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F I S H E R G A L L E R Y

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EARTH GODDESS

He tohu o taku aroha ki a Emare Karaka
na Witi Ihimaera

"My work is centred around the Treaty of Waitangi. It's to do with rangatiratanga, our atua, our taonga, and rights, living rights, arts and cultural rights."

Emily Karaka.

There are very few artists of whom it could be said combine both dawn and darkness in their work. Robyn Kahukiwa is one, Kura Rewiri is another.

The Fisher Gallery exhibition offers us the opportunity to witness the latest work of the third, Emily Karaka, of this formidable triumvirate. Regarded by some as the whaea, Elder Woman, of Maori women artists, Emily Karaka had her first one-person show in 1980 at Auckland's Outreach Gallery when she was only 28. Early mentors included Colin McCahon, whom Emily Karaka claims as one of her respected elders. Among others are Phillip Clairmont, Allen Maddox, Ralph Hotere and Tony Fomison.

The passion, polemic and sheer dimension of Emily Karaka's early work came as a shock, not to mention the subjective slash of her methodology. One could conjecture that her male mentors would have been totally unaware that she would take the strength of their life force and apply it with similar potency and immediacy to her own. Largely self-taught, she developed a highly personal and expressive style that manifested itself in big complex, organically-inspired and discordant work, filled as much with words as with images. Her paintings not only eyeballed us; they shouted at and challenged us. Their very titles also proclaimed their intent. For instance, *Race Relations Triptych* (1988) or *Waitangi Wailing Wall* (1990).

All this made Emily Karaka a wahine toa, the first Maori woman artist to work on the epic scale and, even today, one looks at her canvasses with the realisation that even they are still too small to carry her polemic. Her significant exhibitions have included *Te Wairua A Tane* (Auckland, 1981), *Three Maori Women Artists* (National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1987), *Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake* (National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1990), *Call to Arms* (Delia Grace Galleries, Wellington, 1991), *Te Waka Toi: Contemporary Maori*



Vision Hauraki, 1997, mixed media on canvas,
2 panels each 1350mm x 1500mm

Arts From New Zealand (USA Touring Exhibition, 1992), and *Africus: The Johannesburg Biennale* (South Africa, 1995) in which she was one of only four New Zealand artists selected by the Museum of New Zealand to appear in this huge event, celebrating South Africa's re-entry to the world cultural arena.

Over the years Emily Karaka has maintained a frontal attack on what has always been the main discourse of her art - the Treaty of Waitangi, the rape of Maori land, the political and cultural issues that have decimated Maori society and the triumph of the Maori indigenous spirit in a world from which it has been displaced and dispossessed by the pakeha in power. She may source male antecedents for her processes but, as she herself has acknowledged, the inspiration is much more profound. For instance, the following is the artist's statement for her work, *Nga Uri O Te Ao Tu Te Whare*, featured in the *Mana Tiriti* exhibition at The Fisher Gallery in 1990:

"We participate in the exhibition *Mana Tiriti* affirming Ngai Tai as Mana Whenua of Pakuranga. We, the descendants of Ngai Tai Wai O Hua, Mana Whenua of Tamakimakaurau. We celebrate twenty-five generations of Ahi Kaa. We do not celebrate 1990. We have not reconstructed Haeata's whare 'Hine-te-Iwaiwa' for Mana Tiriti in Pakuranga. As Mana Whenua and keepers of the fire we CHALLENGE

the authorities and laws exerted by tauwi and governments, interpreting our TINO RANGATIRATANGA

"E kore ahau e ngaro
he kaakano iruia mai i te Rangiatea.

(I shall never be lost
for I am a seed sown from Rangiatea.)

"In the beginning was the word, and the word is Io.
So it was... The Treaty, the nation's Korowai.

So it is ... The Treaty, the covenant, the promise of Uenuku.

So it will always be ...

"Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou.

AKE AKE AKE.

I am Paretutanganui and Mita Karaka's mokopuna.

