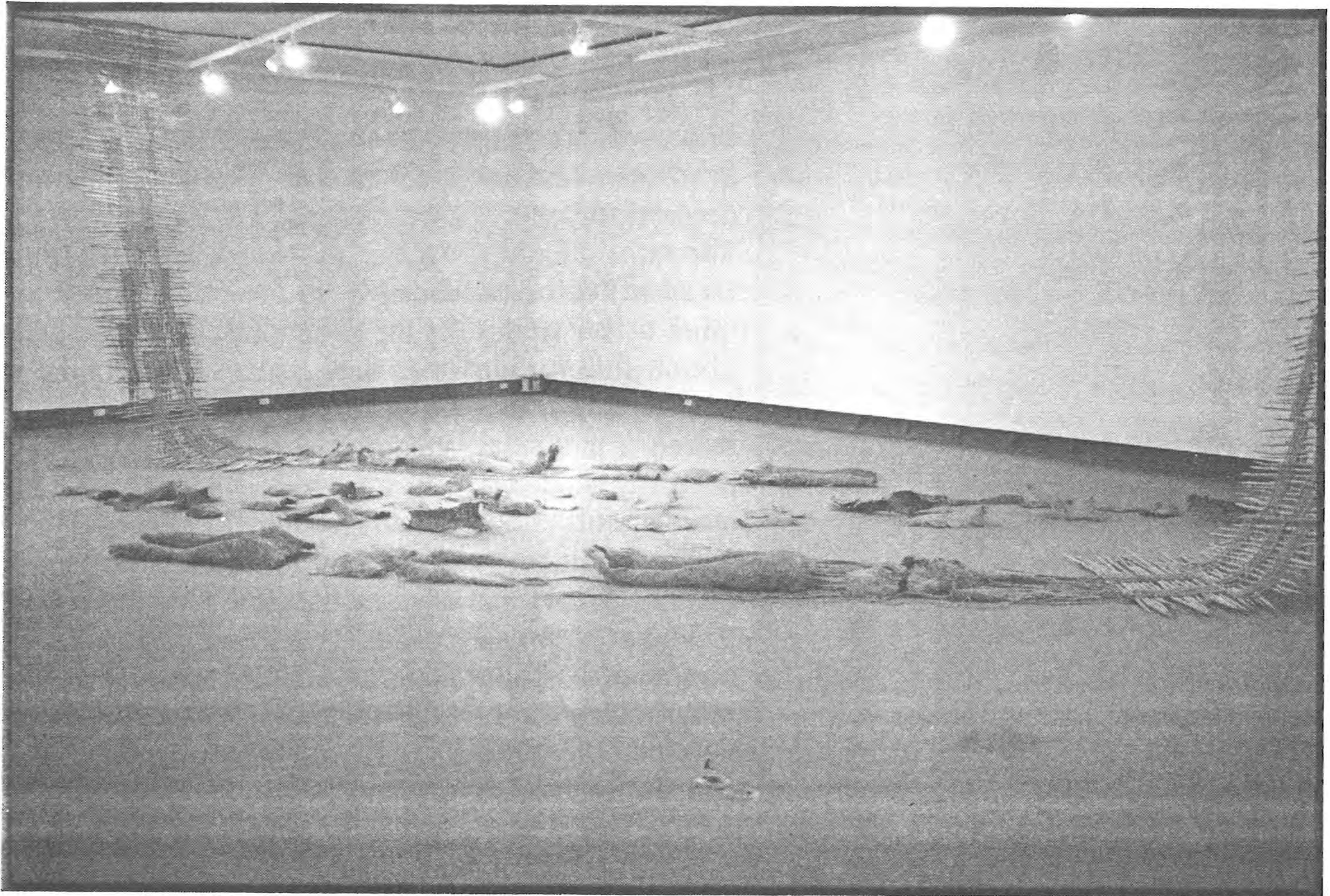


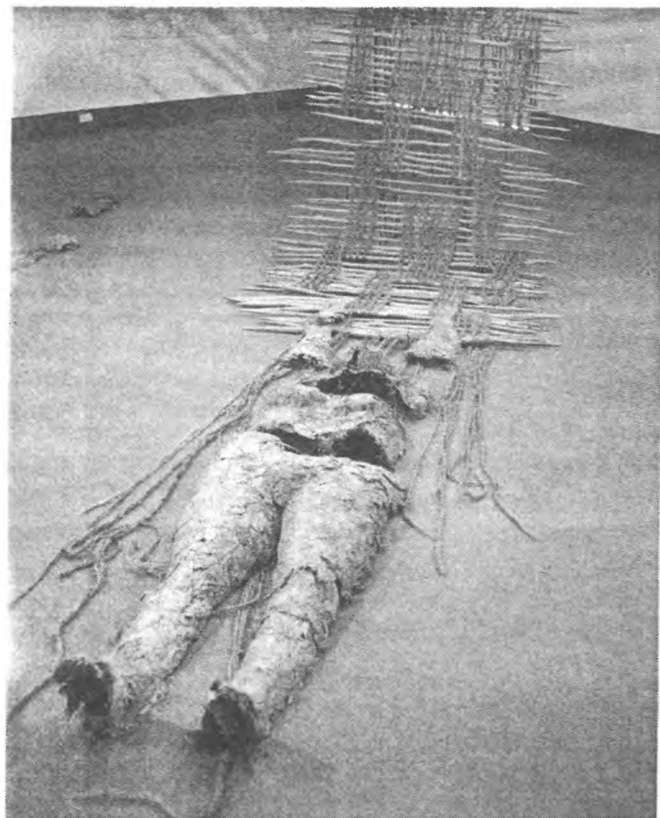
THE CICADA TREE

SHONA RAPIRA DAVIES

Friday 4 November - Sunday 4 December 1994

FISHER GALLERY
13b Reeves Road,
PO Box 51 222, Pakuranga, Manukau City,
Aotearoa New Zealand.
Phone (09) 576 9999
fax (09) 576 7290

Fisher Gallery sponsors: Manukau City Council, Levene and Co Ltd, Air New Zealand, ECC Lighting



SHONA RAPIRA DAVIES
(Ngati Wai)
& IRIHAPETI RAMSDEN
(Ngai Tahu, Rangitane)

Irihapeti: We've got almost no knowledge about traditional birth customs really, or a very limited view, and a lot of it we're making up now as we go along. That's ok, that's a reconstruction of culture. In traditional culture there were hard times, times not to be sentimental about. I think in those days you had very few deaths from child birth, because women with the bad pelvises died and there were no daughters born with bad pelvises. Its only with the new genes, back into our make-up that we're beginning to get funny pelvises through again. Societies like ours, which were isolated, didn't have too difficult a time with birth. We know that, like other traditional societies, the women giving birth had ways to squat and ways to lean. Essentially babies went in the same way and they came out the same way! Our family midwife delivered my mother and my grandmother, helped me with mine, and she was in her 90s. She was able to give us our obstetric history, that's the important thing. She never ever lost a baby, but she said they all had good pelvises. So child birth was not the kind of unusual traumatic thing.

Shona Rapira Davies: I've heard quite a few stories about infanticide and abortions, and there's a particular plant, my aunty told me about, that induces abortion.

IR: Our people did practise induced abortion and infanticide. Every culture has done this. There were certain very tapu things around miscarriage. If you've got a small society, people couldn't be having babies at the wrong time of year when there wasn't enough kai and the mothers weren't in condition. Also they wanted to have their babies in the spring time, so that they would have a summer baby. People then, because their diet was often so poor, couldn't ovulate below a certain fat level in their bodies as well. They were hard times.

