
KO TE TEKAU



Michael Parekowhai

TEN GUITARS



Room 15, Windy Ridge Primary School, 1977.

The Gypsy Rover

The Gypsy Rover came over the hill
Down through the valley shady
He whistled and he sang
Till the green woods rang
And he won the heart of a lady

I was never into cars like my brother Para. I always thought owning a smart guitar would be much cooler than owning a car.

When I was at Windy Ridge Primary School – Te Kura o Te Hiwihau – I went to lunchtime guitar lessons with Mr Bryant. He was very tall with skinny legs and gangly limbs. He wore walk shorts with long socks, sandals and pastel polyester shirts with the sleeves rolled up. He was manic, like Basil Fawlty, with a wild look in his eye. He looked really seedy but kind of funny. He had a florid, slightly greasy complexion, and a nasty comb-over, which was weird since in those days it didn't seem like he was going bald. Mr Bryant played a white steel string guitar; he could make it sing like no-one else on Earth.

Mr Bryant had a guitar band and would gladly give anyone a chance to join in and play in front of the school at assembly. If you didn't know the song or couldn't make the chord changes, you could just sit out a few bars and join in again when it got to a part you knew. The players were always free to play or not at any time. And that was nice. The band practiced in a double pre-fab with the partition wide open. There would be a line of ten or twelve guitarists, another line of ukulele players, a banjo player, and people on any other stringed instruments they could find. *The Gypsy Rover* was Mr Bryant's favourite tune. It's got heaps of chord changes, and it's good practice when you're just learning.

None of my Maori friends ever bothered to come to guitar practice. They'd be outside playing bullrush or rugby or swinging off the monkey bars. Besides, most of them didn't need to practise – they could play already. Mr Bryant was a great teacher. He gave us all a lot of confidence and space. He never put pressure on us to compete or to be the best, or insist that there was any right way of playing. For him, the most important thing was playing along.

And play along we did.

Michael Parekowhai



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

Patriotism

There's a great bit in John O'Shea's 1966 New Zealand rock-road movie, *Don't Let It Get You*. A glamorous young Kiri Te Kanawa, at the dawn of her international career, sits in a Maori meeting house talking to children. Turning on a tape recorder for accompaniment, she breaks into an aria. The camera moves around her as the house of the ancestors is filled with incongruous sounds. The sequence is sexy and surreal. No one would shoot anything like that today, being only too aware of the contradictions involved in such post-colonial scenarios. Now we might be tempted to cast the aspiring diva as a victim, a detribalised person, someone separated from her cultural roots and pressed into mimicking European high culture; someone overimpressed. But in fact it could be read differently: as compelling, authoritative; as embodying a desire so wide-eyed and self-satisfied that the need to police identity need not raise its ugly head. Michael Parekowhai likes that sequence.

For his latest project, Parekowhai has created ten top-of-the-line, customised, hollow body guitars, jazzed up with paua inlays reproducing classic Maori kowhaiwhai patterns. These flashy instruments were handcrafted by Manganui luthier, Laurie Williams. The project is an obvious nod to Engelbert Humperdinck, whose song, *Ten Guitars*, is an old Maori standard, having topped their charts back in the 1960s. Maori really took this song, which promotes a utopian social ideal of playing together in harmony, to their hearts; they claimed it as their own. These days we might consider *Ten Guitars* a bicultural anthem.

I have a band of men and all they do is play for me
They come from miles around to hear them play a melody
Beneath the stars my ten guitars will play a song for you
And if you're with the one you love this is what you do
Oh... oh, dance, dance, dance, to my ten guitars
And very soon you'll know just where you are
Through the eyes of love you'll see a thousand stars
When you dance, dance, dance to my ten guitars

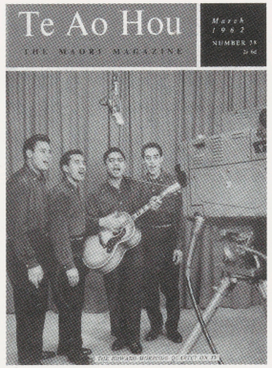
The 1960s have long been a reference point for Parekowhai – he was born in 1968. The 1950s and 1960s was the time of 'the second migration', when Maori became detribalised, leaving rural areas in massive numbers to seek work in the cities.



Michael Parekowhai, billboard for Artspace's 1994 *Changing Signs* project.







