



Katy Pie

Katharine Ngatai

the
cameo project

Ngati Maniapoto, Ngati Rehua, Ngati Wai, Ngati Haua, Scottish, English

Ngatai Family Portraits

17 September – 2 November 2005

Ngatai Family Portraits

Telling one's own story is often not only a self-reflective course of action, but it is also a course resonant with the experiences of many. It is the public sharing of feelings, thoughts and experiences, which others are able to relate to, that often spurs an individual or group to share similar histories. This is when the personal becomes the political.

Katharine Ngatai is exploring her life as a Maori/European, living a suburban lifestyle in the largest city in New Zealand.

Disenfranchised from her iwi by time and location – her family have lived in Auckland all her life – she seeks, through her work, not only to rationalise the dislocation that she feels as an urban Maori, but also seeks ways to relocate herself and her whanau within their mixed cultural heritage.

These investigations by Maori, as well as other first nation peoples, are well recorded. It is quite normal that individuals seek to find ways to return, not by focusing on the negative, but instead seeking out knowledge and adapting that knowledge into aspects of contemporary life.

The Family:

Portrait of Mum – dark red (below)

Portrait of Dad – blue

Portrait of Jessica – dark green

Portrait of Maggie – bright red

Portrait of Michael – bright green

Portrait of Katharine – dark grey



For Katharine Ngatai the thirst for knowledge is the first part of the journey. By telling her own story she is creating work others with similar feelings will relate to and perhaps feel comforted by in the knowledge that they are not alone – ‘not the only half-caste that feels disconnected from their iwi’.¹

Katharine Ngatai's art making name is Katy Pie – a blend of European and Maori languages and a reflection of the artist's mixed racial bloodline.

The pseudonym refers to the Maori phrase ‘kei te pai’ translating to ‘I am good’, and is commonly used when asked the question ‘how are you?’

The name Katy Pie is not a statement of arrogance, but more one of self-assurance and recognition of both sides of her heritage – hence the anglicising of the Maori phrase.

Katharine Ngatai graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts in 2003, prior to which she chose to base herself in Te Toi Hou – a part of the arts school offering cultural support and mentoring.

It was during this time that she intensively studied kowhaiwhai design, the initial interest coming from ‘knowing nothing, looking at the designs and not feeling anything but thinking they were beautiful and unique.’²

Studying kowhaiwhai, its symbolism, and the way artists had developed designs over time, she looked at traditional designs and contemporary approaches.

She became acutely aware of the evolution of kowhaiwhai through the work of Sandy Adsett – who had developed his own design and colourations – and Reuben Paterson who used traditional designs but contemporary materials, most particularly in the glittery work, *The Wharenui that Dad Built*.

These interpretations from the past and present gave her the confidence to develop her own design and approaches.



Preparatory drawing, pencil on paper, 2005

She has invested her works with a personal and contemporary relevance and addresses social issues affecting Maori today – understanding the cultural background within the seemingly complex contemporary world.

The kowhaiwhai designs are beautiful patterns that appear as painted scrolled designs, abstract and curvilinear in form. At first kowhaiwhai patterns can be viewed as a means of decoration only, but closer inspection reveals sophisticated mathematical precision involving symmetry, rotation, reflection and translation.³

Katharine Ngatai has certainly drawn from the original forms, but she intuitively creates the mathematical forms in a freehand manner, breaking away from fixed symmetry. The layout of the works reflects the original usage and design of kowhaiwhai in the meeting house.

According to Roger Neich,

kowhaiwhai is distinctively Maori, most often seen on the meeting house ridgepole (taku or tahuhu) and on the rafters (heke). The ridgepole runs the full length of the ceiling, from the front apex of the bargeboards that enclose the porch, through to the rear wall of the house. The rafters descend at regular intervals from the centre ridgepole, down to the top end of each carved sidewall post (poupou).⁴

Patterns painted on the ridgepole will most often represent tribal genealogy. The main one, of decent beginning with the founding ancestor, is depicted as a single continuously flowing pattern. On the rafters, patterns depict diverging branches of descent.⁵

The ridgepole can be seen as symbolic of the spine and kowhaiwhai symbolises the ribs in the body of the whareniui.

Neich continues, 'kowhaiwhai carries with it connotations and associations of authority by descent (genealogical mana).'⁶

Katy Pie has revived this exploration of genealogy her own way, by creating new designs, revisiting traditional designs and using unusual and contemporary materials and colourations.

Utilising the luminous qualities of perspex, Katy Pie has selected colours to represent her family including aspects of their personality which

connect with the kowhaiwhai patterns she has used to interpret them.

Portraiture can be many things from the mimetic to the abstract. Katharine Ngatai has taken an approach that is a fusion of both in order to complement her Maori and European heritage, binding them together in a manner which is distinctively her own.

Rhoda Fowler

Curator, te tuhi – the mark

1. Correspondence, Katharine Ngatai, 6/9/2005.
2. Conversation with Katy Pie, 31/8/2005.
3. Auckland Museum, *Kowhaiwhai Tūturu Maori*, 1998, p 2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Roger Neich, *Painted Histories*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1993, p 54.
6. *Ibid.*



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Phone (09) 577 0138, www.tetuhi-themark.org.nz. Galleries open 10am – 4pm 7 days.
Closed public holidays. Director: Cam McCracken, Curator: Rhoda Fowler
Design: Jacinda Torrance / Verso. © te tuhi – the mark 2005. ISBN: 0-908995-48-2