SRD: Another thing my aunty told me, there were few babies born, we didn't have hundreds of children, only two or three. They were spaced, like every four or five years, because the baby fed off the mother, right up until they were four or five years old she said.

IR: My grandfather said he was still on the tit when he was nine, he used to come home from school, have a drink, hop back over the fence! Also, all those practical considerations - like when you were mobile you couldn't carry that many babies. And say you did get into a bit of strife and somebody was having a go at you, you needed to be able to move children fast, so they didn't have hordes. All those matters were taken into account, and the old people practised their own forms of contraception, with lactation, and also they had abstinence rules. They'd been doing it for twelve hundred years, and three thousand before that in the Pacific - they knew how to run their society.

By the same token they adored the ones they had. The accounts of missionary Pakeha all mentioned the attitude, particularly of Maori men, towards young children. What the Pakeha called 'indulging them.' They were allowed to do almost anything because kids throughout Polynesia were hard to get and keep alive. But now some of us are belting them, physically and sexually abusing them, and emotionally abusing them...

SRD: And using words like 'bastard' and all the really heavy negative esteem-knocking words. We do that a lot of the time.

I started out talking to you about women having control over life and death but that was maybe in a pre-European Maori society. I don't think it's like that now. Now we have our babies in hospitals, and a lot of our people go into hospitals to die and they get taken away by undertakers, so we have lost power over all the sort of things that used to be part of our make-up.

