

## Te Tirohanga Hou

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In our concept of time we cannot separate ourselves from our ancestors or the generation in front of us. Our past is our future, and also our present, like the eternal circle. This concept is very important to the weaver, who sees herself as a repository, linking the knowledge of the past with that of the future.

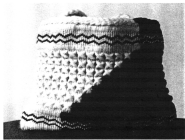
ERENORA PUKETAPU-HETET<sup>1</sup>

*Te Tirohanga Hou* was more than an exhibition of contemporary Maori weaving from the Waikato based group Toi Aringa. It was the result of discussions between the Fisher Gallery, Owairoa Marae and Toi Aringa, a project to formalise the relationship between gallery and iwi. The nature of Toi Aringa's work corresponds with the gallery's commitment as a contemporary art museum serving to project an alternative art vision. *Te Tirohanga Hou* importantly also sought a place for Toi Aringa to present an alternative view on weaving to create a material expression relating to contemporary Maori experience.

The art of weaving is an expression of whakapapa (genealogy), a language of skill and tradition that breathes life into the works. The connection with ancestors extends to the connection with the land, Papatuanuku, the intrinsic bond that shapes Maori society. The art of weaving can be metaphorically described by the process in which the harakeke blades (phormium tenax) are cut from the plant. The weaver is careful not to cut the rito (young shoot in the middle) or the awhi rito (two blades on either side of the rito). This process ensures the survival of the plant, securing the future of the art. We can view all Maori weaving as connected to this central idea. The work may take different forms and incorporate

different materials but the mauri remains. The Te Papa exhibition of Maori weaving *Pu Mānū* (1993) explored this metaphor, combining traditional weaving with contemporary weaving, incorporating artists working within the 'fine arts' arena such as Maureen Lander and Jacqueline Fraser. As Megan Tamati-Quennell points out in her catalogue essay, the development of weaving is 'too new to be supported by those art galleries and museums who continue to perpetuate the idea that anything truly Maori stopped in the 1920s . . . too traditional or staid for the art gallery aesthetic.'<sup>2</sup>

Our popular view of Maori art has been shaped in relatively recent times. The Maori Renaissance of the 1960s asserted Maori identity in a seemingly fragmented, progressively urban Maori existence. While this process heightened the profile of the 'traditional', it also served to alienate the non-traditional as not authentic, as 'pseudo' Maori. This artificial, static view of the Maori world divided the past, present and future, attempting to capture an



irretrievable pre-colonial Maori culture. This initiated a swing back to traditional weaving and a move away from the more figurative patterns such as fern leaves and kiwis and experimentation with materials that had evolved in the first half of this century. By contrast, the range of weaving documented in earlier colonial times is testimony to the innovation of nineteenth century Maori. With the introduction of previously unavailable fibres such as wool, weavers quickly incorporated the new materials into new types of garments such as ngore (a cloak ornamented with pom poms). The korowai (cloak ornamented with black rolled cords) rose to prominence between 1830 and 1850 and as a versatile garment, lent itself to great experimentation. By the 1840s coloured wool had become a fully integrated element in the design and weaving of the classic korowai.<sup>1</sup>

Another example is the use of the kete muka which was developed in response to tourist demand but is now considered a traditional art and functional form.<sup>4</sup> Nineteenth century weaving practices demonstrate a living vitality. This understanding underpins the kaupapa of Toi Aringa. Material culture explains who we are and what our contemporary experience is—for art to reflect this experience it must keep evolving and growing, to imagine that even traditional Maori culture is static denies the dynamics that characterise Maori society.

Toi Aringa was founded as a contemporary group working in a non-traditional framework. The group grew from a Toi Harakeke class tutored by Rama Kete. The philosophy of the group is a reflection of Rama Kete's belief in making weaving accessible to all ages, all iwi, all levels of experience. The group reflects an urban Maori experience. It is non-marae, non-iwi based. Rama also instills a belief in the group that all work is valuable and does not give status to older weavers, rather the emphasis is on encouraging and promoting emerging weavers. The group work together on individual pieces making them collaborative works with each person bringing skills to the collective. In the exhibition, the group requested that no works were attributed to individuals. The title of the show *Te Tirohanga Hou*—meaning 'new vision' expresses the wairua of the weaving and the kaupapa of collective production.