In this troubled time however the media routinely favoured images of 'the happy Maori', 'as happy as the day is long'. It is hard to know if this cliche was a patronising slur projected over Maori, or a confident face projected out by them. More likely, it was a bit of both. The 1960s was a time of complex and conflicted images of Maori – just look at the covers of *Te Ao Hou*, the Department of Maori Affairs' remarkable magazine. On the one hand the magazine represented a flowering of Maori art, literature and scholarship, on the other it was clearly intended as a means of easing transition, lubricating assimilation. Parekowhai finds vitality in such contradiction. Neither naive nor cynical, he revels in utopian images which, although mired in complexity, or perhaps because of it, remain emblems of a possible way through.

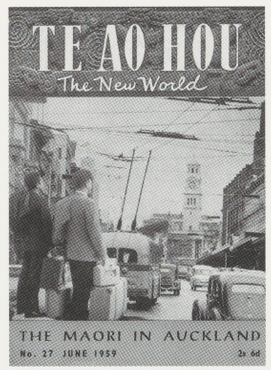
It was in the 1960s that the guitar became the ubiquitous 'happy Maori' party instrument. And the boom-chucka-boom-chucka 'Maori strum', with the strumming hand damping the strings, was certainly distinctive. A sing-along instrument, the guitar was part of the furniture, something to be passed around – joint property. You didn't have to bring one to a party, there would always be one there. It symbolised and facilitated community at a time when traditional tribal structures were giving up the ghost. It was a portable meeting house. They say mimicry occurs where colonialism has done its work, but Parekowhai would stand apart from the authenticity police who lament the Westernisation of Maori music, with old chants and ancient instruments giving way to catchy melodies, tonal harmonies and guitars. For Parekowhai it was the Maori who colonised the guitar, not the other way round – they found themselves in it.

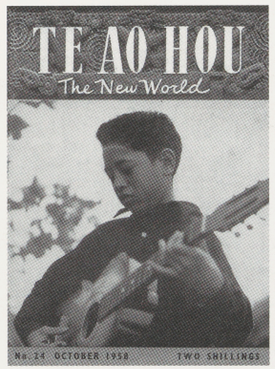
Not that the artist is oblivious to the downside of Western influence. For a 1993 billboard project, he reproduced an Ans Westra photograph of Maori kids in a classroom playing at being a rock band, with toy instruments and an Edmonds baking powder tin

on a broomstick as a microphone. Over the top he printed a John Lennon quote: 'Before Elvis there was nothing', pointing to how new ways were erasing the old. Certainly The King, who took black music and made it his own, has long been a Maori favourite, and Parekowhai himself does a mean Elvis.

In the 1960s, the model of the successful Maori – the Maori 'done good' – was the performer, be it as entertainer (Kiri Te Kanawa and Howard Morrison) or athlete (particularly rugby players like Waka Nathan). But the idea of performance is not entirely innocent. As Maori were dispossessed of their lands, their culture was steadily reified as a pageant, given a commodity form in the concert party and as the Maori show band, where difference was transformed into spectacle. There's a concern for performance in Parekowhai's showing here, the consummate crafting of the guitars, their presentation as top-of-the-range, export quality.

It's interesting to compare Parekowhai's luxury instruments with the basic acoustic guitar, incised with kowhaiwhai patterns, that turns up in this year's movie *What Becomes of The Broken Hearted*, the sequel *to Once Were Warriors*. This guitar appears at a crucial juncture, being implicated in the moment of Jake Heke's redemption, the fireside sing-song that marks his return to the community. Parekowhai's *Ten Guitars* also evokes this possibility of community – we're all 'with the band.' The big difference is that his instruments are flash. They are the apotheosis of the *Broken Hearted* guitar – what it might dream of being. Such instruments are usually one-offs, made for star performers, entertainers, name artists. But here, it's like everyone in the band gets one. While unique, with distinct patterns and individually numbered off in paua in Maori on the fretboards, they also imply a team.







Overleaf: Michael Parekowhai, *Ten Guitars* 1999 installed at Artspace, Auckland.





Still from *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted* 1999.

Not that Parekowhai is mindlessly warm-fuzzy about community. Branding the guitars 'Patriot' on their machine heads brings a range of contradictory associations, complicating a simplistically utopian reading. Patriotism implies fighting for ones country or creed, in that flag-waving, hand-on-heart, white bread, country music, way. It also refers specifically to the American Patriot missile – echoed in the guitars' missile-shaped cases. This high tech device – supposedly a defensive weapon for the greater good – is used to destroy the enemy's missiles mid flight, most successfully in the Gulf War. We are used to the idea of weapons concealed in instrument cases, but here guitars are concealed within missile cases, perhaps recalling American folk singer Woody Guthrie's guitar, which bore the inscription, 'This machine kills fascists'. If patriotism insists on belonging, it also requires an other, the possibility of not belonging: one person's Patriot is another's Traitor. So the utopian image of Humperdinck's happy band playing together is also tainted, politicised – us and them.