IR: In the 1896 census there were approximately 39,000 Maori in the whole country. The life expectancy of Maori women was 23 years; 24 to 27 for men. Only one in five Maori infants would survive in the first year of life. Infants were dying of starvation, infectious fevers, mothers of childbirth fever, there was small pox around, there was bubonic plague here, all of those came from overseas. Now at contact our people appeared to live to be much older and there was no mortality like that for infants. In 1935 the life expectancy of Maori was 39 years. There was no proactive attempt to help Maori health, we got dragged along on the coat tails of the Pakeha, so to speak, until the Maori doctors intervened. We were poor and the poor were always considered to be dirty. And some Pakehas say cleanliness is next to godliness, and godliness and cleanliness were mixed up with each other. I think we as Maori have to watch whether our values are Maori, or are they values of poverty.

SRD: Being Maori and being poor, people now think that it's synonymous.

IR: So really since 1896, or well before that, we've never had many old people.

SRD: My grandfather died when he was 35 and my grandmother died when she was in her 50s. My mother died at 55.

IR: My grandmother died at 43 and my mother at 32. Tuberculosis.Everything, every single thing that we ever do in 1994, has been influenced by the colonial experience. And the issue is to reclaim culture, but in reclaiming it we have to redefine it, because we actually haven't got much accurate information. One reason is that so many died, and the ones who didn't die were into surviving. Pakeha rewrote our story.

I think it was a well regulated society, you've got highly civilised people who know what they're doing about the world. But the issue is not about what did they do, because I don't think we'll ever completely find out. The issue really is to get the power to define how we want to do it again. There were traditions and rituals and things, some of which we'll never know again. And there's no reason why we can't make them up for today. If we can't reclaim it, we can simply re-weave it. Why not? There are sufficient threads for us to re-weave something strong. The issue is for us to have the power to do that. Not somebody else telling us.

We've not got much to replace it with yet. Like there's no point telling our people not to sing hymns if we can't give them other spiritual songs to sing. And they'll keep singing hymns and practising imported religious rites, they want to do something to express their wairua and if we don't find something else, some other way to do it, they'll stick with Christian hymns. I've moved away totally from Christianity now, but as soon as they start singing all the hymns and I know all the words, I always sing, really sing. But I won't say amen! They're all going 'amen', not me, because that's 'so be it', and I don't want it to be it at all! That's my way of compromising, but I can't resist singing with them!

SRD: That's exactly right, the sound and the feeling that is poured into those words and the power is extraordinary. This is part of our remaking ourselves.

IR: We've got to offer ourselves something else. We've got to make imagery that our people can identify with and let the other colonial imagery go.

SRD: A thing that I see being taken over, is taking the pito and the whenua and burying it.

IR: The Pakeha are starting to like that now! Its a lovely idea. It's nice to weave culture around something, but that's our choice, and it's a lovely thing that's been left from the old times that we can do, its one of the things that distinguishes us from other people.

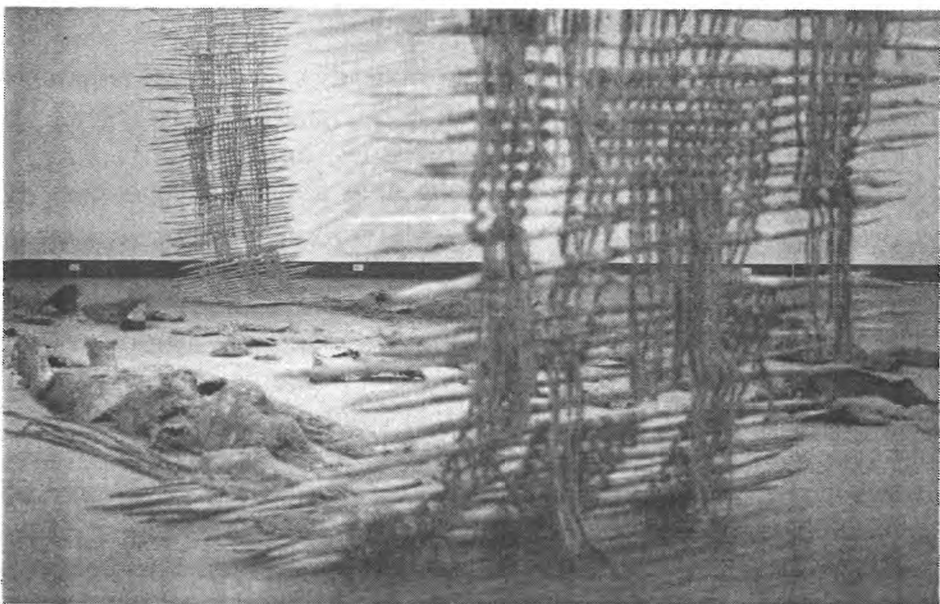
SRD: I must admit I'd rather fight with Europeans than fight with my own, cause with my own it can just be quite devastating.