Toi Aringa's principle aim is to retain the essence of the art of weaving while pushing at the boundaries of the weaving framework.

The domestic element of Toi Aringa's work finds a common thread that runs through the history of women's art. Common concerns such as availability of materials, cost, time and space demand innovative, practical solutions. Through necessity the group developed an experimental, pragmatic approach to problems they were encountering; experimenting with the microwave provided a fast method for drying flax, shearing combs for sizing and pet combs for stripping the para to reveal the muka.

Availability is a key factor to the group's method. The group does weave in traditional fibres such as

muka but also experiments with non traditional fibres which provide the opportunity to produce works without the time consuming constraints of preparing traditional fibres. Utilitarian domestic objects find new life as works of great beauty. The group uses mop string to make garments traditionally made from flax. The feathers used by Toi Aringa are from imported feather dusters. Without a source of native feathers, the group sources materials that provide practical, affordable solutions. In the same way our tipuna added wool fibres to their weaving to enhance the vibrancy of their work, Toi Aringa also experiments with colour. The natural muka fibre responds well to dyeing, holding the artificial brilliant colours achieved with commercial dyes such as Dylon. An intricately woven kie kie whariki (wall mounted time chart) titled *Te Tirohanga Hou* encapsulates the possibilities achievable with colour. The piece runs from natural undyed colours with representations of the Marae, the Maunga, the Waka, the Awa, the Iwi and the Taha Wairua, into a spectrum of colour. Reds run into purples, back into reds running into oranges, through to acidic greens, into a sky of different blues.

The garments woven by Toi Aringa also extend outside the perimeters of traditional designs. *Te Tirohanga Hou* included garments for children experimenting with scale, colour and materials. One

(continued on page 86)



## REVERIE AND PHANTASMAGORIA

(continued from page 59)

Pick dates her solo career from 1991 when she began exhibiting at the Brooke | Gifford Gallery. I remember seeing that first exhibition. The paintings were large figurative works with mythological themes and subjects, predominantly female, evidently an attempt at a sort of restocking of the mythic pastures. Since about 1994 there has been a steady, confident evolution on a number of fronts, both technical and expressive. Mythology has been abandoned in favour of a more personal iconography. Her work is still 'personal'—diaristic, confessional, are words commentators have used—but meaning is as much withdrawn, erased, obscured, deflected and dream-altered as it is transparently 'confessional'. Her 1995 comment is still pertinent.

Many artists pour much of their 'selves' into their art. It's hardly surprising given the long hours in the studio week after week which must lie behind a year's output like Pick's. She is playing out her life and breath onto the canvas in front of her—what else does a busy artist have to work on than as some level 'the self'. Colin McCahon had wise words to say on this subject in 1972: 'My painting is almost entirely autobiographical—it tells you where I am at any given time, where I am living and the direction I am pointing in.'<sup>10</sup> I suspect Pick might agree with this, so long as the 'autobiographical' is not confused with the 'confessional'.

It is impossible for artists to communicate all the intimacies of their personal lives to strangers, and pointless to try to trace paintings to their autobiographical source. In Pick's case the hint of the confessional entices the viewer into a world of intimate cries and whispers, but the communication is baffled and ambiguous. It certainly doesn't resolve itself into anything resembling a 'story', though there are hints and suggestions which can be picked up on. You would have to be pretty blind not to infer that the ups and downs of human relationships, including sexual relationships, are important to Pick, or that childhood, travel, and the history of art are other experiences which shape her practice. What is more important is what the artist as painter makes of her experiences and what in turn the viewer makes of the images which the artist has produced, with whatever impulsion autobiographical and otherwise.