My great grandmother was trained and skilled in the use of the taiaha and mere, often accompanying Princess Te Puea taking matters of raupatu (confiscated lands) to Parliament, while my great grandfather worked as secretary to the fourth Maori King, Te Rata."

It is clear from this statement that Emily Karaka sources an awesome whakapapa for the strength to do her work. In many respects she has taken on her great grandmother's mantle, pursuing the matters of raupatu but through the halls of art. The brush as well as the pen, can often be, if not mightier than the sword, just as effective.

We who love Emily Karaka and admire her can follow her struggle, frustration and inspiration to convey the breath of the anger and pain through all her years as an artist. Sometimes the work has been sublime, sometimes unruly and wilful. The range is simply astonishing. Emily

Karaka has never edited her work or, for that matter, her life. She constantly puts herself on trial, as it were, and has never been able to hide behind politeness or diplomacy. What you see is what you get with Emily. Surely it must have been the same with her great grandmother.

Emily Karaka's reply to MP, Ross Meurant's accusation, 1987, of being a terrorist attempting to overthrow the New Zealand Government.

"I am armed with a paintbrush. If that is regarded
as terrorism, then I am a terrorist. My artwork is my platform."
My work is my patu"

Big canvasses, large passions, epic dreams.

Appropriate for an Earth Goddess, everything about Emily Karaka's work is big. Indeed, most people know of the work as huge canvasses you feel that you can walk into and wrap yourself in. They evince visceral, disturbing responses, primarily because they are like disturbed spirits, never at rest.

Emily Karaka's work has always been like this. Time and time again she hits out at racism and Pakeha injustice. Her paintwork has often appeared raw and bleeding, dripping down the canvas, as it does in *The Painted Dream Garden* (1991, Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa); this 'bleeding' effect is one of the most characteristic features of Emily Karaka's style of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Thus you can walk into the paintings if you like - but it takes courage to be embraced by the world of Emily Karaka.

As well as largeness of scale and rawness of execution, Emily Karaka not only paints her work but writes them as well. She is one of Maoridom's most articulate of artists, not only in the expression of her own personal views about the Maori situation but also in the ways she transfers these messages to her work. Many of her paintings are polemic, narratives of dispossession. Her anger against laws that cripple the Maori are scrawled over her work - laws like the State Owned Enterprises Act, 1986, or the Resource Management Act, 1991. In a recent work, *Te Uri O Te Ao* (a manawhenua hapu o Tamakimakaurau 1995,



Ka Awatea, 1991, mixed media on canvas,
2 panels each 2800mm x 1400mm

Auckland City Art Gallery) the painting is blazoned with phrases and symbology. The phrase "This Land is Maori Land" appears at the top of the painting; it is Emily Karaka's constant refrain. There, too, is the owl, echoing Emily Karaka's own passionate cries against Pakeha oppression of Maori. The cross is there, also, both as liturgical instrument and as indictment confronting pakeha lies and broken promises.

All this makes Emily Karaka the most articulate of our painters, using words and numbers freely in her work as accusatory reminders of the plight of the Maori. The principal sources of her texts are her own oral literatures. Indeed, all her paintings are works within the great karanga tradition of Maori women. Karanga themselves, they call, sing, chant, lament, shout, cajole and weep.

Although she was a recipient of the Tylee Cottage residency, Wanganui, and has had work exhibited widely, hers is the tempestuous spirit that makes the Establishment uncomfortable.

You can see this unflinching spirit in the woman herself and the work Emily Karaka has done beyond her art. In this respect she has continued the fighting spirit of her father, John Mita, who was a strong advocate for Maori Labour, and her mother, Margaret Rose, who fought to establish an urban arts centre in Auckland. Emily herself, as the Secretary



Night Out, 1997, mixed media on canvas,
3 panels each 1350mm x 1500mm



*Local Government Tea Party, 1997, mixed media on board,
3 panels each 1150mm x 1700mm*

of her own iwi organisation, is outspoken on issues facing Ngai Tai, Wai O Hua on national radio, Holmes show, you name it, Emily is not afraid to get involved, boots and all.