IR: Well, they try those games. I met a couple of prominent Maori men the other day and I went to hongi with them and they said, "Oh no no, we don't do that stuff," and I said, "You do with Maori men." And they said, "Oh we kiss." I said, "Do you two Maori men kiss?" "No". "Well hongi." They avoided it like anything but I went plunk plunk on both their faces. Their attitude comes from colonial attitudes toward women. It should be foreign to us.

The hongi is the most privileged form of greeting and it's so elegant to look at, you share mauri and you make a choice to give your tapu head to somebody, that's a big choice. It's really a big choice and it's an honourable thing and its a thing that recognises the mana of the other person.

SRD: We've talked a lot on birth and life, but I'm actually finding it quite difficult to talk about death.

IR: Oh death, death is normal, nothing more normal, and I like the way we handle death, and I am not



afraid when my own death comes, it's the how of dying not death itself which interests me.

SRD: I'd love to be buried in a cave.

IR: Well your people always have been. And so have ours, though only our heads go in the cave, the bodies go down the blowhole or else they get cremated, we cremated ours.

SRD: In the final analysis actually, we don't get a say anyway! The good thing about it is that in the end it's decided by the family. I might say that I want this and that and that, but its not going to happen. Those things will be taken over by the whanau.

IR: In the traditional cultures, the issue was to save the bones, you know that's why we didn't cremate some people. But with us they saved the heads because they were tapu, and the rest of them got burnt or you just weighted them and put them down the blow hole. Important people got their heads saved.

Our creation stories from the South are quite different from the North, but we've still got the same taking-off story, you know, it doesn't differ very much at all, what we do is the same, the route to Reinga is exactly the same.

SRD: When my dad did the poroporoaki, he's really funny my dad, never said anything all the way through, until the body went down, and then he started the poroporoaki, you know the one that makes your hairs stand on end. The most extraordinary feeling.

IR: I'm always interested in tangihanga, I love watching different types of tangi. We were home recently our cousin died, she was only 44, too young, and again the health service couldn't cope with her needs because her needs were about being Maori in the colonial society. I was angry at her death, but it was interesting, because our last native speaker died about two years ago at home - we've got no native born speakers left now, only second language speakers. We are busy reclaiming our reo and our dialect but it takes time.

Anyway my cousin was a Mormon, the family is Mormon but we had all the flavours there as usual. They all got up and did their thing and they had a little mihi because they knew hardly anybody spoke Maori. There were two or three hundred at the funeral, the only one who got up and went on and on and on in the reo, embarrassed and humiliated many, hardly anybody heard a bloody word he was saying, was the Pakeha Roman Catholic priest. Thank goodness nobody could understand him, because he couldn't evangelise them!

But what that said too me is that he doesn't know the people, he doesn't care about them, what he cared about was showing off that he could do this, he humiliated them. I thought, right, my cousin's dead in her box because of people like you who are dominating, colonising, controlling, managing, not thinking about the outcomes. I went round to find him, and have a go at him, but he'd taken off.

It always intrigues me at tangi, the power plays and all the family things. The biggest one of course is who goes, why are they there, everybody says you really know the measure of the person when you have their tangi. At home at our tangihanga, as soon as they hear there's a tangi all the polytech language speakers come in and they all stand there and "Apiti hono, tatai hono..." There's the big ones, and thin ones and Pakeha ones and round ones and they walk in and they've got tokotoko bigger than themselves. Terrible! But our people are hospitable and you don't stop anyone from coming to the tangi. And they come and practice all over us, and I'm the only one who usually gets wild. How dare they, you know, why should they come and inflict all that on us and then leave us cold. They say it's respectful to the dead, but it does not respect the living. We don't know them and we never see them again.

SRD: That doesn't happen at home!

IR: But death, of course, death, fundamentally changes everything it touches. And our recent history has been one of death, death, death, death all the time. And the thing that motivates me to do a lot of things are unnecessary deaths, I don't resent death when it occurs after a reasonable life, you know. Or when it seems somebody's invested enough in their life or when you know that there's some reason to it. We're starting to get old people again, but many are non native speaking, they come from a different world many of them. We're into the next generations now coming up on the paepae. You watch Maori men who won't go to things now because they know they're in the age group, their hair is white and they're expected to speak and they are unable. It's not their fault. There are going to be profound changes to the culture.

Now we see a young university trained Maori getting up on the paepae before their fathers and uncles. It's very very sad, but it's demographically understandable. And the egos! Untrained 35 year olds, out the front doing their thing, and men, their fathers, opening the mussels out the back and doing the spuds! That's a generalisation. There are lots of other places which are about packed with native speakers who are very comfortable culturally.

We will sort it out though, that's what culture is all about. What needs to be understood is the tremendous diversity of being Maori and the range of ways our people cope with the major issues of birth, life and death. And our insistence on keeping our cultural practices alive, our way.

Edited by Jonathan Dennis. 1994.