But there is another sense in which patriotism operates here. As T J McNamara put it in a review of the Artspace show: 'You have to take out a mental subscription to this kind of art, but once you are a subscriber, the possibilities are endless.' It is as though the artist were inviting us to become patriots of the guitars themselves, asking us to subscribe to their implicit utopian possibilities, to take them as our treaty, our founding document, our meeting house.

The *Guitars* are accompanied by a second installation, which also takes its name from an old popular song. *The Bosom of Abraham* is an arcade of fourteen kowhaiwhai pattern lightboxes, a generic meeting house. Traditionally the meeting house is where the tribe details and asserts its identity, but it is also where locals and outsiders are made one through a sequence of protocols, a cultural airlock of sorts. Parekowhai's meeting house does without the most tribally specific aspects – the carvings of ancestors; those features that make it, in the first instance, someone's place and not another's. In fact the kowhaiwhai patterns from the rafters have migrated down to take the place of the carvings. Further the two kowhaiwhai patterns Parekowhai uses are among the most well-known, which, rather than defining a particular quality within Maori culture, today simply indicate Maoriness. Like the *Guitars*, this is a make-shift modern meeting place for all.

Parekowhai has long engaged the Duchampian idea that the viewer completes the art work. Previous sculptures were based on letter blocks, toys, games and kitset models, implying that the viewer might physically manipulate the work. Similarly, the guitars long to be played. Resting silent on their raisers, they await the band of men who will coax them to life, deliver up a possibility latent within them. Play isn't simply implied;



Howard Morrison, still from *Don't Let It Get You* 1966. Courtesy Pacific Films Collection, New Zealand Film Archive.

Overleaf: Michael Parekowhai, lightboxes from *The Bosom of Abraham,* 1999, installed at Auckland Art Gallery.







Michael Parekowhai, stills from *Gitbox Performing Guitar Boogie on Ten Guitars* 1999.

there have been and will be performances. The project opened with a performance by the guitar orchestra, Gitbox, reprising the Quin-Tikis' number *Guitar Boogie* from *Don't Let It Get You*. A pick up band also played *Guitar Boogie* at Queensland Art Gallery for the 1999 Asia-Pacific Triennial. And more performances are planned. The choice of *Guitar Boogie* is pointed. A Teddy Boy 'Maori show band', the Quin Tikis exemplified the play-together spirit *Ten Guitars* quite literally. In *Don't Let It Get You* we see one player picking and another fingering the notes on the same guitar, coordinated in a virtuoso show.

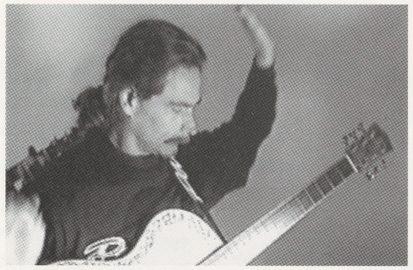
The guitars are also commodities. The artist insists they be split up, sold off as individuals, available to collectors, museums and musicians alike. So the guitars have potentially different destinies: one may be played in church or by Neil Finn, another kept in a glass case. However there is always the possibility – and intention – that they be reunited, played together again at a different time and place, bringing their subsequent histories with them. A reunion gig. The idea of *return* is crucial. For Parekowhai's *Ten Guitars* is nostalgic for a time when Maori, at least in representations like *Don't Let It Get You*, could believe in both putting differences aside and retaining their selves.

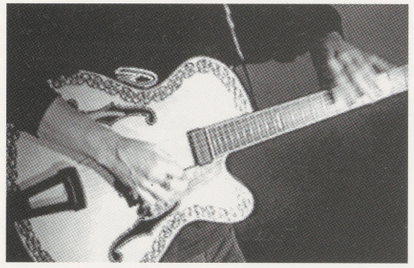
Robert Leonard

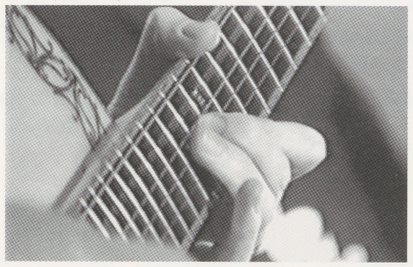
Robert Leonard is director of Artspace, Auckland.











