

the
cameo project

dave stewart
there are no straight
lines in culture

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Dave Stewart carves out a statement about hybridity

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Dave Stewart: *There are no Straight Lines in Culture*, maquette, 2003

This sculpture works as a scale model, not just of a canoe, but of the huge debate about race relations issues in New Zealand. This strong little wooden canoe carries as its cargo some of the central issues about what it means to be a New Zealander, here, and now.

In the 'politically correct' climate of New Zealand in the 1980s, liberal Pakeha wrestled with their respect for indigenous culture, alongside their own hunt for a coherent identity as Pakeha, basically a geographically distant offshoot of Anglo-Celtic culture. The Springbok Tour in 1981 was stimulus for this debate, hotly followed by Donna Awatere's *Maori Sovereignty*, which questioned whether Pakeha had any culture at all. Certainly even finding a collective name for all white New Zealanders of European descent has not resulted in a consensus. The debate surged on, with various writers fuelling the debate, expunging white liberal guilt, and popping bone carvings around their necks. In those days there was a drive to accept and celebrate diversity and difference; and to remind Pakeha of their status as colonisers, revised to read as deferential to First Peoples. Globally, First Nations activism established the tone of this discourse. Liberal (mostly postwar baby-boomer educated, white) New Zealanders fell into line. They had marched against Vietnam, struggled for women's rights and been arrested during the tour riots. Now it was time to attend to the rights of the tangatawhenua.

Twenty years on, at the beginning of the new century, an internationally growing acceptance of the values of hybridity has opened up identity categories to diversity and fluidity; a distancing from the racist and deterministic connotations of essentialism, in which identity overlays biology. But identity politics in New Zealand makes the wide acceptance of hybrid identities difficult. For a start, hybridity can look suspiciously like Pakeha assimilation of Maori culture. Besides, the careful rhetoric of biculturalism cannot easily accommodate hybrid, Maori and Pakeha, identities.

Dave Stewart's carved canoe sits in this context. Defiant of politically correct apportioning of aspects of the culture he grew up in – the cultural artifacts of

Maori and Pakeha – he carves his canoe and ponders whence we all came. He knows we do not just construct our identity out of thin air, but out of ideas that have descended from the past. His own distant background – his ancestors were from the Orkneys – is about as far from New Zealand as one can get. They were also an island people. They, like Maori, needed vessels to depart from one space and arrive at another. Other artefactual parallels can be noted: they too used spirals in their decorative works; and wore kilts where Maori wore grass skirts. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, described us as products of historical processes which have left in each of us ‘an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory’. These traces include the fragments sought by a genealogist (or an artist) on a family history research mission, travelling backwards. Which way must their canoe face?

In the one-way traffic of colonialism, the Pakeha agenda was to give Aotearoa a make-over, to an Anglo-Celtic form. They would civilise the natives and settle the land. This process was executed under the assumption of the superiority of European culture. Yet the settlers who constituted Pakeha culture were themselves a hybrid people, drawn from diverse European locations and cultures. As colonisers their place was quite different from that of the colonised: the colonisers were not the minority group. The local indigenous people were expected to accept assimilation. This was one-way traffic. Colonisation did not travel in both directions at once. The historicism of Western intellectual thought directed us to consider empire as an historical more than a geographic issue. It certainly did not encourage us to see colonisation as a human rights issue.

The inevitable mixing of races over time, in a dynamic and changing world, has created new identities, which are seen as a positive progression; and inherently a rejection of differences identified by race. Hybridisation is also an acknowledgment that race, like any cultural artifact, is not a static category, but is changeable, vital.

‘Nga tangata awarua’ is a term for the ‘in-between’ status of these individuals. Awarua can mean the

flowing of two rivers, or a corridor or passage. Hybridity implies dual heritage, which might be an uncomfortable space; or a space with the advantages of access to more than one culture. Dave Stewart’s canoe beautifully illustrates the dilemmas and delights of trying to find a way in that river, corridor or passage.

In the can’t-win climate that rebukes a Pakeha male for drawing from every cultural idea in his environment – which includes Maori culture – Dave Stewart’s canoe underlines the questioning that accompanies this debate. The official espousal of biculturalism in New Zealand since the 1980s works against hybridity, seeing it as assimilation in another guise, with tokenistic public claims of equality (like those Maori names attached to all government departments). It is true that Pakeha do not have to negotiate between two cultures, as Maori do. It is also true that younger Pakeha grew up in an environment far different from that of their parents, where Maori were far less visible politically. Today many aspects of Maori culture are an everyday part of Pakeha experience.