For instance, in 1996, Emily Karaka became publicly embroiled in the Maori gateway controversy for the Garden of Memories, Uxbridge Road, Howick; the gateway was one of the key projects Ngai Tai hoped to complete for Howick's 150th celebrations but it was stonewalled by constant bickering among the members of the Howick Community Board about where it should be located. Later that year, the Manukau City Council similarly reneged on agreeing to consult with Ngai Tai about environmental matters; Ngai Tai had requested that they be formally regarded as manawhenua, or guardians of the land.

Emily Karaka is also a poet and writer of considerable strength, with notebooks and writings that go right back to her childhood years with her father. Some of this work was published in *Te Ao Marama, Vols One and Two*.

The phrase "put up or shut up" could never be applied to Emily Karaka. And when she puts up, as she did for the exhibition *Women Paint The Land* (Lopdell Gallery, 1993) this is what she says:

"I descend from the Waiohau Confederation of Tribes, and relate to Kawerau a maki, The landmark monument on top of Maungakiekie (One Tree Hill) is dedicated to the past and extinct Waiohau'. We descendants of the confederation of Waiohau tribes, are living testimony that indigenous people survive colonial conquest, invasion and history. My tipuna signed the Treaty of Waitangi at Karaka Bay (St Heliers) at the top of Tamaki Heads. The Treaty guaranteed that our lands and Taonga would be protected, in return for allowing crown to establish Government in New Zealand."

"As manawhenua we have a spiritual obligation to protect the land. This obligation transcends time and man-made laws. Our earth mother is in jeopardy and it is time that man is made accountable for the abuse and assault he has made on her."

"I have always had a deep sense of loss and loneliness, through having my soul voice suppressed: a cry, quietened so that I fit into a dominant culture's shoes.

All my life I have communicated this pain...through pencil, paint, wood and clay. Now I find through this constant expression my world is revealed."

Emily Karaka, at 45, is still youthful.

In 1996 her old school, Auckland Girls' Grammar awarded her a Founding Day Award for services to New Zealand Arts and Justice; if only other awards and accolades were so forthcoming. Her best years are yet to come, and the Fisher Gallery exhibition shows us that 'the spirit of indomitable

Earth Goddess remains as passionate as ever.

Her recent paintings reveal that her palette is as charged with rhetoric and emotion as it ever was. Her paintings still seem to eyeball you. They are also moving beyond the specific into the realm of universality. As early as the *Korurangi* exhibition she was working on themes embracing the wider world - in this instance, confronting French nuclear testing and its implications for Polynesia and the people of Aotearoa. Subsequently, her paintings are embracing wider themes.

Ka Awatea (1991) is a case in point. The basic Maori text of the painting contains icons and references that are simply astonishing. From the sacred emblems of Ratana and Te Kooti Emily Karaka moves to the universal and the secular - Jewish, Egyptian, Aboriginal and Indian Nation imagery - in a work with millennial meaning. In the Lopdell Gallery exhibition (1993),

Emily Karaka produced three works which were still lifes in acid rain, after the Hopi Indian prediction that the sky will rain yellow rain, and man will know that his day has come. The works were inspired by an actual weekend in August, 1993, when a yellow substance fell from the sky covering a vast area of South Auckland, the peppery substance we know as acid rain.

"The issues that I'm always discussing are economic, social and environmental, and land rights tie back to the basis of justice in our country, the covenant of the country, the korowai of the country."

Who knows where Emily Karaka will take us as we face the millennium?

Wherever it is, we can be assured that the kaupapa (purpose) of this indomitable woman will be as strong and as fierce as ever and, conversely, as loving as it has always been. For never doubt that beneath all the passion there is a strong and abiding love, or aroha, for the land and the iwi. In my opinion, Emily Karaka is the New Zealand artist for the New Millennium. She is, indeed, Earth Goddess.

Witi Ihimaera, March 1997.



*Te Ure O Te Ao, 1995, mixed media on canvas,
2 panels each 1500mm x 1900mm*