.

A narrow concept of 'the ethnocentric' continues to guide the restructuring of the social and institutional arrangements surrounding the production and exhibition of Maori art. Within these constraints, historically specific forms of craft and indigenous images of spiritualized subjectivity have

controlled the construction of a Maori aesthetic. Constricting societal modes of artistic regulation have never allowed Maori artists to become more than bearers of tradition and children of nature, never more than re-presenters of the land and the past. Perhaps it is time to rework the givens of the political and theoretical analyses that surround and govern orthodox notions of 'Maoriness' in artistic practice.

On the periphery, the problems of identity and identification have become confused with survival. In reaching forward to the new, the old is merely reconstituted and reinstated through formal criteria of what constitutes Maoriness in art. In this chronic interplay of economics, ideologies and politics the Maori struggle for place, position and space within the arts and art galleries of Aotearoa becomes restricted to issues of land and tradition. Maori art is treated as a spectacle inside these new politics of bicultural representation. Consequently, familiar recurrent imagery has contributed to narrow conceptions of what Maori art is or could be.

Who decides what Maori art is ? Maori – it's a Maori
'CHOICE!'

NOTES

- 1) The term 'paraesthetics' refers to that discourse on art "for which art is a question not a given, an aesthetics in which art does not have a determined place or a fixed definition" (David Carroll, 'Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida'; Methuen, New York and London, 1987, p. xiv).
- 2) The tendency to downgrade any art by Maori artists that does not meet preconceived standards of Maoriness extends beyond fine art into musical criticism; e.g., the recent complaint that local rap act Upper Hutt Posse "doesn't rap in Maori" (G. Cartwright, review of 'Against the Flow', *Music in New Zealand*, winter 1990, p. 67).
- 3) See, for example, G. Cartwright, 'Recent Work by Tony Fomison', *Art New Zealand* 52; pp. 66–69, 1989; and F. Pound, 'Minefield and what else happened in N.Z. art in the Eighties?', *Tension* 19, pp. 83–87, 1990.