

10 Guitars

Michael Parekowhai

The exhibition *Ten Guitars* takes its name from the song by the consummate smooth crooner Engelbert Humperdinck. The fact that it is instantly recognisable (and hummable) to any New Zealand audience is a unique and somewhat freak occurrence – the song was the ‘B’ side of a genuine Humperdinck hit, and only achieved its popularity here through its selection on jukeboxes. It quickly became a party sing-along standard and, while a favourite of almost every New Zealand partygoer of recent generations, is especially well-loved by Maori. Parekowhai both celebrates and considers the deeper implications echoed in the song and its significance. The paua-inlaid guitars, handcrafted by Manganui luthier Laurie Williams, can be appreciated as beautiful objects on their own. A close look at the guitar straps reveals the word ‘Patriot’, raising complicated issues of nationhood, place and belonging.

“Ten Guitars” became popular at a complicated time in recent New Zealand race relations. In 1964, *Washday at the Pa*, a book project undertaken by photographer Ans Westra for the Department of Education, was withdrawn following complaints from the Maori Women’s Welfare League that it perpetuated stereotypes of Maori. The Department of Maori Affairs published the magazine *Te Ao Hou*, which celebrated the growth of Maori art, literature and scholarship. However, the magazine also worked to ease cultural transition and assimilation. *Don’t Let it Get You*, New Zealand’s first rock musical film, further reinforced the idea of the happy-go-lucky Maori strumming a guitar easily alongside Pakeha performers. The performance by Gitbox which is seen on video here is a reprisal of “Guitar Boogie”, a stand-out scene in the film from quintessential Maori showband the Quin-Tikis.



With this exhibition, Michael Parekowhai expresses a knowing nostalgia, if not for reality, for the representations like those in *Don’t Let it Get You*, where Maori could slip in comfortably to Pakeha culture while retaining their own sense of identity. He uses elements in the exhibition that are familiar and comfortable, but possess an underlying ambiguous edge.

Michael Parekowhai (Nga-Ariki, Ngati Whakarongo) was born in Porirua in 1968. He has exhibited extensively in New Zealand and internationally, including major exhibitions of New Zealand artists such as *Headlands* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in 1992, *Cultural Safety* which was seen at venues in Germany and New Zealand in 1995, and *The World Over*, a joint project between City Gallery, Wellington and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1996. His solo exhibitions include *Kiss the Baby Goodbye* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1994.

Michael Parekowhai lives and works in Auckland.

Ten Guitars is an Artspace touring exhibition, with support from Gow Langsford Gallery and Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa. A catalogue is available from the Gallery’s Art and Design Shop.

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Image: Kiri Te Kanawa, still from *Don’t Let It Get You* 1966. Courtesy Pacific Films Collection, New Zealand Film Archive.