Pick's big year in 1998 confirmed that she is much more than the creator of a recognisable style which quickly catches on and might just as quickly fade. Hers is a robust talent that is rapidly maturing. A more expansive (and structural) use of colour, and a deepening interest in character and personality—both at the psychological and technical (painterly) level (as in the Bill Hammondish *Can One Dismiss Hats as Simple Things*)—are perhaps portents of things to come. A talent which looked deep and narrow on first acquaintance is proving to have the range, staying power, and capacity for growth of the best practitioners.

1. Kapka Kassabova, 'Disembodiment: when in the dark', in *Disembodiment*, Auckland University Press, Auckland 1998.
2. Since 1994 Pick has generally held at least three solo shows per year, usually in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland.
3. Seraphine Pick's test *A Painting You Can Wear* was included in the catalogue for *Unveiled*, Wellington City Gallery, Wellington 1995.
4. Pick's pale yellow in predominantly monochrome black-and-white environments is also close to the role (if not the shade) of yellow in some late McCahons, such as the majestic *Blind* sequence of paintings usefully reassembled recently by Wyrstan Currow and Robert Leonard for the McCahon Room in the Auckland Art Gallery. The same yellow is also an element in *Flight of the Shining Cuckoo* (Hocken Library). In McCahon, yellow is most likely to signify dawn or 'resurrection'.
5. It is evident from looking at Pick's files that this element has been developing for some time, as for example in a series called *Looking Like Somebody Else*, of which, incidentally, there are a few examples on the internet (type Seraphine Pick into your Alta Vista search engine).
6. *A Painting You Can Wear*.
7. Pick was represented in *Shawiters and Earthlovers* by one of her largest paintings *Why? Why Not?* (1997).
8. These sentences incorporate some details from a conversation with Seraphine Pick in December 1998.
9. *Paintings and Drawings*, Brooke | Gifford Gallery, 1991.
10. Colin McCahon: *A Survey Exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland 1972, p. 26.

## TE TIROHANGA HOU

(continued from page 60)

ensemble (Toi) included trousers, vest, and hat woven in mōpstrung with muka cords and feathers. Another outfit (Uenuku) consisted of a bright technicoloured korowai constructed from muka and embroidery cotton with taaniko border and matching trousers in mōpstrung with coloured muka cords. The scale aspect was heightened when the garments were worn by children in the presentation evening held the evening prior to the exhibition opening. The catalyst for the exhibition and show was the production of a kakahu for Tainui kaumatua Mick Ratu, and is a symbol of Toi Aringa's appreciation of the support and teaching given by both he and his wife Maggie Ratu. This pureki, woven from flax, muka and cabbage tree was worn on the presentation evening by the eighty year old kaumatua it was made for. These works were worn as physical expressions of Maori prestige and pride.

In this exhibition Toi Aringa claims a contemporary space, both physical as in the gallery space and as part of the evolution of fibre art. Contemporary use of fibre ranges from the traditional to non traditional, both art forms woven together by a shared history, both as legitimate and authentic as the other. Toi Aringa meets the challenge of weaving past with present using materials accessible in their domestic surroundings. Not a new story but a new chapter, adding to the multiplicity of expression in the diverse range of Maori arts.

1. On the kaupapa of weaving published in *Mataora—The Living Face, Contemporary Maori Art*, edited by Sandy Adsett & Cliff Whiting, David Bateman, Auckland 1996, p.123.
2. Megan Tarnati-Quennell, *Pi Mana—A Celebration of Wharu, Raranga and Taitoko*, Te Papa, Wellington 1993, p. 8.
3. Mick Pendergrast, 'The Fibre Arts' in *Maori: Art and Culture*, David Bateman, Auckland 1996, p.115.
4. Mick Pendergrast, *Te Aho Tapu—The Sacred Thread, Traditional Maori Weaving*, Reed Methuen, Auckland 1987, p.129.