Dave’s canoe explores these ideas. The dugout part of the vessel is from one solid piece of wood; an ironic counter to its expression of hybridity, given that so much current sculpture is about assemblage. In this work hybridity in New Zealand is interrogated with an absolutely essentialist technique. Dave’s single block of wood with its hollowed interior is both traditional canoe-making, and quintessential modernism in its truth to materials; a wry juxtaposition of the technique with the complexity of content.

Its prow is another single piece, neatly joined, so the two pieces work in unison. Its curves at each end do not state that it does not know if it is coming or going; this is not about whimsical indecision, or political ambivalence; but about awareness, of looking both ways, and of including of options. There are no straight lines in historical or cultural narrative, but numerous side journeys and byways. A curved canoe is insensible to linearity. Exploration today is not about finding new physical spaces on the globe, but about new ways of interpreting what is present.

dave stewart

study

- 1998: Attended the Foundation Art Programme at Rutherford College, taking courses in sculpture and photography.
- 1999 – 2002: Studied at Unitec in the Bachelor of Design Degree Programme majoring in sculpture. Completed Degree with Honours in 2002.

awards and competitions

- 2002: Winner of the Trust Waikato Contemporary Art Award with installation titled *Hyperreal Toolbox for the Reinvention of a Transglobal Empire in a Parallel Universe?*, multimedia (pine, rimu, paua, ink, glass, homebrewed beer). Judge: Zara Stanhope, Senior Curator at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne. As a consequence of the award, the work was bought by the Waikato Society of the Arts.
- 2002: Royal Easter Show 10th Annual Art Awards (ceramics) – voted people's choice for pit-fired earthenware installation titled *Dogpile*, 40cm x 28cm. Selected by Chester Nealy.
- 2001: Manukau Vessel and Sculpture Exhibition – *Pacific Circumnavigator*, recycled kauri, 46cm diameter x 73cm high.
- 1993: Waihi Summer Festival Photographic Competition – Merit Award for *Engaged*, colour print, 15cm x 20cm.

previous exhibitions

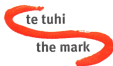
- May 2003: *Through the Event Horizon* installation exhibited at Lopdell House Gallery, Titirangi, Auckland. First solo exhibition.
- January 2003: *The Apostles Give a Mexican Wave to Giacometti* and *Going to Come Back* exhibited in 'Pushing the Boundaries' – the Corban Estate Art Centre Affordable Art Exhibition featuring the work of 20 emerging West Auckland artists.
- January 2003: *Cultural Tensegrity* (Prop) exhibited in the Coopers Creek Vineyard Outdoor Sculpture exhibition.
- November 2002: *Blood, Spit and Fears, Black Hole,*

Abbreviation (1/12), *Panorama, One Dozen and Untitled* (*Billboard Poster*) exhibited in 'Labyrinth' – the Unitec Design School Graduate Show.

- October 2002: *Black Hole* exhibited in 'Septych' – a group show of seven graduating Unitec sculpture students at the Extreme building in Newmarket.
- July 2002: *Dogpile, Panorama* and *Abbreviation* (1/12) exhibited in 'tART' – a tertiary student art exhibition displayed in shop windows along Karangahape Rd.
- April 2002: *Hyperreal Toolbox for the Reinvention of a Transglobal Empire in a Parallel Universe?* Exhibited in 'Slipping Beauty' – a group show featuring the work of seven senior Unitec sculpture students at Snowwhite Gallery, building 1, Unitec.
- December 2000: *Never Fade Away* first screened in 'Merry Isthmus' – a show on Auckland by 2nd year Unitec Critical Studies students at Alleluja Café, St Kevin's Arcade.

film, stage and television work

- Wardrobe props under Tracy Collins and Gavin McLean for *Power Rangers* 2003 season.
- Set and Props construction, assistant to Phil Gregory, for *MacBeth* at the Silo theatre, directed by Margaret Mary Hollins (Pandemonium Theatre Company), August – September 2003.
- Art Director for *Danny Boy* – a short film by James Ratahi, April, 2003.
- Art Director for *Henchman* – a short film by Roseanne Liang, 2002.
- Art Director for *Compulsion* – a short film by Angeline Loo, 2002.
- Producer/Director/Co-editor/Cameraman for *Never Fade Away* – a pilot documentary on the 25-year history of Auckland Rock band Hello Sailor, 2000.



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Director: Candy Elsmore, Curator: Rhoda Fowler

Design: Jacinda Torrance / Verso

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