Michael Parekowhai

b.1968, Porirua
Nga-Ariki, Ngati Whakarongo

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1993
A Capella Gregory Flint Gallery, Auckland.

1994
Kiss the Baby Goodbye Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton.

1997
Recent Paintings Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.

1998
Recent Paintings Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch.

1999
Kitset Cultures Djamu Gallery, Sydney.

Ten Guitars Artspace, Auckland.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1990
Light'arted Artspace, Auckland.

CHOICE! Artspace, Auckland.

Kohia ko Taikaka Anake National Art Gallery, Wellington.

1991
Cross-Pollination Artspace, Auckland.

Light Sensitive Artspace, Auckland.

1992
Headlands Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; National Art Gallery, Wellington.

W.A.R.: Whatu Aho Rua Tandanya Gallery, Adelaide.

Hit Parade Wellington City Art Gallery.

Vogue / Vague CSA Gallery, Christchurch.

Homemade Home Wellington City Art Gallery.

1993
Stop Making Sense City Gallery, Wellington.

International Festival of the Arts Wellington.

Shared Pleasures Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton.

After After McCahon Cubewell House, Wellington.

1994
Changing Signs Artspace, Auckland.

Localities of Desire Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Art Now Museum of New Zealand, Wellington.

1995
Korurangi Auckland Art Gallery.

The Nervous System Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

Cultural Safety Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt; Ludwig Forum, Aachen; City Gallery, Wellington; Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton.

1996
'Here I Give Thanks' Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

The World Over City Gallery, Wellington; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

1998
Dream Collectors Te Papa, Wellington; Auckland Art Gallery.

1999
Home and Away Auckland Art Gallery.

Taonga Mauri Art Station, Auckland.

The Promotor Auckland.

Beyond the Future: The Fourth Asia-Pacific Triennial Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

Who Do I Think I Am Artspace, Auckand.

PUBLICATIONS

1990
George Hubbard and Robin Craw 'Beyond Kia Ora: The Paraesthetics of *Choice!*' *Antic 8*. p28.

Steven Zepke 'Difference Without Binary Oppositions: A Chance for *Choice!*' *Antic 8*. p29.

1991
Robert Leonard 'Against Purity: Three Word Sculptures by Michael Parekowhai' *Art New Zealand 59*. pp52-54.

1992
Robert Leonard 'Mod Cons' *Headlands* Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; National Art Gallery, Wellington. pp161-172.

Rangi Panoho *W.A.R.: Whatu Aho Rua* Tandanya Gallery, Adelaide.

Michael Parekowhai, front and back covers, *Midwest 3*.

1994
Lara Strongman and Robert Leonard *Kiss the Baby Goodbye* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton.

Allan Smith 'Michael Parekowhai: Kiss the Baby Goodbye' *Art New Zealand 72*. pp64-65.

Wystan Curnow 'Michael Parekowhai' *Art and Text 49*. pp82-83.

Localities of Desire Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Robert Leonard 'Perverse Homages' *Planet 13*. pp78-79.

Art Now Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, 1994.

1995
The Nervous System Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

Cultural Safety Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt; City Gallery, Wellington.

1996
Korurangi Auckland Art Gallery.

The World Over Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; City Gallery, Wellington.

1998
Dream Collectors Te Papa, Wellington; Auckland Art Gallery. pp154-155.

1999
Jim and Mary Barr 'The Indefinite Article' *Art Asia Pacific 23*. pp72-76.

Maud Page *Kitset Cultures* Djamu Gallery, Sydney.

Gregory Burke 'Michael Parekowhai' *Home and Away: Contemporary Australian and New Zealand Art from the Chartwell Collection* (ed. William McAloon) Auckland Art Gallery, in association with David Bateman, Auckland, 1999. pp58-59.

Robert Leonard 'Michael Parekowhai: Ten Guitars' *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial* Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. pp100-101.

Michael Parekowhai, pagework, *Pavement 37*. pp190-191.

Checklist

Ten Guitars 1999
guitars, cases, straps, raisers
guitars each 1040 x 430 x 130 mm

Gitbox Performing Guitar Boogie on Ten Guitars 1999
video, directed by Karen McKenzie for Backch@t
2 minutes 35 seconds

The Bosom of Abraham 1999
screenprinted vinyl on fluorescent light housings
14 units, each 1245 x 215 x 70 mm

Itinerary

Artspace, Auckland, August 1999

Asia-Pacific Triennial Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane,
September 1999 – January 2000

City Gallery, Wellington, May – June 2000

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, July – August 2000

Dunedin Public Art Gallery, September – October 2000

Ten Guitars

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